A Model for Developing Internet-based Course Samples for Successful E-Marketing to Recruit and Retain Students

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of a user-friendly and attractive Internet-based multimedia course teaser that combines e-learning and e-marketing to recruit and retain students. The needs and constraints that instigated the creation of the course sample are discussed, the model and its development are described, the technical aspects of the project are outlined, and the outcomes to date are delineated. The model was developed using software and materials available to any developer regardless of computer-skill background.

An attractive function of the model is its ability to not only respond to student need for practice but also its design for use as a marketing tool. The simple data capture system collects prospective student data for future marketing. A marketing contact program using the captured data keeps name-recognition and program quality fresh in the minds of prospective students. The model is a working success and can be emulated by other programs.

Keywords: Course Teaser, Distance Education, E-Learning, and E-Marketing

Introduction

The advent of the Internet has had profound effects on society, seen clearly in the fields of education and marketing. It has revolutionized the field of marketing to the extent that, today, marketers use attractive interactive multimedia web sites not only to advertise their product and services but also to communicate with their customers and sell their product and service, all with a few clicks of a mouse (Deghton, 1996). One of the goals of e-marketing is to create strong relationships with customers to promote repeat customers; in other words, to develop retention of customers. Many times this goal is established by customized advertisements and personal reminders, which are easily done since the web allows tracking of an individual's browsing and shopping habits. Clearly,

enhanced customer relationships develop and maintain a competitive edge. (Tapscott, Ticoll, and Lowy, 2000)

As a result of the Internet, then, competition for customers has expanded and become, of necessity, more highly inventive. Universities face the same increased competition that other elements of the market economy face. Student mobility between universities has been facilitated through articulation agreements and transfers. Students have a broad range of courses available to them and can easily attend the university that provides what the student perceives to be the best offering. Thus, universities must court student interest in their marketing campaigns since ultimately the student is where the registration dollars come from. Most universities have turned to e-marketing and e-learning to improve their recruitment and their course delivery respectively. Few, however, have coordinated these two elements for advertising purposes.

Most university personnel look upon a university's advertising campaign as something separate from daily class function. The authors of this paper believe that instructors can have a strong influence on marketing and support their university's efforts to recruit and retain students by showcasing the attractive elements of their courses.

The model discussed in this paper demonstrates how to develop inexpensive course teasers to recruit and retain students. This model can be used for developing teasers for any discipline; can be as simple as a one-page teaser on the Welcome page or as extensive as our model, containing content, quizzes, projects, and a variety of media. It can be developed by the instructor, by IT staff, or by computer students using anything from simple html to complex web programming, inside or outside of WebCT, WebCT VISTA, WebCT Campus Edition or Blackboard environments. The complexity of the teaser is a function of the tools available to the developer and to the developer's imagination.

Background

The course-teaser model was developed by the English Language Institute (ELI) in response to a market slump in international students seeking English language instruction. This situation has created intense competition. The ELI needed to build name-recognition with prospective students and to distinguish itself from its many U.S. competitors.

The Director of ELI determined that the best draw would be to offer representative course content to prospective students via an Internet-based free course teaser. If the teaser content changed regularly, prospective students would return to the website to engage in new e-learning activities.

Building the Model

The model was built with three major issues in mind: quality, cost, and appeal. Quality was built into the model in the form of the effectiveness of the curriculum and

materials, as well as the overall organization, structure and ease of use of the model. Cost was minimized as much as possible. Therefore, the model was developed completely in-house, over a period of time in addition to regular duties, which saved money. Cost and appeal guided many decisions concerning the building of the model and were referred to as they relate to each decision.

Because the materials had to reflect an entire program rather than a single course, the planning stage was extensive. Instructional materials had to be conducive to presentation via Internet, had to be pedagogically sound, and had to appeal to a broad range of language interests, skill levels and needs. Furthermore, the teasers had to give prospective students a strong sense of what the ELI program could offer as well as give them a sense of progress in that content area. To bring the most benefit to the ELI from the addition of these teasers, they had to be long enough to engage the prospective student for more than one sitting (to encourage the student to come back to the site often). The teasers also had to be memorable in the same way that print media stimulate visual memory to achieve effective advertising. To appeal to a broad range of prospective students, it was deemed necessary to divide the course content into smaller segments and to offer enough variety to engage different skill levels. Thus, the teaser segments in our model moved from simple to difficult over a period of time.

Appeal also had to be developed in the materials. Subject matters were chosen that would pique the interest of prospective students (flying saucers, snakes, jokes, items of personal interest such as buying a used car, sending a business e-mail, and so on), and skills were mapped so that all possible language skills were represented. Some sections were developed in a scaffolded process so that prospective students would associate new contents with a core of meaning, thereby remembering them better and thus gaining a sense of progress. Of course, within a module, only one small aspect of a skill could be taught. Materials were constructed to appeal to as many learning modalities as possible (visual, auditory, tactile).

Finally, appeal drove the need for artwork and other attention-getting stimuli. Each module was created around a color-coordinated infrastructure, which helped with appeal and ease of use. Unusual text, artwork, photographs, streaming sound and even streaming video were used within the body of the module. WebCT software tends to force a dry presentation, thus banners were included at the top of most Lessons and many Practices that were in color, contained clip art or other visuals, and often presented a "first-one-done-for-you" example of how to answer the Practice questions. Of course, most especially in this area, cost was a factor. Royalties could not be paid for artwork, so the main illustrations were collected from public domain clipart, original drawings, and original photographs of willing subjects from UHD faculty, staff and students. Most of the sound streams were the recorded voices of willing instructors, and a streaming video was made of an instructor giving a speech to help illustrate a lesson. In these areas, the audiovisual department of the university was most helpful, recording and digitizing the sound and videotape segments to create clips that could be used in the modules.

Tools

In general, tools are the choice of the developer and should be familiar and easy to use. The chosen software packages should be university-supported. In most universities, dealing with locations on servers and arranging for safe access by prospective students requires university signature approval and support.

For our model, WebCT was chosen as the basic software because it was easy to use, common to the university setting, and supported by university systems. On the other hand, WebCT has the disadvantage of forcing a generally static and dry presentation and has limitations in its types of quizzes and available bells and whistles (for example, sound). Microsoft Word and FrontPage were used for the content presentation of the teaser segments. Since WebCT was limited to non-sound quizzes, Respondus was used to create quizzes requiring sound. In addition, Respondus was used for quiz types not supported by WebCT, while Photoshop and Pagemaker were used for some of the graphics. Finally, Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) coding was used to fine-tune content pages, banners, quiz questions and answers, various visuals, sounds, video, and links.

For those interested in the audio and video additions to the program, the following technical information is included. The video was shot with a Sony DSR130 on DVCam tape. It was digitized on a PC by attaching a video tape recorder (DSR30) via a fire wire to the PC. The DV encoder software was used to digitize the tape is from Main Concepts. Adobe Premiere was used to edit the footage, both audio and video. Since the output files were generated as reference files (AVI or Quicktime), they had to be transcoded into Real Media files using Cleaner 5. They were then either uploaded to the server that houses the site or stored on CD for later insertion in to the course materials.

The video was recorded as stated above. Taking into consideration the possibility of slow computers used by prospective students, the site offered two streams of video (a 45K stream and a 100K stream) that students could choose from. The video was uploaded to the server, and links to those files were embedded in a .ram extension linkage file (a Real Media metafile that tells the user's computer to go to a specific server and use Real Player to play the video). To accomplish that, the link was coded and then saved on Notebook using Save As into a Media metafile. Finally, the link was inserted into the appropriate WebCT content module. The audio-only files were encoded through Pinnacle into Premiere and then the above process was followed.

Recommendation

The ELI Free English model is an effective way to organize and present teasers, regardless of subject matter[1]. The multimedia model is low cost. It does not require extensive technical knowledge from the developer, although more bells and whistles can be added if the developer is conversant with coding. The model can be completely created by a single person but it can also be developed more rapidly by using university resource centers. Although this model's segments do not dovetail, the model is adaptable

to continuous development of a subject area. Many WebCT-based courses can be dry and single-faceted compared to this model, which provides a number of avenues for making content attractive to students. Because this model includes visuals, sound, text and tactile action (typing, clicking, etc.), it appeals to all learning modalities. Finally, the model attracts students, addresses various skill levels, encourages prospective students to revisit the site, and provides users a sense of satisfaction, all while instilling name recognition, course interest, and the recruitment/retention function so essential to today's university.

Conclusion

This paper describes the development of a user-friendly and attractive Internet-based multimedia course teaser that combines e-learning and e-marketing to help recruit and retain students. The results to date have been very encouraging for a small department within a university. Faculty who invest time in developing course teasers using this model can enjoy similar success while showcasing quality courses.

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[1] Visit the ELI Free English at http://www.uhd.edu/prospective/continuinged/eli/free_english/index.html