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GETTING THE RIGHT BLEND

HOW TO CREATE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE THAT STUDENTS AND PARENTS WANT

Students and parents are generally proud of their schools and universities. However, with increasing global competition and new technologies transforming the education sector, institutions are facing unprecedented competition. Those that don't make customer experience a high priority will find it increasingly difficult to attract the number and quality of students they need to thrive…. or survive.

Technology plays a critical role in improving customer experience, but it's not just about providing online videos of lectures and other self-service digital tools for students. "It has to be a blended learning experience, providing the best possible on-campus and off-campus environment," says Katrina Reynen, Industry Lead for Education at Optus Business.

In this paper we explain what leading schools and universities are doing to provide an outstanding experience for students and parents.

LEADING UNIVERSITIES AND SCHOOLS AREN'T JUST FOCUSING ON DIGITAL CHANNELS, THEY'RE AIMING TO PROVIDE A HIGH-QUALITY BLENDED LEARNING EXPERIENCE.

HOW SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES ARE PERFORMING

Consumers rate education as one of the better sectors for delivering customer experience, according to the Optus Future of Business Report 2014. People are 30 per cent more likely to recommend a school or university than the average business or government organisation, although they're only fractionally more likely to remain loyal.

Given the increasing competition for funding and students in the education sector, it's not surprising that the sector's customer experience practices generally compare quite favourably with other industries. For example, 71 per cent of education institutions have a customer feedback program that provides actionable insights.

However, the Future of Business Report reveals that unless customer experience is outstanding, most consumers are unlikely to remain loyal – and even less likely to recommend your organisation to other people.

THE FUTURE IS A BLENDED LEARNING EXPERIENCE

What sets an outstanding customer experience apart from an average or even a good one? Our report reveals it's the human touches, such as friendly, knowledgeable staff, that are most likely to delight customers and exceed their expectations – and that's especially the case for education institutions.

This is why leading universities and schools aren't just focusing on digital channels. "They're aiming to provide a high-quality blended learning experience," says Reynen.

"Some universities focus on delivery of online learning because they assume students prefer not to have to attend classes in person. But that causes disengagement from their social learning environment which is one of the key reasons why students are dropping out of their courses. Learning is actually a social experience, and that's why attracting students to learn on campus is becoming a high priority for some institutions."

Improving the on-campus experience requires getting the little things right, such as network access and download speeds, and the number of places students can charge their phones.

More importantly, leading institutions are working towards providing a blended learning experience with integrated solutions. "We have to move beyond just putting videos of lectures online. We have to start thinking about e-textbooks and other ways of delivering a blend of online and offline education."

Bring-your-own-device (BYOD) programs will become essential. "Rather than having a laptop for home and a PC at university or school, students should be able to use a fully mobile 3/4 network enabled tablet or the device of their choice, so learning is the same on and off campus."

Students expect to be known as individuals to their institutions, with access to all the key resources, software and applications they need to complete their course. The most customer driven universities and TAFEs are even finding ways to customise retail offerings and additional services to their students, based on their proximity to the campus.

HOW TO MEET SELF-SERVICE EXPECTATIONS

While human interactions will remain vital, digital channels are increasing in importance. According to our report, self-service features and easier, more convenient interactions are two of the faster-growing consumer expectations in the education sector.

"It's like banks. You want to be able to do the easy transactions online, but you still want a real person to be there for the more complex problems such as how to choose the best course for you to achieve your life goals," says Reynen.

Self-service digital tools have been a key focus area for many institutions – with some schools even offering parents monthly email report cards, for example. However, there's plenty of room for improvement. "You still can't enrol your child in a primary school online. That's fine if it's your local school, but it's a nightmare if you're moving from interstate."

The key to improving front-end tools is getting the back-end systems right, which is why student management systems are high on the IT agenda of many schools and universities. These systems make it easier to manage the student recruitment and admission process, oversee the entire student lifecycle, deliver real-time online self-service features and more.

However, as in all long term change projects, the key to improving the digital learning experience is to provide the right professional learning for teachers and lecturers so that the technology significantly improves the learning experience, rather than just replacing the administrative elements of delivering learning.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Consumers are 71 per cent more likely to expect a personalised, flexible experience from an education institution than they are from an average business, according to our report. That finding confirms one of the four strategies Reynen suggests for improving customer experience in the higher education sector:

- Offer greater flexibility and personalisation. "Learning is becoming more individualised," she says. "Students want the flexibility to be doing, say, a biochemistry degree but ask to study a topical subject in depth, such as the Ebola virus, and get credit for it. Some of the more entrepreneurial universities are starting to offer more courses, and giving credit for completion of online learning from other institutions, some of which are overseas. They're giving students more options, saying: 'Let's figure out what's the right course according to your interests, background and abilities.'"

- Focus on the transition points. Universities are spending time and money on attracting high school students. "There seems to be quite a concerted effort to build a relationship with the customer, before they even become a customer," she says. But it shouldn't end there. "With the difficulties many graduates are having finding jobs in their fields, students will increasingly look at how universities are helping with the transition from study to career."

- Have a clear online strategy. For example, while Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are booming, Reynen contends that not every tertiary institution needs to offer them. "Successful MOOCs are really expensive so you need to have a good strategic understanding of why you're doing them. For some Universities, MOOCs help maintain their strong global brand presence. But others, are very clear that their online strategy is about providing excellence and choice for their own students – finding out what they want and delivering that."

- Make stronger, more targeted and higher value partnerships between business, research and development activity and education institutions. This will support the emergence of people and products that are work ready, immersed in real life business experience, and globally aware. Australia needs more highly skilled, creative and innovative people in order to compete globally and higher education institutions have a critical role to play in this.

CONCLUSION

"ICT has become a core competency in education," Reynen says. "Today's ICT department has to support everything from teaching, learning and self-service tools to storage, security and online courses – even collection and reporting of big data analytics for system improvement - and they're generally delivering."

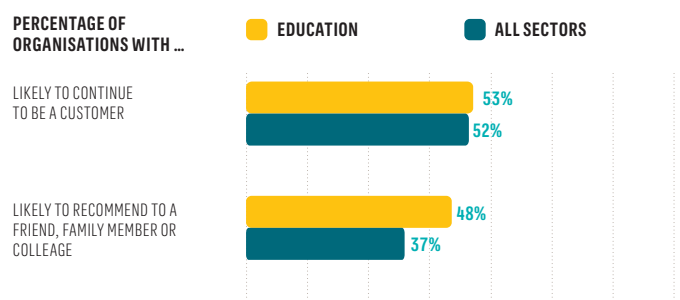However, having ICT capabilities is one thing; having the right strategies is another thing altogether.

"Tomorrow's successful university and school will have the right blend of services and technologies," she says. "That's why today's leading institutions are looking at a range of capabilities, such as game-based learning, online assessment, better ways of communicating with students, and how to build loyalty and communities of learning.

"They're aiming to give students the right information, getting them into the right course, making them feel valued, providing a good, blended learning experience online and on campus, and helping them with their transitions to the next phase of their education or career."

CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION

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HOW CUSTOMERS RATE EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

PERCENTAGE OF ORGANISATIONS WITH …

■ EDUCATION   ■ ALL SECTORS

LIKELY TO CONTINUE TO BE A CUSTOMER
- 53%
- 52%

LIKELY TO RECOMMEND TO A FRIEND, FAMILY MEMBER OR COLLEAGE
- 48%
- 37%

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