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Facilitating the Choice of College Major Using the Consumer Decision Process, Content Marketing, and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how digital content and patterns of online engagement may be used at every stage of the consumer decision process to influence and inform the choice of college major. Implications and recommendations for college and departmental websites concerning how they can best assist prospective students in choosing a college major are highlighted throughout the paper. With its focus on process, this paper demonstrates how colleges and their academic departments can effectively leverage digital marketing and the consumer decision process to facilitate the college major choice process.

Keywords: *Digital Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Content Marketing, Online Search*

INTRODUCTION

Surprisingly little is known about how students choose college majors in the Digital Age. While there exists a large body of research that identifies factors important to students in college major choice (Wright, 2018), there seems to be significantly fewer studies of the college major decision process in general or the extent to which internet search and online content inform the process among today's prospective college students. In addition, relatively little is known about how social media content or engagement may influence the choice of a prospective student's college major. To bridge these gaps, this paper deconstructs the process of choosing a college major using the classic consumer decision process model. The consumer decision process is a framework that identifies the major stages, both mental and physical, that consumers pass through in the process of making a purchase decision. The stages of the process are: (1) problem recognition; (2) information search; (3) alternative evaluation; (4) alternative selection; (5) decision/purchase; and (6) postpurchase evaluation (*Consumer Behavior*, 2017). In particular, this paper dissects the consumer decision process as it pertains to prospective college students' choice of college major in light of contemporary research underscoring the predominance and influence of online search, university website content, and social media in the broader college decision process (*Inside Higher Ed*, 2018).

CHOOSING A COLLEGE MAJOR – THE MAJOR DECISION PHASES

Choosing a college major in the Digital Age is inherently the same as yet profoundly different from the process faced by previous generations of college students. Digital media have transformed the manner in which students access information about colleges and universities.

University websites are usually the first structured encounter students have with a prospective college or university (Ford, 2011). Research by the higher education industry contends the bulk of prospective college students' opinions of schools are significantly influenced by the institutions' websites (Inside Higher Ed, 2018). Coincidentally, the widespread adoption by colleges and universities of social media to connect with students and promote college activities is one of the most significant ways the marketing of higher education has changed in recent years (*Trends in Higher Education Marketing*, 2014). Despite the preponderance of evidence that students use and are influenced by digital media in the college-going process, scant literature exists on how students may be using the internet to assist in the college major decision process.

For prospective students, the choice of college major is one fraught with perceived importance. Research indicates that the choice of college major may impact everything from a student's academic performance while in college to the number of years it takes to complete a degree to the propensity for dropping out of college to projected lifetime earnings (Wright, 2018). Given the importance of the decision, colleges and universities seem poised to assist students with the decision of college major in the content-rich digital age. This paper contends that it can be especially instructive for college marketers to study and understand the consumer decision process as it relates to the choice of college major and apply the insights to constructing and improving their college websites, marketing content, and social media posts. Digital and social media content have the potential to impact the process at every stage of decision-making.

Stage One: Problem Recognition

Consumer decision-making begins with problem recognition. The consumer behavior literature loosely defines a problem as the difference between a consumer's actual and desired states (*Consumer Behavior*, 2017). Problem recognition is a key step in the process since consumers do not engage in decision-making or make consumptive choices until they recognize the need to do so. Rather than simply swoop in to solve a problem, marketers often jumpstart the consumer decision process by triggering problem recognition, i.e. by helping consumers recognize they face a problem. Marketers may assist consumers with problem recognition by pointing out potential problems ("Got milk?") or by helping consumers recognize or better understand problems by framing the situation in a persuasive way ("Fifteen minutes could save you 15% or more on your car insurance").

When students make the decision to go to college, they very quickly encounter the problem of "what should I major in?". Research indicates the choice of major is stressful for students because they fear making a poor or ill-suited choice (Kumar & Kumar, 2013). University websites in general and college and/or departmental websites in particular have the potential to draw prospective students' attention to a range of "problems" surrounding college major choices and how to solve them. Messaging and content from an expert (as a college should be in the major fields it offers) may be used to both trigger and frame problem recognition surrounding choice of major. It should be recognized that such information is provided to help prospective as well as matriculant undecided students at a crucial point in the college major decision process.

Stage Two: Information Search

Stage two of the consumer decision process is information search. Once a problem is recognized, consumers start a search for information to help in solving the problem. There are two distinct sources of information: internal and external. Internal information exists within the consumer's memory: it is all the information stored in a person's memory that is capable of being accessed by the person. It includes memories of prior product experiences, brand or product knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. Internal information is always the first type of information searched in the consumer decision process. The challenge for marketers is to get their useful product information into the consumer's memory so that it can be recalled and used. In contrast, external information comes from outside sources and includes marketer-controlled information, word-of-mouth information, and non-marketer-controlled information, such as consumer-generated social media posts. Marketers need to make sure they understand the full spectrum of the consumer's external information sources (where do students get information about college major choices?) and provide sufficient and compelling marketer-controlled information with which the consumer can engage to counterbalance or debunk any false or negative information that consumers may find during external information search.

It is also essential to understand that information search operates on a continuum from minimal to extensive. Internal information search is often the easiest and most common method of minimal search. Searching one's memory for stored information can happen effortlessly and in milliseconds. Minimal internal information search happens to some extent every time we make a consumer decision. There are many situations, however, where consumers put forth effort and search out information. In today's digital age this usually includes engaging in online search. Extensive information search tends to happen more often for new, expensive, or risky decisions. Hence its potential salience in the choice of college major.

Research indicates prospective students are often uninformed, misinformed, or undecided when it comes to college majors (Granitz et al., 2014). College and departmental websites represent logical sources of external information and, given the predominance of online search in the college decision process, are increasingly likely to be encountered in the information search stage (Inside Higher Ed, 2018.) Additionally, research supports the idea that college website content is seen by prospective students as more credible than a college's social media content or general social media content (Hagedorn, 2013). Industry experts and survey researchers believe that prospective students first check out a college's homepage then turn to the entity's official social media accounts as well as unaffiliated social media to see what others, particularly current students, are saying (Williams, 2017). This makes the role of the college website potentially even more influential on prospective student perceptions and choice behavior.

Stage Three: Alternative Evaluation

The results of information search are used in the alternative evaluation process and can play a key role in helping consumers qualify or disqualify alternatives. To wit: during the search for

information, consumers will begin to define and structure a set of alternative solutions to the problem. This explains why the information encountered during information search is critical to the way the process moves forward. The initial set of choices or ideas for solving the problem is called, appropriately enough, the complete set. The complete set may include different product options or alternative ideas for solving the problem. During cognitive processing as the consumer eliminates some products or ideas and favors others, the complete set is narrowed to a mental construct called the awareness set. From the awareness set, the consumer gives greater value to certain options than others and thereby also narrows it down. More informed or experienced consumers tend to have larger complete and awareness sets than less informed or experienced consumers. Research, for example, shows that first-generation college students are significantly more likely to enter college undecided about their major and then, upon choosing, are more likely to select a vocational field such as education or nursing compared to students whose parents had a bachelor's or master's degree; students whose parents held a postsecondary degree were more likely to select a major in STEM fields, architecture, arts and humanities, or the social sciences (Wright, 2018). This suggests first-generation students' awareness sets are affected by a dearth of information and guidance related to their college careers.

The final and most important set of options is a mental construct known as the consideration (evoked) set. It is from this set that the final decision is always made. Getting into the evoked set can be a challenge for some options. Marketers need to gain understanding of the processes that consumers use to include certain options or products in their awareness and evoked sets, although it is acknowledged that these cognitive processes are often veiled and highly individualistic.

Options in the decision sets are evaluated by the decision-maker based on any number of personal and environmental factors. Ultimately, however, the final choice is one of three types: an emotional choice, attitude-based choice, or attribute-based choice. When using an attribute-based approach, the choice is made by comparing the evoked set options across a defined set of attributes. The attributes are the features or benefits considered most relevant by the consumer. Not all attributes are tangible. Intangible criteria such as image, prestige, and perceived quality can also be used in the evaluation. To take advantage of this process, it is critical for marketers to know which attributes consumers consider to be most important and the relative importance of various attributes vis-à-vis each other. Research into determinants, influencers, and moderators of the college major choice can aid in helping understand the evaluation of alternatives. For example, research suggests social image and job availability are significant factors that impact students' decisions to select a business major (Granitz et al., 2014). Synthesizing a number of studies on factors affecting the choice of college major, Wright (2018) lists the following exogenous factors as being positively correlated or determinative in major choice: expected earnings, prevailing labor market outcomes, time to degree, graduation rate in major, nature of required coursework, peer effects (what majors are popular), and parental influence including gaining parental approval. Endogenous variables that have been found to influence the choice of major are race, gender, academic preparedness, and math ability. Other factors that have been found to be influential are the education level of the parent(s) and the student's socioeconomic status (see Wright, 2018 for a more comprehensive list of these). One group of researchers

(Reuben et al., 2015) concluded after extensive review that “tastes and preferences are a large determinant of college major choice” indicating that attitudes and emotions may drive the decision rather than rational considerations.

Stage Four: Decision/Purchase

Stage four involves the consumer making the choice and purchase. Even at this critical point in the process, the marketer still has a chance to intervene and affect the outcome. Four purchase characteristics affect the final purchase decision: physical surroundings, social circumstances, time, and state of mind. Marketer-controlled aspects such as the ubiquity of information, use of promotional materials, and action convenience are capable of swaying consumers’ final decisions. Follow-through with marketing tactics like those listed above helps to ensure that you are maximizing the consumer’s opportunity to choose your product.

Relevant and easy-to-navigate digital content may prove critical in assisting the final decision. It is imperative that colleges reach students with information during the moments that matter. The greatest challenge surrounding digital information for any organization lies in supplying relevant, useful, engaging, and expert content in a timely fashion. While university homepages often feature engaging visuals such as carousel slideshows or short videos and calls to action such as “Apply Now” or “Live Chat” links, these kinds of tactics appear to be used less or not-at-all when it comes to helping students choose a college major. Indeed, recent studies show that students find the bulk of information that features prominently on many college websites to be confusing, irrelevant, and unhelpful (Tate, 2017; Williams, 2017).

This author contends that the major fields of study housed within a concomitant college should be among the predominant areas of expertise for the college. In other words, a college should be an expert in the major fields of study that it offers. Unfortunately, many college websites appear to serve chiefly as mundane information repositories—highlighting recent news, cataloging upcoming college events, and providing links for everything from the college’s mission statement and strategic plan objectives to a “welcome letter” from the dean. A convenience sample of college departmental websites suggests that departmental websites often follow the same informational bent, dominated by a faculty/staff directory and offering only brief descriptions of majors and course listings. Such a focus on the college’s activities, personnel, and course offerings prioritizes current students’ needs over those of prospective students. Colleges and departments will need to overhaul their websites if they wish to tap into undecided students browsing for major advice. Colleges must address the needs of prospective students to attract them as majors, assist in the evaluation process, and make it easy for students to complete the necessary forms or paperwork to affiliate with a major.

Stage Five: Post-Purchase Evaluation

The fifth and final step of the consumer purchase decision process is post-purchase assessment. After a product is bought, the customer may experience post-purchase dissonance, satisfaction, or dissatisfaction. Marketing communication and customer service can play key roles in helping to minimize post-purchase dissonance or product/service dissatisfaction. Organizations that

reach out to consumers to reinforce their choices with positive messaging and other relationship-building tactics can often eliminate dissonance altogether.

Major-switching is prominent across all types of institutions of higher learning. Research shows that switching majors can be costly in several ways. There are more immediate costs in terms of effects on graduation rates and the additional tuition and opportunity costs that come with the added time to degree that major switches are associated with. Also, there may be vast differences in the projected lifetime earnings associated with different majors such that there can be a large cost associated with switching from a lucrative major to a relatively low earnings major. In addition, a poor choice of major in college can be a significant contributing factor to the decision to drop out of college altogether (Wright, 2018). Finally, researchers have also found that some fields are more prone to major switching than others. Students in STEM majors are significantly more likely to switch their majors and few people switch into STEM majors from non-STEM fields (Chen, 2013). Students at public universities were more likely to switch out of STEM majors than students at private universities. And, major switching can also be moderated by demographic and socioeconomic factors. Low income students have been found to switch out of STEM majors at a lower rate than higher income students (Chen, 2013).

Colleges and departments can benefit from knowing and understanding what causes students to switch majors. This information can then be used to better assist students during the time of initial major selection as well as aid in student retention more generally.

SUMMARY

It is highly likely that today's college students use online search, digital content, and social media to help them choose a college major. This paper demonstrates how digital content and patterns of online engagement may be used at every stage of the consumer decision process to influence and inform the choice of college major. Implications and recommendations for college and departmental websites concerning how they can best assist prospective students in choosing a college major are highlighted throughout the paper. With its focus on process, this paper concretely shows how colleges and their academic departments can effectively leverage digital marketing and the consumer decision process to facilitate the college major choice process.

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