



Certain Changes to Training Companies Due to Social Web Development

Manuel Fandos Igado

Universidad Internacional de la Rioja, Madrid, Spain

José Ignacio Aguaded Gómez

Universidad de Huelva, Huelva, Spain

Companies use many different marketing strategies in order to make their products known and place their corporate images and brandings in the market. Besides, nowadays, being on the Internet is a must for every company striving for success. The development and implementation of Web 2.0 or social web are threatening the basis of the ways of mixing with other people. A company devoted to open and distance learning, such as Master-D Corporation, a clear example of how a proper and planned use of the different possibilities offered by the Web 2.0, based on blogs, allows a company to achieve bigger market shares and brand positioning following the win-win principle. Blogs are, undoubtedly, channels of communication that prove the power of attraction of good information. These changes are affecting everybody and, in particular, companies and institutions related to people's education, teaching and training for their inclusion in society and labor market. This essay brings up some reflections in two ways: The first one deals with some reasons why education is also related to the concept of "company"; and the second one deals with how these changes generated by Web 2.0 are affecting some training companies, represented in this case by Master-D.

Keywords: social web, Web 2.0, blogs, wikis, training, teaching, companies, market, business

Introduction

A certain Puritanism (or even hypocrisy) often prevents us from uttering the words training and education together with "dirty money" business, market, money, client

Let us not create polemics, however, many have done business by negotiating.

At this point, we should be aware that nothing is free, everything comes at a price, but a different matter altogether is who pays that price. It may be that one does not have to "pay" for something (nothing at all or a perhaps a small part) but that "something" almost always comes at a cost to someone (Fandos, Pac, & Curto, 2004).

From this perspective, and put simply, what is wrong with considering the student or the pupil (also the teachers and other staff) for what they really are, clients (both internal and external)?

Real businesses are built on the win-win principle. Both sides (company and client/client and company) win. We work together to achieve our goal. Real companies go to such great lengths to realize this vision that it is essential that their objectives are closely linked to their clients'.

We are now with Bartolomé (2004) where he considered learning to be an individual activity of the pupil, and that teachers could not do anymore than guide, accompany and facilitate... whatever we agree, yet learning is the responsibility of the learner and as such he/she must do it.

Therefore, given that learning is something that the learner does whenever he/she wishes or whenever he/she can, we, as training companies, have had to look for formulae to offer this accompanying service, tutoring services or orientation in the most flexible way possible. In business, we are certain that we have to go or be exactly where the clients may need you. However, would not any teaching institution defend this idea of being with the students (clients) together with a goal wished and reached thanks to a common effort?

If we can accept this premise, then training and business can be clearly linked.

Let us consider something which is obvious: Business is linked to competitiveness, therefore, by deduction, there is a certain element of competitiveness that training must bear in mind (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008b).

Let us continue with this series of syllogisms. It seems to be that this business spirit in the teaching field must be based on the principle of win-win in a competitive way and in the broadest sense of the word (Deming, 1989).

There are many ways to procure this element of competitiveness, one of which is to look for the difference, distinguish yourself from what the others do and how they do it, in order to open up a market, offer a different service, and therefore have more chances of success.

Social Web and Companies

Concentrating on the clients (pupils) to create a good relationship, which is efficient and effective, delivers a “profit” in the user and provides what each individual pupil really needs, is the aspect which differentiates us. And this type of elements can be perfectly coordinated with the e-learning, the “blended learning” or “open training” (methods, being more or less developed, are applied by many training companies), and be intrinsic to the potential of Web 2.0.

In this situation, these possibilities for diversification, personalization and differentiation of the various services which individual clients demand are the aura which surrounds the work of this company.

Because it is useful, because it allows us to tailor to the needs of each and every client, because it generates principles like those of “win-win”, because economy plus technology is viable and because it is flexible, these are just a few of our most outstanding characteristics. The possibilities of the social web interrelated to “blended learning” and “open learning” are becoming an essential part of this training company (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008a) because apart from all those things already mentioned, it allows, strengthens and facilitates business opportunities.

We know that the incorporation of Web 2.0 in the life of companies does not have repercussions in their relationships with external clients (students in the case of training companies). The social web is changing the way labor relations in companies (with forums, wikis, platforms..., in the different intranets). The relation of companies and their potential clients is also changing in their ways of standing out in this “infoxication” (confusion caused by an excess of disorganized information) (McLuhan, 1969), confusion coming from the Internet and our society (new ways of marketing, such as “viral marketing”¹). And if that is not enough, Web 2.0 is generating new types of relations: “networking”—social networks that, on many occasions, affect workers and managers in parity conditions in any kind of environment.

We are facing a reality that is affecting many business models that will necessarily adapt in the following years, so that they can guarantee their survival.

These changes must be in line with some quality standards that we demand more and more as clients. The

¹ Retrieved March 3, 2009, from http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing_viral

problem of quality still has a long way to go (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008b).

Training Companies and the Social Web: Experience of Some Obstacles

At the same time, as society was changing its organization, didactic organization in education began to be questioned (Aiello, 2004). Currently, the debate is not about virtual versus on-site and the general trend (Harvey & Knight, 1996) is to shift the focus from the teachers onto the learners, a focus which Master-D² has made clear from its creation.

This is something which training companies have always understood. The most important thing is the person who is learning, and his/her needs and attention must be paid to first and foremost, not on the contents of what he/she must learn, nor on the channel through which this information arrives.

Our principle is to offer solutions, not to pontificate about which is the best product or which has the best contents.

Since its outset, the mission of this company has been “to help the greatest number of pupils reach their goals in the shortest time using an appropriate product and excellent service”.

If you pay attention to the “correct product” and “excellent service”, it is very clear where the focus lies. Given that, as we stated above, learning is an individual and personal thing, the task of the training companies is not to influence learning, and in fact, we cannot do that. Its objective is to influence the accompaniment and the assessments, as far as providing resources is concerned (both materials and immaterials), which allows every single pupil to interiorise and learn whatever they need to.

The model, however, is based on each person what he/she needs and when he/she needs it. Tutorials, certainly, but not at a pre-arranged time set at the beginning of the course (provided that this time coincides with the teaching staff’s timetable). The client calls the shots.

In our different approach, we are also convinced that the clients do not have “carte blanche” to do whatever they like, simply because they are the clients. We propose an itinerary for them to achieve their objective from the beginning, and it is clear that as they progress with their studies and reach milestones, the clients/pupils gain access to new services, support and materials.

However, the work and the process of learning is up to the individual, and periodically, the pupils have to demonstrate that they are completing their parts of the work and to ascertain that they have to pass through certain points. The introduction of these “check points” transformed a company of distance learning into a company of “open training and coaching”.

In order to offer this excellent service which forms an essential part of the company’s mission, we decide to implement an investment plan which has allowed us to create 50 delegations/branches throughout Spain with teaching, information systems and communications departments, which make up more than three quarters of the total workforce. As we can see, this is far removed from the notion that “blended learning” or “e-learning” is popular in training companies, because they can keep the costs down.

Therefore, to stay with this subject, offer a service and provide the appropriate work which personal learning requires, this company has made important investment efforts in technology.

The Web 2.0 has a lot of possibilities which the market is gradually accepting and training companies are

² Master-D Group is an open learning company based in Spain and leader in their sector. It was created in 1994 and nowadays it has more 70,000 students. It gives training services to more than 30,000 new students every year (in the last five). It has more than one thousand workers and is present in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Brazil and China.

incorporating. However, this presents companies with other problems: What contents? Who creates the material? How should I organize it? How can I distribute these in accordance with the clients' profiles and needs?

These are just some of the questions which training companies must answer in order to be different and competitive as we said before.

It may be that whoever is reading these thoughts finds some incongruity with what we were discussing earlier. If the learner is collaborative, one may think that the question we asked above "What contents" should not apply. The contents can be developed by the networking, a working group which supports the Web 2.0. And there is no incongruity, because training companies know that the clients and the network of pupils, can effectively create conditions and collaborative learning. But the client pays, because he/she has the necessity; he/she pays principally, because he/she wants to be offered a solution and, of course, that solution cannot be that he/she resolves the problem himself/herself, and if this were so, why would he/she want the mediation of a company?

However, the problem is clear. The environment surrounding Web 2.0 is very interesting. However, we must continue working on the creation of contents which develop all the potential of this setting. There are more problems, which the author does not want to go into too much details, but let us look at one more.

One of the most relevant potentials of the Web 2.0, as we commented before, is the collaborative work which it allows. On the other hand, knowledge, being a technical expert..., are elements or differentiating factors which some people do better than others, for example, a job interview, an official exam, a public exam.... Some training companies find themselves in a dilemma: On the one hand, learning can be better and make a more significant difference when it is done collaboratively; and on the other hand, showing all you know and sharing your expertise can be counterproductive when possibly both have the same aspirations, and consequently, they are adversaries which struggle to get the same place, the same job "How can the company reconcile the necessities of both clients?".

Some Social Web Facilities for Training Companies

But which technologies and what for? All of them. The ones that exist and the ones that will, because for teaching companies, technologies are just a way to give an excellent service. Furthermore, technologies are seen as an unavoidable element to become visible. They are the first step to give the service required by our students (clients).

Then, it is obvious that these days companies have to adapt to the changes we are living. In this case, those are coming from Web 2.0. In the end, it is probably an approximation to what Andrew McAfee³ called "Enterprise 2.0" or what Julen Iturbe Ormaetxe⁴ called "Empresas 2.0".

In the end, it talks about taking advantages of the possibilities given by technologies, being conscious that the way of acting can end up proposing (in fact, it does) other models to generate a change in the organization's system of values.

Every company knows that its survival depends on its adaptation to modern times and the necessities of its clients. This "company Darwinism" obliges us to think about which are the necessary adaptations to warrant survival of companies. Master-D is not an exception in this sense. It has to be in the vanguard of these adaptations as a result of its own mission as a company: to help as many students as possible to get their goals

³ Retrieved March 3, 2009, from <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/the-magazine/articles/2006/spring/47306/enterprise-the-dawn-of-emergent-collaboration/>

⁴ Retrieved March 3, 2009, from <http://blog.consultorartesano.com/2006/01/web-20-y-empresa-20-post-1-continuara.html>

in the shortest time possible through an excellent product and service.

As we put in advance, digitalization and networks are the origins of a great number of changes in the tools and methods of communication. The methods of communication between company and (internal and external) clients are adapting to this situation.

The new tools allow us to address and respond to the clients in a more personalized way. This situation prompts the emphasis on the contents and the information, rather than the tool we use to get to our clients. Information is not conditioned by periodicity of the media anymore. Nowadays, updating can be permanent, in real time.

Nowadays, companies are more and more conscious about the fact that information spread, brand and attraction of customer models are overcoming the model point-multipoint (which is unidirectional) (see Figure 1).

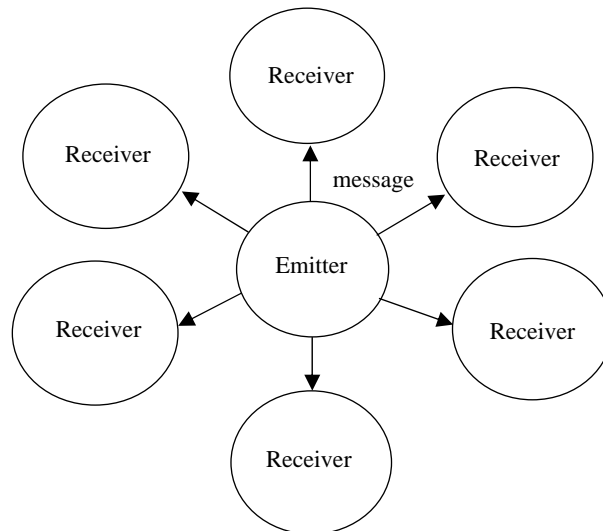


Figure 1. Model point-multipoint.

Bit by bit, the model multipoint-multipoint (see Figure 2) is being imposed and furthermore, it is multidirectional. It is the users that access the servers where the information that they search for or want is. Furthermore, it is these users that generate what some people call “viral marketing”.

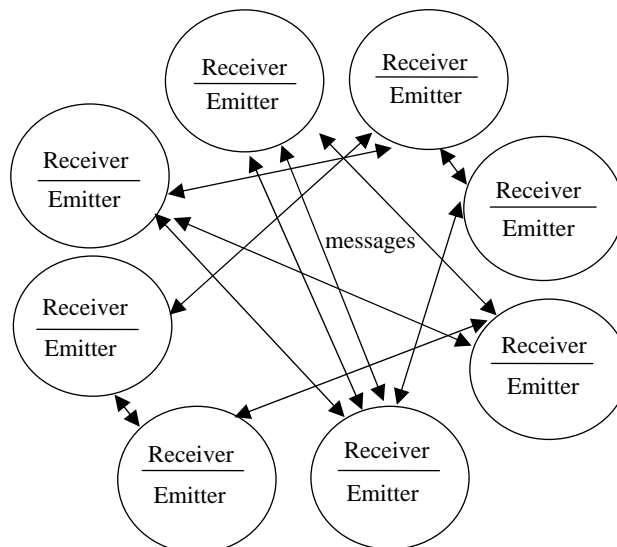


Figure 2. Model multipoint-multipoint.

In this model, each transmitter becomes a receiver and each receiver becomes a transmitter and the messages can reach everyone, either segmented or individually. The model multipoint-multipoint allows all possible combinations. It is the expression of the EME-REC (Emetteur-Recepteur) model which the theorist Jean Cloutier proposed (Cloutier, 1975).

It is not only to do with acquiring clients, but also with gaining their loyalty. The actions in this sense achieve, in the first instance, two important objectives: brand creation and improving brand recognition. The simple fact is that in talking about something or offering something to potential customers, obliges companies are constantly up to date with this knowledge.

Suffice to say, therefore, that in this context, the users/clients are “kings”. In the present moment, companies have to be aware that the means of client acquirement have to follow a “user centered” model (Aguaded & Fandos, 2008) which aims not only to obtain feedback but also, where possible, interactivity.

To summarize, the interest aroused by the social Web in the company world is growing day by day. There are basically two reasons: It allows proximity between (real or potential) client and company. It is a clear relational marketing tool. It permits the creation of a network of mutual knowledge (in both directions), allowing the appearance of mutual trust.

The Experience of a Training Company With Blogs

On the one hand, in the last two years, the Spanish training company Master-D has been betting on the use of blogs as a tool that brings a “visibility” of the products, services and brand image of the company, and it also generates traffic (visits) to their corporate website. This leads more people to be interested in their products and/or services.

On the other hand, in the last two years, the company has created different blogs, which are fed by professionals and managers of the company, allowing two types of objectives: brand knowledge and client generation.

The experience is still very recent, but in the first stage of our analysis we observed that a correlation between the number of visits to our blogs (<http://www.masterdopina.es>; <http://blog.opositor.com>; <http://blogmasterd.pt>; <http://blogmasterd.gr>; <http://www.masterdlabsbs.es>; <http://www.blogenergiasrenovables.com>; ...) and the traffic generated in our corporate web (<http://www.masterd.es>) exists. We have also proved that a percentage of the traffic that gets to our corporate website ends up asking for information and a percentage of these ends up becoming clients of the company. The presence of blogs is firstly helping us get more clients and, therefore, a greater business opportunity.

We are conscious of the important potentialities for companies that blogs have (Villanueva, Aced, & Armelini, 2007)⁵. In this case and for now, we are only stressing the external dimension of them.

The first conclusions of this experience are:

Revision of the use and possibilities of the ICT (information and communication technology) facilitates the “necessary visibility” for this time of infoxication.

For this, we have to take into account a work paradigm in which “being participant” substitutes “being looked at” and the directives of the companies have to be present (make themselves visible) on the Net to give answers to those who ask questions and to generate trust on the brand, the product and the service offered by

⁵ Retrieved March 4, 2009, from <http://www.divshare.com/download/launch/1420234-e2f>

their companies. In the end, the important thing is to come to the top/to emerge from obscurity, generate credibility, have the ability to “manage” the conversation and get some compromises.

With care, but being sure that this way of working is bringing us satisfactory results, we can say that corporate blogs provide competitive advantages that can be checked in the companies using them.

It is evident that blogs are a potent corporate communication tool that facilitates interactivity with a public that can potentially become clients of the company promoted by the blog. Without a shadow of a doubt the first result is that it improves the positioning of the corporate web page in search engines.

Obviously, the traffic that supports the different weblogs relies on the “posts” and “tags” used on them.

In any case, it is a tool that has to be clearly aligned with the strategic and communication plan of the company. It has to be perfectly in tune with the corporate culture.

It also provides the company with an important source of information about the opinion of the users (potential clients) and even the works or development lines of other companies in the same field or competitors.

Therefore, suffice to say that this option (and the corresponding risks) brings “visibility” of the company with it, as we said, for the best positioning in internet search engines. Firstly, it builds community “networking” between other blogs (and their corresponding bloggers), and even for the directives that feed the thematic blogs to be able to be considered an authority and reference in this area of knowledge. It allows for an immediate “feedback” and compels you to update (and create through diffusion) specific knowledge. This allows companies to “encourage talent” of their employees.

From a “*stricto sensu*” publicity standpoint, the company becomes its own billboard through its blogs. This, taken to the extreme, could even make it a trend setter.

In any case, we also have to say that if the company is not transparent and if it is not absolutely ready to give all the information required and even accept reasoned and reasonable criticisms, the social web and blogs cannot be their tools. In the end, it is a question of being as much “authentic” as possible.

Conclusion: Adapting for Survival

As if it was a newspaper headline, this could be the most important conclusion that companies (training companies too) have to work hard at it, so that they can guarantee their survival now and forever.

We are immersed in some changes and many times vertiginous, originated by the progress and implementation of ICT in any field of social development. We are subjugated to what some people call “information pedagogy”. Currently, it is said that teachers and students are a kind of mediator between information and human experience. This mediation is conditioned many times by technology and the uses of a whole range of tools and possibilities that social web or Web 2.0 offers.

These changes are creating new relation environments and new ways of communication. If the consumption of companies’ products or services is essential for their survival, and it is necessary they are known so that this happens, the adaptation to this changes is an immediate challenge to companies that aspire to continue in the coming years.

The social web is nowadays and is going to be in the nearest future a Copernican change in social and educative environments. The adaptation to these changes postulates as a priority for everybody.

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