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# HOW TO EFFECTIVELY MARKET DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

By

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## ABSTRACT

*Many organizations have adopted and readily accepted e-learning as a part of their training models. However, one topic that does not often come up in discussions is how to effectively market distance education (DE) programs. Ever wonder why a distance educational program has had low enrollment and completion rates? This paper will address the importance of integrating marketing into distance education initiatives. This paper tells how strategic planning, designing/developing, promoting, implementing, and evaluating a marketing campaign for DE programs can greatly influence participation and motivation in the programs. This paper also gives examples of effective and ineffective DE marketing campaigns, and will ultimately teach how to create a highly effective DE marketing strategy and campaign. With this goal in mind, one can learn not only how to create a winning DE marketing campaign, but also, how to evaluate and determine the return on investment (ROI). Evaluation and ROI are two crucial steps that should not be left behind with DE marketing campaigns.*

### How to Effectively Market Distance Education Programs

It is a fact that the distance education programs have not been successful always as expected. A common problem that can be seen in a distance education program is, majority of people are not interested in enrolling in such program, and those who have enrolled in such programs have only started the course, but not completed it in due time. When management comes to know about the low enrollment and completion rates and asks for a solid reason, the training managers will be put into trouble and sometimes the management's decision would be as severe as to cut down the budget allotted for distance education. Such concerns and fears are prevailing everywhere and training managers have to avoid it at any cost.

In a study conducted by the MASIE Center (ASTD and The MASIE Center, 2001), there was 58% start rate across all e-learning courses. Mandatory courses averaged 69% start rate. Overall, the study confirmed that many e-learning courses were not able to attract all the learners to whom they are offered.

There could be many different reasons for a low enrollment and completion rate of DE programs. Maybe the employees are not motivated, or perhaps they never heard about the program, or they do not see what's in it for them. One aspect that is often neglected when offering a distance education program is effective marketing. One might get the best designed DE course, full of interactivity, case studies, and more, but if it is not thoroughly planned how to market it and to stir the interest of the people, then the end result could be disappointing. Developing and implementing a marketing campaign that creates "want" and "must have" feelings is critical to the success of DE program. This paper will walk through the important steps for creating an effective DE marketing campaign. This paper focuses much on the following topics:

- Strategic Planning
- Design and Development
- Methods of Promotion
- Implementation
- Evaluation and ROI

### Strategic Planning

There are several steps that must be followed to create a winning campaign. The first step is to plan strategically in advance. Strategic planning for distance education includes showing current conditions or constraints of the organization based on the organization's mission, values, and goals (Berge & Smith, 2000). When planning for the DE marketing campaign, it should maintain an alignment with both the goals of the program as well as the organization's goals. This will help to affirm senior management that the DE program is aligned with business strategies, learner needs, and corporate objectives, thus opening the door towards company-wide acceptance (Berge & Smith, n.d.).

While planning for marketing a DE program, note should be taken of the current organizational conditions and any constraints that could pose a threat to the campaign. For example, if the employees in an organization are new to e-learning they should be trained by giving face-to-face training classes. This training must enable them to market their campaign, highlighting the benefits of the e-learning and the specific course to both the stakeholders and to the learners of an organization.

Another key area of strategic planning is to determine to whom you will be marketing the DE program and try to learn more about the audience. The benefits of the e-learning program must be communicated to the audience and specific messages should be developed for different audience depending on job role (Dineen, 2006). For example, if you are marketing to an entire sales force, you have to provide them with the benefits of taking the DE program and how it would help them to increase their sales and customer relationships. Sales people are usually on the go and travel a lot, thus another benefit that should be emphasized is the convenience of taking the training regarding the timing and venue. They could take the training via a laptop while riding on an airplane, or while having their lunch, or even at night in their hotel room. If one can't convince his audience to enroll and complete the DE program, then he should not expect to receive a lot of positive feedback.

One can also learn more about the audience as by collecting useful data in the form of interviews, surveys, and focus groups. Electronic surveys work really well, because most of them have reporting capabilities and features for easy tracking. It is important to collect data such as the learner's needs and wants for training, how they would like to be informed about training, and the kinds of promotional methods they would enjoy. The overall goal for collecting data from the learners is to determine what their needs are and how they can meet those needs through creating an effective marketing campaign.

One will also want to find out how voluntary, and skillful learners are taking a DE program (Cross, 2003). By getting into their hearts and minds, determine what will motivate them to want to enroll in and complete the DE program. Some learners just don't understand how e-learning can help them, thus applying a marketing mindset could not help but improve the effectiveness of the e-learning (Cross, 2003). If one can effectively communicate how e-learning will help the learners in the marketing campaign, and can clearly show them the benefit of the course, then they are one step further in creating that winning campaign.

Obtaining sponsorship and buy-in from top management is critical as one prepares for the marketing campaign and even for the distance education programs and initiatives in his entirety. Support can be gained from top management by persuading them to invest in the DE initiatives by showing them the benefits and positive impact that it will offer the organization. This will inspire them to take e-learning seriously and will endorse the DE initiatives (Dineen, 2006). The keyword in Dineen's article is "persuade", which for many people, can be tough, but is a must in order to help to start the DE campaign off on the right track. Getting top management support also can help to boost ones campaign, and can also push the importance of taking the DE program to other managers, which in turn push down to front line employees. This approach is called a "Top Down" approach and can have a very positive impact on the outcome of the campaign. When employees hear that top

management values the DE programs, then that will be an eye opener and the response rate (enrollment and completion) will automatically increase.

Strategic planning is just the beginning, and sets the foundation for the marketing campaign. It allows one to think of the end goal and plan to reach that goal. One may be planning to treat the learner as a customer, and to give them the best service and product out on the market. If one doesn't plan and research the market, then he is just setting himself, and campaign up for failure.

Once collecting data through electronic surveys, etc., analyzing should be made carefully to use it to help to design and develop the winning marketing campaign.

### Design and Development

After strategically planning for the DE marketing campaign, one can begin to design and develop it. While it should be audience - centric designing marketing campaigns, also remember to provide the benefits of the training program and how it will help the audience to improve their performance. Performance improvement is what one will want to market in the end. People take training to learn something new and or to "improve" upon their current skills. For example, a manager might want to improve his/her communication skills. A sales person would like to know that they'll increase their sales as a result of attending the DE program. A customer service representative would like to be able to handle an angry customer. These are just a few of hundreds of examples on highlighting the key benefits of performance improvement.

Designing and developing the DE marketing campaign is similar to the Design and Development in the Instructional Design "ADDIE" model. Actually, the entire ADDIE model can be applied to the marketing initiatives. In Jay Cross's article, "E-Learning: You Build It Now Promote It", he provides a chart that compares Marketing to Instructional Design.

Cross couldn't have said it better in his comparison between the two. The market research is similar to analyzing and strategic planning. Design and Development is what one is talking about now, which has

Marketing	Instructional Design
Market research	Analyze
Design marketing mix	Design
Develop marketing campaigns	Develop
Launch campaign	Implement
Assess results and cycle back	Evaluate

Chart. Company Marketing to Instructional Design

two stages that lone believes gives life to the DE campaigns. Without an enticing design and mix of promotion, the life of the campaigns will be dull, and won't captivate the audience. Cross also mentions three key areas of marketing design that should be included in the campaigns:

1. Brand image and identity
2. Product position
3. Market segmentation

Branding the e-learning program is the first part of designing a campaign. This is where one will want potential learners to identify with the course and to show the benefits of completing it. What is a brand? A brand is a promise to the customer and the sum of the associations it brings up in the mind of the buyer (Cross, 2003). Designing a brand is to create those associations in the learners' minds. What are some of these associations? If one is trying to market an e-learning program on how to use a new software program, it is to be kept in mind that he is not selling cool, fun, interactive training tutorials, but instead selling productivity, reliability, speed, and an easier way to do the job. A modern example of branding would be Nike. When Nike markets it's products, like their running shoes, they are not selling a typical pair of tennis shoes. Instead, they are selling confidence, power, and strength. The goal here is to influence the consumer, make them visualizing themselves winning the marathon or race with the new pair of Nike shoes. Branding is very powerful and can make a world of difference in what learners think about the DE programs. Cross proposed a challenge when talking about branding ones e-learning programs: "Is e-Learning about a commodity? Can it command a premium? Will learners go out of their way to get in?"

The next step in designing a winning marketing campaign is to create product positioning. This is where one describes to the potential audience what e-learning will get them. Marketing the e-learning program by highlighting its time-saving value is a wrong approach, either one has to position it by getting down the learners emotional needs. Cross mentions five effective ways to help the marketers to position e-learning:

- A pathway to promotion?
- A way to make work easier?
- A better position in the job market?
- Creating more value to the next employer?
- A good way to stay current?

All of these five positioning methods get down to more of a deeper level or emotional level. Positioning sets the foundation for branding. For example, let's say one has a DE program on leadership. One could position it as a way to build the future. As for branding, one could develop the DE program to have a consistent look and feel, an enticing name, and communicate the direct benefits to the customer. A customer should want to take this leadership program because it will help him/her to grow in the company and develop invaluable skills that others do not possess.

The third key area of market design is market segmentation. A segment is a part of the market that one will want to give special attention to from the other's (Cross, 2003). This is where one will want to market the DE program differently to different people. As the old saying goes: "Different strokes for different folks." For example, while marketing that leadership course that was in the same way mentioned earlier, might not have the same effect on every one. Older employees who are about to retire might not respond to the campaign positioning of building his future. On the other hand, young entry level employees would probably be all over it! To design that winning campaign, make sure of the audience and segment to whom it is addressed.

### Methods of Promotion

As one design and develop the campaigns, it is important to choose one or more methods of promotion. Promotion

is a means of getting ones positioning, brand, and message out to the intended audience. It is a way to excite and motivate learners to enroll and participate in the DE program. Methods of consumer marketing would include repetitive messaging, testimonies, incentives and rewards, just to name a few.

Below is a list of specific methods that can be used to promote DE programs:

- Internet/Intranet - What better a place than the web for promoting ones programs, especially since the DE programs incorporate technology and more than likely the web. One could create banner ads that people could click on to tell them more about the program. Make sure these are placed on most frequently visited pages and websites.
- Teaser - This is where one can "tease" the intended audience about the program. A good example would be an animated Flash teaser or movie that conveys the brand and positioning, and addresses the question "what's in it for me?".
- Hold a launch event - These events are valuable for generating excitement and interest around e-learning and also gives the opportunity for hands-on sessions and registration in a supported environment (Dineen, 2006).
- Lunch seminars - Conduct lunchtime presentations on specific topics highlighting the courses and job aids that are available for additional information on the topic, and Schedule these regularly (Express Computer, 2005).
- Contests - Provide incentives, and anything that requires people to complete a course to win a prize. Publicize lists of winners in the newsletter or on the website (Express Computer, 2005).

These are just a few of many different ways to promote the DE programs. Just remember to choose a promotional method that will help to build and create excitement and get learners to crave to attend DE programs.

### Implementation

Once the market research is conducted, and the campaign is designed and developed, then it is time to

implement. This is where all the hard work is ready to be put into action. When implementing the DE marketing campaign, one may take up promotional methods, branding, etc. and announce it to the intended audience. For example, if one chose to create an animated teaser, during implementation, he could send out a company-wide email communication informing people to click on a link to view the teaser movie. As a reminder, one can have more than one promotional method during implementation. He could have the teaser movie, a contest, and testimonies all as part of the implementation of the marketing campaign. During implementation, make sure and have "call to action" items and to provide the audience with deadlines to enroll or respond, and give detailed directions on exactly what they need to do. With that said, sit back, and wait to see the outcome.

## Evaluation and ROI

After one has implemented the DE marketing campaign and has completed the promotional events, one will be able to evaluate the outcome and determine its success. One of the easiest ways to determine the success of campaign is to get feedback from the learners. Talking to participants, interviewing employees, and sending out a follow-up electronic survey are also effective. Another way is to see how many people responded to the campaign by looking at the registration and course completion numbers. Third, were people talking about the campaign? Did people participate in the promotional events?

If also one could develop an electronic survey and send it out to the original target audience after the campaign, and use the data collected to help to evaluate the overall success of the campaign. This is very similar to the "E" in the Instructional Design ADDIE model, which stands for "Evaluation". One can use the survey like a smiley sheet- a way to get the audience's reaction to DE marketing campaign. Ask questions such as:

1. Did the promotional methods for "Name of your DE program" grab your attention?
2. How did you hear about "Name of your DE program"?

3. Would you be interested in similar promotional methods for other e-learning courses in the future?
4. What was your overall impression of the way "Name of your DE program" was marketed?

Questions like these can help to learn how the audience perceived the DE marketing campaign. Along with evaluation, one should determine the ROI. Determining ROI can be very challenging, especially for the DE program itself. The same can be true for the marketing campaign. The ROI for the marketing campaign can simply come from satisfaction and positive feedback from the target audience and senior management, unless the DE program is generating revenue (Cross, 2001). To come up with an exact ROI percentage for the marketing campaigns is not as necessary as calculating the ROI for the e-learning course itself. Like Cross mentioned, the ROI will be based on the needs of management, etc. For example, if hundreds of people registered and completed the DE program and if the management witnesses a strong increase of enrolment and improvement in performance, the management should congratulate, both the marketing campaign and DE program. The ROI for the campaign is the fact that management is happy and has seen an improvement in their employees' performance, not to mention the fact that hundreds of people were registering for and completed the program.

Kevin Kruse believes that one shouldn't focus only on ROI because he may miss tremendous opportunities to contribute to the organization's strategic goals (Kruse, 2002). ROI is only an aspect of evaluation, thus the evaluation plan should include other areas such as company values and goals. The marketing campaign should align with the organization's mission and values and should make the management believe that the campaign was right on target.

## Conclusions

Marketing DE programs effectively takes time, dedication and strategic planning. It is important to get senior management support and buy-in prior to implement the campaign. An effective campaign must gain the

audience's attention, and should highlight the DE program's benefits and should answer the question, "what's in it for me?" While designing and developing the campaign, the market positioning and segmentation, as well as branding should also be taken for consideration. Design the campaign so that it adds a lot of flavor, and gets down to more emotional levels. Promotion is very important and the methods one choose can have a powerful influence on the outcome of the campaign. In conclusion, while marketing a DE program, one must be innovative and creative, and focus on the customer. One will be surprised with the outcome of the campaign if he follows the advices presented in this paper, and will become an expert DE marketer and could create winning campaigns.

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method that will help to build and create excitement and get learners to crave to attend DE program.

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