

ELECTRONIC MAILING LIST AND INTERNET FORUMS - TOOLS FOR MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING WITHIN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract:

This paper is about the use of Electronic Mailing List and Internet Forums as tools for managers within educational organizations. In the same time, some of concepts, ideas and models can be used in other business organizations, especially in service providing organizations. Understanding management requires both learning and practicing, directly experiencing. People involved in electronic networks are experiencing the alternative to real communication. We considered Electronic Mailing List and Internet Forums both as marketing tool and a human resources management tool. The benefits of using discussion lists are: people informed, involved and improved.

Keywords: electronic mailing list, internet forums, virtual groups, educational organization, educational tool, working groups

Definitions of important terms

According to Wikipedia [1], an *electronic mailing list* is a type of Internet forum, a special usage of e-mail that allows for widespread distribution of information to many Internet users. It is similar to a traditional mailing list — a list of names and addresses — as might be kept by an organization for sending publications to its members or customers, but typically refers to four things: 1) a list of e-mail addresses; 2) the people ("subscribers") receiving mail at those addresses; 3) the publications (e-mail messages) sent to those addresses; 4) a *reflector*, which is a single e-mail address that, when designated as the recipient of a message, will send a copy of that message to all of the subscribers.

An *Internet forum* is a facility on the World Wide Web for holding discussions and posting user generated content, or the web application software used to provide this facility. Internet forums are also commonly referred to as web forums, message boards, discussion boards, (electronic)

discussion groups, discussion forums, bulletin boards, or simply forums.

Educational organization

We are considering the case of universities and of the communicational systems used in their educational context and environment. Although most of examples are universities, actually, the theories presented here can be applied to business organizations, too. Many business organizations are transforming themselves to become learning organizations. They are including their clients in their processes; they are using networks and relationships as tools for marketing services and products and for management of human resources.

Another reason is the importance of human resources involved. It has been argued that people (participants, personnel, clients, volunteers and others) can be considered as an element of the marketing mix.

We consider universities to be organizations shifting from a traditional structure based on hierarchy to a modern model using dynamic networks.

Such organizations include clients in their structure. It is the typical educational organization that includes its clients in their processes.

Functions of Electronic Mailing List and Internet Forums

We consider some functions Electronic Mailing Lists, useful for management: communication; cohesion of the group; marketing, networks within organizations

Communication

The main function of an Electronic Mailing List is communication within the virtual group. The virtual group is the virtual form of a community. The virtual group is supposed to be composed by all the members in the real group (students in a class, professors in a department, all the participants in a project) Communication using Electronic Mailing List is not instead but in addition to real communication. The main benefits of using Electronic Mailing List as a tool for virtual communication are the following.

Increasing the efficiency of communication within the group. In educational environments, people are sometimes too busy or too involved in their own job and they are not communicating efficiently even they share the same area (building of the school or of the university, class hall, school yard, school bus, library)

More encounters of members. Because of increased communication, the interactions multiply. This guides to social interaction, acceptance, new perspectives and sharing resources;

More information shared. Thanks to the function of distributing and keeping the information Electronic Mailing Lists and Internet Forums can be considered as the depository of information communicated within the group. That is, another face of information resource.

More members involved. Due to personal characteristics of some members, lack of interest, lack of time

or introverted persons, real groups dissipates some of their members. Virtual groups get back the lost members of the group. They are feeling themselves to be part of the group even they are not physically involved in group activities.

All the communication is the private property of the group. People involved in communication of a virtual group tend to reject messages that are not respecting the rules of the group, the interests of the members or they are from another source which is not a part of the group.

Communication releases time and space. It is not anymore necessary to use only the formal time (that is, time officially dedicated for communication in the real group, for example, proper time to give a phone call) or the formal place to communicate within the group. People can use their own time and they can be in their preferred space to transmit and read messages. Every participant can choose the proper time for concentrating for creating an important idea.

Culture of communication within the virtual group. The values and the rules of the communication within the group can be easily explained and debated or even voted. The culture of the group is more likely to be influenced by the responsible parts involved in the communication.

Cohesion of the group

Cohesion plays a central role in collaborative learning. In face-to-face classes, it can be reckoned from several visual or oral cues [6]. Cohesion of the group is the effect of following.

Communication. Communicating is one condition for members to stick together. Another one is the common interests and the common experience. The virtual group is supposed to be composed by the same members of real group. Members have common settings, characteristics and they are involved in the same process.

Brand or the visual identity of the group. Groups want to be distinctive and different. They use marketing to establish a specific identity.

Pictures. Electronic Mailing Lists can host pictures. These can be a tool for cohesion of the group. People view themselves in the frame of the group and understand better the role of all the participants.

Time, also is a cohesion element. Most of Electronic Mailing Lists have a group calendar where can be posted timelines for group activities. This feature can be used for better planning and communicating the plan more efficiently.

The group resources. Electronic Mailing Lists and Internet forums host electronic resources, valuable for members. Educational organizations use information as resources. Groups host files, rules, information about participants, time, place and process.

The process itself and group activities. Working together and discussing about their work is a powerful tool of group cohesion. These provide members with common experience.

Marketing

Marketing in educational organizations deals with analysis marketing environment, marketing research and identification the main public categories, segmenting and differentiating the market in order to identify the persons or group to be served and known, participation to strategic planning process and establishing the organizational strategy, acquisition of main resources of organization, developing policies, programs and activities designed to meet the needs of target publics, formulating and implementation the price, communication and distribution policies, managing the public image of organization, formulating and implementing policies both for products and resources, monitoring, evaluating and controlling marketing activities,

attaining and management of volunteers and participants to nonprofit activities, research of funding markets, identification of existing and potential resources, project management and communicating with financers of projects.

Usually, marketing deals with clients and clients are external to organization. Educational organizations have more target markets and more categories of clients such as input public: donors, financers, educational authorities as rules maker; internal categories: professors, students, volunteers, administrative personnel, decision makers (members of the educational councils); intermediary public: companies selling produces and services, partners in educational projects; consumer public: students, prospects, media, local public.

They have to consider for each category their behaviors, characteristics and preferences, including: channel preferences; technology adoption; media usage; lifestyle and other consumer behaviors; life-cycle data.

With the tools and resources to effectively analyze donors, volunteers and markets, educational organizations have to uncover potential opportunities and develop the best strategies to tackle their specific marketing challenges:

- Customer Acquisition and Retention, that is to identify the best contributors and volunteers so they can find and keep more like them
- Market Analysis, to prioritize the best markets for effective marketing programs
- Direct Marketing, to enhance the donor file and improve the response rates by mailing to fewer, better-targeted prospects
- Media Planning—choose the appropriate medium to reach the best contributors and volunteers while maximizing media expenditures

Electronic Mailing Lists are marketing tools that can be used as

tools. Organizations can develop dedicated communication channels for each category and keep it closer. Electronic Mailing Lists and Internet forums are networks to be used for reaching marketing goals.

All the implications for marketing of the organization can be better viewed using the concept of relationship marketing and internal marketing.

Internal marketing includes processes, relationships and all the participants involved in organizational. Internal marketing approaches both participants and communication system used[4]. Internal marketing is used for motivating the participants to offer the best services to clients, to stimulate efficiency within organization, to create satisfied clients adhere to organization.

Networks within organizations

Using a virtual group basically consists in building a network. Network is an alternative to hierarchy. That is, people communicating using Electronic Mailing List and Internet Forums are not respecting the hierarchy; they are developing another dimension of organizational life of the group.

The use of network has been studied in marketing by Grönroos [2] and Gummesson [3]. They focused on the networks within organizations as tools for transformation of organizational processes and structures. Using this model, organizations shift from a traditional structure based on hierarchy to a modern model using dynamic networks. Such organizations include clients in their structure. It is the typical educational organization that includes its clients in their processes.

Using Electronic Mailing Lists as tools at University of Oradea, Faculty of Economic Sciences

University of Oradea is a public institution of higher education in Oradea, Romania, with more than 18 faculties and departments, 23000 students and 1000 professors and

researchers. Faculty of Economic Sciences is one of the biggest faculties within University.

The use of Electronic Mailing lists and Internet forums became a necessity while the number of students increased and the information regarding the transformation of higher education system were more and more. Faculty of Economic Science of University of Oradea has more than 4000 students and programs for undergraduate, graduate and doctoral students.

Another reason of using this form of communicating with students is the need of tracking graduated students and to maintain relationships with them. First class of students, which graduated in 1996 joined in 2006 after 10 years and offered valuable information to the management of the Faculty. The plan of the Management Marketing Department was to develop EML and Internet forums to encourage graduate students to give feedback and to establish a direct means of communication with them.

The concept

The classic marketing approach considers students as clients, at least one of the categories of clients, besides employers and other participants to labor market. For educational institutions the main products are study programs. As educational institutions are service providers, models and concepts from service marketing can be applied for their success on the market. The main idea is to keep the clients close and to involve them in the educational process as conscientious clients, responsible for the success of their own education.

Service provider companies of any kind build networks for keeping their clients closer. So it does the Faculty of Economic Science in Oradea, even it is not business oriented.

Resources and benefits

The resources that Management Marketing Department are described below.

The official Internet Site of the faculty: <http://steconomice.uoradea.ro>. This site is ranked the first in his category (Educational) in Oradea, on Romanian traffic counter site www.trafic.ro (May, 2007). The institution provides students with information regarding educational process, programming exams, terms of educational actions and projects, congresses and other educational forms of spreading information and so on.

The electronic interface with distance students, on the site <http://distance.uoradea.ro> which uses Moodle package. According to official site[5], Moodle is a course management system (CMS) - a free, Open Source software package designed using sound pedagogical principles, to help educators create effective online learning communities. Students and professors have their personal account used for entering the system. Each professor was instructed how to use the system and the process of distributing course content and assess students and their activity. So far (May 2007) there were 700 students and 56 professors using Moodle. This system is an alternative, aimed to complete the classic educational process, especially for distance learning students.

Students' group Yahoo Groups. This is a private form of communication

between students. Each group of students is encouraged to develop their own Yahoo! Group, to stay close to the other colleagues, to be informed, to have access to group's calendar and resources. Yahoo! Groups is a service from Yahoo! that provides electronic mailing lists. As well as providing e-mail relaying and archiving facilities for the many lists it hosts, the Yahoo! Groups service provides additional functions on the web site, such as voting and calendar systems and file uploading. The basic mailing list functionality is available to any e-mail address, but a Yahoo! ID is required for access to other features. Group messages can be posted and read by e-mail or on the Group homepage, like a web forum. Members can choose whether to receive individual e-mails or daily digest e-mails, or to read the posts at the web site. Professors urge students to create a discussion group for every specialty and every year of study. They distributed electronic resources for courses and seminars using groups, making attractive the member quality of the group. In the meantime, students understand better that they are part of the community and they have advantages if they stay in contact with other colleagues.

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