Action Research: Effective Marketing Strategies for a Blended University Program

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Abstract

This action research study investigated a marketing plan based on collaboration among a program faculty team and other organizational units for a graduate professional program. From its inception through the second year of operation, program enrollment increased due to the marketing plan based on an effective approach grounded in simple marketing principles. Data including planning and meeting notes, memoranda, documents, and program enrollment data reveal how plan development and implementation increased enrollments by over a third in less than two years.

Introduction

This study looks at team collaboration in successfully marketing a University blended-delivery program within 50 miles of a campus in a large metropolitan area. The study focuses on marketing (Borden, 1964; Isgar, 1995; Shaik, 2005) action research (Argyris, .Putnam, & Smith, 1985, 1999; Avison, Lau, Meyers, & Nielsen, 1999; Dick, 1999; Gay, 1987; Lewin, 1946; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991) and collaboration (Clark, Moss, Goering, et al, 1996; Faber & Green, 2001; Giarratano & Gannon-Cook, 2000; Havernik, Messerschmitt, &Vandrick,1997; John-Steiner, Weber, & Minnis, 1998) as a means to accomplish innovation diffusion, and as a model for change integration of new university programs (Allan, & Wolf, 1978; Bourner, Katz & Watson, 2000; Fullan 1991, 1994; Isgar, 1995, Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Robinson, 1995; Rogers, 1995; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971).

In many instances, little formative test-marketing is conducted when new programs are initiated in universities. The addition of action research into the marketing implementation could offer an opportunity for test-marketing and also provide valuable insights into the community needs, all without any additional costs or efforts to the university.. In this study the research team implemented a marketing plan initiated by their university to gain a larger market share in the fertile potential online higher education market (Bonk, 2001; Bourner, Katz, Watson, 2000; Bunn, 2001; Capella University, 2008; DePaul University, 2008; DeVry University, 2008; Dunn, 2000; Eastmond, 2007; Huang, 2002; Kezar, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002; National Institute for Literacy, 2000; Nova Southeastern University, 2008; Pink, 2005; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000; United States Distance Learning Association, 2001; University of Maryland, 2008; University of Phoenix, 2008; Walden University, 2008 . From the inception of a simple and direct plan through the second year of operation, program enrollment doubled. Throughout the process the marketing plan was implemented and results recorded using an action-research data collection method provide a rich data set to enable the researchers to draw inferences about the marketing plan implementation effectiveness and make recommendations for future university marketing initiatives. The findings of this study reinforce the effectiveness of systematic marketing in increasing enrollments in higher education. These findings could also have residual effects on both the sponsoring institution and the targeted educational community as well as contribute to the body of literature on the marketing of educational products and services.

Literature Review

Marshall McLuhan (1964) predicted a global village, over fifty years ago, and today everyone can be connected electronically in virtual communities. The literature in this study includes research on electronic and blended learning, marketing and change theories, embedded action research and implementation of innovation in education.

The study was grounded in diffusion of innovation theory that posits successful innovation can quietly assimilate into the culture of the academic environment without mandates from management (Fullan, 1991, 1994; Gannon-Cook, Crawford & Varagoor, 1998; Robinson, 1995). Once an innovation is adopted, it becomes less

threatening. Templates, training, and other support can promote electronic innovation adoption that ultimately turns adopters into assimilation supporters. Even after and institution has embraced and assimilated the innovation, resistors may still be reluctant to become adopters, but the wave of change can carry late adopters to join a critical mass of adopters (Allan, & Wolf, 1978; Bourner, Katz, & Watson, 2000; Gladwell, 2002; Robinson, 1995; Rogers, 1995). As adopters increase in numbers and use the innovation repeatedly, a tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) occurs, and the innovation becomes part of the evolving culture. When closing on the tipping point, a critical mass of users typically provide testimonials for innovation success (Gladwell, 2002; Zaltman, 1998) and the sponsoring institution can then implement a marketing plan, both face-to-face and electronically, with collaboration from both administration and participants (Faber & Green, 2001; Havernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 1997; Isgar, 1995; Robinson, 1995).

Research on innovation indicates there may be a relationship between an organization's training delivery capability level and the barriers to detain it (Barg, 2004; Berge, 2002, Berge & Muilenburg, 2001; Nootenboom, 2006). One of the biggest obstacles is can be an entrenched organization culture (Berge & Muilenburg, 2001, Gask, 2005; Nootenboom, 2006; Shaik, 2005). Often the challenges to the innovation implementation, such as online instructional programs, may come from the very establishment committed to its adoption (Berge & Muilenburg, 2001). Organizations can be at different readiness stages for online instructional delivery and delivery capability, but too often the organization is hurdling forward at such a brisk pace that training is developed and delivered without an audit trail (2001).

Many academic administrators seem to think that, when it comes to creating distance education programs, if you build it, the customers will come (Robinson, 1995). Administrators often waste efforts on ineffective marketing, setting up and implementing the marketing plan, to then fail to allocate enough time for the innovation to take root in the target culture (1995). New product marketing research conducted at Harvard indicates people make purchase decisions based on word of mouth (Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbek, 1973). The Zaltman study (1997) revealed testimonials were more successful in marketing a new product than media advertisements. People talked about something they were excited and felt good about, but they also talked about bad experiences. . Therefore, the product must be delivered consistently in order to obtain and sustain positive testimonials from satisfied customers; these findings also apply to marketing online programs.

Adoption of an innovation seems to occur more effectively when any product, including the innovation assimilates into the culture (Fullan, 1991; Fullan, 1994; Robinson, 1995; Rogers, 1995; Becher, 1969). Increased exposure and familiarity with innovation reduces resistance (Barg, 2004; Ellsworth, 2000; Ely 1990; Gask, 2005; Gladwell, 2002; Nootenboom, 2006; Zaltman, 1998). Once the innovation becomes less threatening adopters are more willing to consider the innovation; as they begin to use the innovation they adapt their work styles to accommodate the innovation and encourage their peers to try it. At this point adopters require reinforcement and encouragement as they embrace and integrate the innovation (Robinson, 1995). Adopters must perceive the benefits of the innovation exceed its costs; time and effort invested in the innovation will be worth the investment.

The adopters in the study included two segments of the educational community: first the faculty members implementing the marketing plan; and second, the targeted marketing group. The higher education administrators who promoted technological innovation, global education and eLearning developed internal organizational factors such as collegiality, professional faculty training, and personal and professional collaborations (Barg, 2004; Berge & Muilenberg, 2001; Bourner, Katz & Watson, 2000; Ellsworth, 2000; Ely 1990; Gask, 2005; Havernik, Messerschmitt, Vandrick, 1997; Havernik, Messerschmitt, Vandrick, 1997; Nootenboom, 2006).

Gladwell (2002) purports that successful products or marketing efforts are identified by three characteristics: (a) contagiousness by exposure; (b) small events have large effects; and (c) change occurs at a tipping point single event (). In other words, once exposed to the innovation or change, events as small as testimonials can begin to spread the use and a large mass of users can quickly turn into a critical mass that "tips the scales" (p.21) to mass adoption. So, while managing change may take time, "the actual changes can occur in a moment" (p.21). . Short-sighted new program implementation timelines which attempt to force quick adoption often incur resistance instead of compliance (Clark, Moss, Goering, Herter, & Wascha, 1996; Faber & Green, 2001; Giarratano & Gannon-Cook, 1999; Havernik, Messerschmitt, & Vandrick, 1997; Haverschmidt, Smith1998; John-Steiner, Weber, & Minnis, 1998; Larson & LaFasto, 1989; Robinson, 1995; Shaik, 2005; Stribiak & Paul, 1998). Therefore, promoting collaboration among adopters and sustaining support for change implementation are key elements of successful new program implementation.

Facilitating innovation and adoption should also address minimizing or removing implementation barriers. Faculty are usually time-challenged, entrenched in a change-resistant culture, and without tools and support to integrate the innovation (Berge & Muilenburg, 2001; Bonk, 2001; Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2001). A higher education survey study (Berge & Muilenburg, 2001) reported the biggest adoption barriers to an innovative distance education

program to be: (a) adequate faculty compensation and time; (b) insufficient support for organizational cultural change; (c) lack of technical expertise and user support; (d) failure to evaluate innovation effectiveness issues.

Innovative organizations and their employees display several attributes that facilitate change. Adoptive behaviors, self-determinism, competence, tendency for success, and tendency to avoid failure contribute to successful innovation participation (Allan & Wolf, 1978). Five organizational attributes facilitate innovation adoption: relative advantage; compatibility; complexity; trialability; observability and access (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). One primary requisite for successful innovation adoption is that adopters must perceive the innovation as simple to use and maintain (Allan & Wolf, 1978; Gannon-Cook , Crawford, & Varagoor, 1998; Institute for Higher Educational Policy, 2000; Robinson, 1995). Innovation happens when an organization minimizes barriers and also promotes change.

Research on team management underscores the importance of adapting and reinforcing innovation in environmental and cultural contexts (Kaufman, 2000; Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Rogers' categories of adoption can also serve as barriers, the lack of relative advantage; incompatibility; too much complexity; insufficient trialability; unobservability and inaccessibility or lack of encouragement to adopt the innovation (Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971). Opposition may also come from lack of confidence that the system is capable of successful implementation (Ellsworth, 2000).

Method

Action research employs a similar and much earlier methodology organizational researcher Kurt Lewin (1951) called field research a collection of problem-solving cycles for improving organizations. The process involves project identification; analysis; planning; observing; evaluating; amending; and beginning the cycle again (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). "The term 'action' captured the notion of a disciplined inquiry in the context of focusing efforts to improve the quality of an organization and its performance" (National Literacy Secretariat of Canada, 2002). From its educational inception, action research has provided "immediate answers to problems that cannot wait for theoretical solutions" (Gay, 1987, p. 9).

Action research is "the practical application of the scientific method or other forms of disciplined inquiry to the process of dealing with everyday problems" (Vockell & Asher, 1995, p. 445). Integrating theory and practice is the key to action research. The term action research evolved from classroom research conducted informally by teachers in kindergarten through twelfth grade who sought expeditious solutions to classroom problems (Gay, 1987).

The teacher as researcher collected data through observations, kept a journal to record journaled the process of discovery, and chronicled steps taken to solve the problem. In early action research, a teacher would often began the study with a new classroom initiative that needed documentation, then the teacher organized and analyzed the qualitative data from the study throughout the initiative's implementation and reported the findings upon completion of the initiative's implementation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991). In the last fifteen years, teachers and educators have relied upon action research methodology to collect reliable data and provide valuable insights to classroom teachers and as an excellent source for important archival data. "In action research the emphasis is more on what practitioners do than what they say they do" (Avison, Lau, Meyers, & Nielsen, 1999, p. 93). The action research approach is "value-driven, attuned to power issues, committed to stakeholder participation, and action-oriented" (Nelson, 2004, p.389). Contemporary researchers regard action research as a viable method in higher education and training and human performance (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Dick 1999; Gask, 2005; Nelson, 2004; Zuber-Skerritt, 1991).

This study applied principles of action research; a qualitative research methodology to document a university's new marketing plan implementation. Two action researchers documented every meeting and the results, then provided a chronicle of the evolving marketing plan. The program coordinator who was one of the two researchers had written memoranda, notes, and two reports assessing the marketing plan that were used as source documents for chronicling the marketing plan activities and the results of these activities. The principal marketing agent also served as action researcher, embedded in the marketing team, to keep detailed journals and records to document which aspects of the marketing plan worked best and succeeded and failed.

Results

This study had two distinct phases, the first, a collaborative but failed effort to establish school district cohorts; the second, to build enrollments at university system sites.

Phase One Data Collection

During the initial phase, one of two action researchers worked as a faculty and marketing agent. The first phase marketing team consisted of the program coordinator, a faculty marketing agent, an adjunct professor, a university staff person and a remote-site campus director. The program coordinator arranged for the marketing agent, a full-time instructor with extensive sales and marketing experience from private industry, to secure cohorts at school districts located within an 80 mile radius from the campus. The faculty marketing agent who had a one course release from teaching four, began to devise a plan based on the educational market data such which school districts were in the area and how many teachers. After beginning visits, at least one superintendent expressed an interest in the program which indicated the marketing effort plan could yield enough students to offer courses for the master's degree and the certificate programs.

The faculty marketing agent, who was one of the two action researchers, first met with the directors of two university sites located 40 miles and 60 miles from the campus. The faculty agent's purpose was to obtain the directors' agreement to provide classroom space for potential cohort classes in the event that the school districts could not. The next step was to visit school district administrators within the eighty mile radius. The intention was to discuss establishing one or more cohorts and possibility tooffer classes at their sites. This would enable employees in the school districts to complete a master's degree or a certificate both through online and face-to-face courses.

The marketing effort in phase one spanned eighteen months. During the first six months the marketing agent developed the plan and contacted administrators in school districts with prospective students. The Dean of the College of Education gave the faculty marketing team six months to design the marketing plan, test, and offer the first courses. The university provided a very small marketing budget to fund printing brochures and provide light refreshments in school districts where administers approved marketing presentations. The marketing agent designed and distributed the brochures when visiting school districts and businesses to reach prospective students. Two faculty received travel reimbursements for mileage to the marketing plan targeted school districts sponsoring presentations. A marketing plan was developed and several onsite promotional presentations were held to encourage school district teachers to enroll in the program. The marketing agent who was also an action researcher provided the reports and journals to the team at the end of phase. During the first semesters of the marketing effort, the marketing agent and the site director faced communication barriers to enroll students. In order to introduce the marketing agent, the program coordinator arranged to have one core course of the graduate program to be taught at the satellite campus site adjacent to the largest targeted school district. This was in the fall of 2002. During that fall, preliminary marketing, mostly consisting of introductory calls on school district administrators and networking with campus site staff, was conducted by the marketing agent while teaching onsite at the satellite campus. The marketing plan was implemented the following semester in the winter of 2003.

First the center director who agreed to host cohort classes realized that the course schedule did not designate the site course; as a result of schedules that did not clearly indicate which course was offered at the site, many students had difficulty identifying and enrolling in their course; instead of the projected 25 students, fewer than 10 were enrolled when the semester began. Consequently, the program coordinator wanted to cancel future site courses despite his commitment to school district administrators and prospective students to offer the program at the site. The faculty marketing agent convinced the Dean and Associate Dean for the program to continue implementation by allowing two site courses to be offered the next semester. The distance education unit published a clear, accurate schedule that indicated which two site courses would be offered in the second semester. The two faculty reminded students that they genuinely wanted the cohort to succeed and encouraged students to continue.

Another barrier encountered was a surprise to the two faculty initiating the marketing plan. Apparently there had been a recent negative experience by teachers in the school district with an earlier program effort by their university. This failed effort had been conducted by the same program coordinator who directed phase one of the current marketing plan. The school district superintendent for one of the largest school districts in the United States apprised the faculty marketing agent there had been a serious breech of promised committed by their university, a failed attempt to offer a similar graduate program and this posed a serious barrier to the current marketing plan. In a previous initially successful program marketing effort the program coordinator at the time convinced the school district to reimburse teachers who would enroll in face-to-face courses to compete the graduate degree program; the same program now re-introduced by their university. The program coordinator had agreed that all courses required for the degree would be offered face to face either at the district or the nearby university site. Unfortunately, after two years, and prior to the students in the cohort completing their degrees, the university reneged without notice. Students were left with two choices: travel about 80 miles round-trip to attend courses at the university; or, not complete their degree. The superintendent characterized the earlier experience for the district and teachers as being "baited and switched." Yet, despite the prior negative experience and perhaps because the courses would now be offered as hybrid or online courses so that students could complete their degrees or certificates without commuting to the campus, the school district superintendent agreed to allow the university to distribute program information and host program information sessions at the district.

Phase Two

After the first eighteen months and immediately prior to the following fall semester a new program coordinator revised and renewed the marketing plan to increase program site enrollments. Initially the newly-appointed program coordinator suggested that the eight-member graduate program faculty a move to team-decision making in which eight faculty members worked for consensus about the procedures and policies of the program. Personnel changes influenced phase two marketing; the faculty marketing agent returned to full-time teaching in the program and was replaced by a new full-time distance education director; the program added a new full-time tenure-line faculty member; the program coordinator for phase one stepped down and was replaced by a tenured program faculty member.

The new program coordinator, new distance education coordinator, faculty (including the original marketing agent), and student services coordinator began the effort by inviting all students enrolled in a Web course or interested in the program to an informal session at the site during the first week of class. About 22 students and all program Web faculty attended. Faculty and university staff introduced themselves and the program in an informal session with refreshments.

The session offered current and prospective students opportunities to access their Web course with technical support assistance, meet with their instructor or faculty advisor, or, if a prospective student, the ability to talk to the student services representative about admissions.. University faculty teaching the hybrid or Web courses visited the sponsoring campus sites in an effort to reinforce the university's commitment to the program. In addition, twice a semester program Web faculty would hold informal office hours at the same time; refreshments were served and students were encouraged to bring prospective students.

Another important factor in promoting enrollments was changing the master schedule for the program curriculum. Scheduling improved after faculty completely supported a revised program curriculum that deleted electives not part of the four certificates. The revised master schedule for four years offered all certificate and program core courses via Web-enhanced or Web every semester. In addition, the revised schedule rotated Web courses with hybrid (Web-enhanced) courses so that students had the option of taking courses either way every other semester. A program support person prepared clear print materials every semester indicating which courses were offered, as well as times, locations, and modes of delivery, as well as which courses applied for each certificate Program. The program increased total graduate enrollments and the number of graduate sections in the summer of phase one of the marketing plan, which was the semester prior to a change in program coordinators and the move to team-decision making. After the initial phase one of the program, the university held a faculty retreat prior to the fall (and beginning of the phase two of the marketing plan) in which the faculty identified and prioritized a series of activities needed for the marketing effort; the new program coordinator drafted a vision statement for the department and for the marketing program. The vision would be: that the program would be first in the region as measured by total number of graduates in K-12 (ranked as the number one market for recruiting program employees by regional employers). The team-based management emphasized continually generating consensus about program direction with frequent meetings. The program coordinator guided the marketing efforts and make decisions based upon increasing enrollments and retaining faculty, two of whom did not have tenure.

Graduate program course enrollments, as distinguished from student head count, increased from 274 at the end of phase one (summer) to 311 the end of year one, phase two (summer); 390, the end of year two, phase two (summer); this was 27 percent in the last year; or 42 percent in two years. Average per section graduate program course enrollments increased over both phases: 13 phase one; 16 phase two, year one; 18 phase two, year two. Thirty-two students were admitted to the program in spring of phase two year one as a result of certificate marketing. By summer, the end of year one, phase two, the program did not have to cancel any courses for lack of enrollments; similarly, all courses made by the beginning of year two phase two and enrollments were up as were per section enrollments.

Several factors contributed to the program enrollment increase. Most courses were taught by full-time graduate faculty and since the beginning of phase one (fall). The Dean required all faculty teaching in the program including part-time faculty to hold a doctorate. But this may be less important since prospective students did not know about faculty quality but they did care and learn about the program from the marketing efforts of faculty, the distance education director, and the support of an excellent program support secretary. The next sections describe how these factors enabled program enrollment increases.

Keeping accurate records and journals provided thick narratives of the marketing implementation and helped identify some key elements to the success of the plan. The action researcher presented data that might not have been uncovered without the commitment to comprehensive data collection by someone embedded in the team. The data on the contributions by the team members helped set the benchmarks for future marketing efforts. For example, the

program suite secretary was exceptionally committed to providing accurate, timely information. She established a data base of students after discovering persistent errors and recognized omissions in data from the university student database. She and key players on the team made rapid changes to the departmental program data base, preventing further problems from the university data base which was not updated on a timely basis. The department database was reliable and provided the program coordinator with timely data, such as the number of students admitted each semester and which students were admitted. The suite secretary was often the first contact point for a prospective student; she was the consummate professional whose demeanor was positive and knowledgeable, often helping students negotiate through both the information and admissions processes. While not conducting formal action research, she also recorded data, calculated totals, and disaggregated salient data points for important market reporting, such as total program course enrollments and admitted students.

During phase two from fall through summer, the program coordinator answered about six to eight phone calls or emails per week from prospective students. The program faculty cooperated and participated in growing the program. Program faculty met their commitment to the Dean to attend site-based meetings for current and prospective students twice a semester during the first fall semester. The meetings were held on Saturday morning, a time voted as preferable by the majority of graduate students attending site-based online or hybrid courses. In addition, faculty volunteered enthusiastically to hold similar site meetings twice during the spring and summer semesters during the phase two of year one.

The marketing program was also successful because of the contributions of the university distance education director. The director averted a near-disaster when many students read the online schedule for the fall and spring semesters of phase two and found few or no program Web courses listed on the schedule. The program coordinator immediately notified the university enrollment services, but they could not change the confusingly cluttered online schedule that lacked clear indications of which courses were available online. The distance education director created a tag line and link to automatically appear on faculty and distance education staff emails. Any student who received an email from any of the distance education staff or program faculty could click on the link displayed in the email and connect to an accurate schedule of program courses offered that semester. The link of the revised schedule clearly indicated which courses were online or which were hybrid courses offered and whether the courses were offered online, on site at the satellite campus, or at the campus.

In addition to the program coordinator and faculty the distance education director and her two person staff attended site meetings at the satellite campus between program faculty and students to further underscore the university's commitment to the degree and certificate programs. The director continued to meet with the program coordinator and staff to reinforce the enthusiastic collaboration among the departments and satellite campuses. She also continued to publish updated program course schedules and marketing information on the distance education Website so students could quickly find the information they needed to answer their questions.

Scheduling also improved after faculty agreed that the revised graduate curriculum should delete electives not part of one of the four certificates. At that point, the program coordinator prepared a revised four year Master schedule that offered all of the certificate and program core courses either online or by hybrid course delivery every semester. The online and hybrid courses were rotated so that students had the option of how they took the Masters and certificate courses.

Three program certificates were approved at the beginning of phase one and these offered a product aimed directly at teachers; they could earn a certificate and then, if they wanted to complete a Masters degree, apply those certificate courses towards their degrees. In addition to the first three certificates, the program faculty also unanimously approved a new certificate directed more towards business students or teachers who wanted to move into administration. This increased the number of certificates to five; certificates appealed to students who were demanding certificates as opposed to degrees.

The program coordinator designed a marketing tool that displayed a simple two-sided schedule; on one side, the courses were offered for the forthcoming semester (and which were online or hybrid); on the verso, the courses were listed with any certificates on which the course was included. Next, the distance education unit put the schedule online to make sure that students had the course information available both in print schedules and online.

During phase two the program coordinator, with the help of the program secretary, established an additional data base of the graduate students participating in the master's program. The program data base consisted of the names of the students who were admitted to the program and their demographic data. The program coordinator made a comparison between the program data base and the university's database that revealed university's data base was inaccurate, often failing to list the students' originating campus locations, advisors, or admission dates. This made any tracking of increased enrollments for the marketing program more difficult. Only the department program data base provided accurate data to track marketing outcomes.

By the end of phase two, year two, average per section enrollment for all courses and sections in the marketing program was 21; thirteen online courses had an average per section enrollment of 20. For hybrid courses, average section enrollments, 25 for five sections, increased from 23 at the end of phase two, year one.

The program coordinator noted several additional findings that online courses were more labor intensive for both faculty and students than traditional courses, but were preferred by students, as indicated by sustained high enrollments. The growth in these enrollments supported the marketing program and the department's addition of more online sections each semester throughout the two phases of marketing plan.

Discussion

No one factor precipitated the surge in enrollments over the three-year study period; the marketing efforts of faculty, a distance education unit, and excellent staff support, all contributed to success. Phase one data revealed that the faculty marketing agent had to overcome unanticipated obstacles, but she addressed them with her initial marketing and enthusiasm to establish program credibility with the school administrators of the target markets. The initial phase took six months longer than originally anticipated, largely due to the school district hesitancy to participate in the marketing plan based on their prior experience with the university. However, after trust was cultivated, the initial rollout of both the Master's and certificate programs were completed by the end of the first year and revisions were done on a continuing basis by the marketing team.

Recorded phase one dialogs depicted an evolving fiduciary relationship between the program faculty and the two other groups involved in the plan: the university site personnel and school district personnel. Together they forged a positive bond to replace a previously counterproductive relationship in which program delivery had failed to meet school and university site director expectations and students were unable to take courses as promised. The turnkey event in phase one was when the faculty marketing agent convinced the site director and superintendent to give the program a second chance and allow the program to offer courses on site and allow her to distribute information to prospective students at the site and in the schools. The second turnkey event occurred when the marketing agent saved the program from cancellation by convincing university administration that it could not withdraw from the program in the early phases just because site course enrollments were not as high as they desired. Had the university cancelled the marketing program, it would have been viewed as a breach of trust, and any future marketing efforts in the targeted school districts would have been extremely difficult.

One of the biggest discoveries that came from the action research was that establishing positive trust relationships among the product representatives, the product purveyors, and consumers were some of the most important efforts of the marketing plan. New and innovative product quality did not become a factor in marketing until these positive relationships were created. Potential product consumers and purveyors required reassurance that product delivery and support would meet their renewed expectations.

Phase two established faculty collaboration and institutional support. The new program coordinator began with a team management approach; faculty met as a group and identified and prioritized a series of activities to build the program, and approved a vision statement. The newly formulated marketing plan for phase two was a team effort to realize the vision. The team-based management approach generated faculty consensus about the procedures and policies of the program.

During phase two the program continued to increase total graduate enrollments and the number of graduate sections. The program coordinator continued to guide and make decisions based upon increasing enrollments. She made consistent efforts to retain the same faculty to teach courses in the program and to maintain an ongoing university presence at the satellite campus. The volunteer efforts of faculty and staff also reinforced the buy-in of the school district administrators and their commitment to the marketing program.

Consistency was an important factor in the success of the program. The program coordinator continued to amend the marketing plan to include: more face-to-face support for nurturing new students and to maintain the commitment to site visits. The staff secretary continued to provide quick responses to prospective student inquiries and program faculty kept their commitments to site visits. The distance education director continued to provide technical support for online marketing and support to the marketing program efforts.

The marketing plan exemplified a higher education collaborative effort by reinforcing collaborations, by delivering the product promised, and by providing service and encouragement to customers (Faber & Green, 2001). The program coordinator, faculty, and staff fostered institutional integration by delivering the expected product, providing consistent and reliable service, and encouraging and supporting students. In keeping its commitments, the marketing team achieved diffusion of the innovation into the provider's (the university) and the customer's (the school district) cultures (Kaufman, 2000; Robinson, 1995; Rogers, 1995; Rogers & Shoemaker, 1971; Stribiak & Paul, 1998; Varagoor, 1998; Wolcott, 2002). Current results are consistent with Bourner, Katz & Watson (2000)

conclusions that collegiality and collaboration promote successful higher education technological initiatives. The faculty marketing the program worked consistently with school district administration, prospective students, and colleagues to deliver the innovative degree program as promised. Certain attributes predict innovation: adoption: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (Rogers, 1995).The plan supported the mission of the school districts and the university; the district wanted to provide faculty development and the university wanted to build the program. Yet the plan was simple and implementation required little more than limited faculty participation. Once faculty began testing the site meetings, they witnessed increased program enrollments. The marketing plan yielded positive results that led to faculty adoption and institutional integration. The results of this study are consistent with literature on innovation adoption; that positive expectancy and consistent product delivery led to satisfaction and adoption (Berge & Muilenburg, 2001; Bourner, Katz & Watson, 2000; Jacob & Hellstrom, 2001; John-Steiner, Weber, & Minnis, 1998).

Summary

The first step towards successful acceptance and integration of the marketing plan was to meet faculty needs; the plan was successful because the product and program met faculty, university, and school district personnel needs. Furthermore, the program delivered the expected product. While this is the most obvious of conclusions, the first attempt to market the program failed when the product, the marketing program and scheduled site course offerings, was not delivered as expected. Failure to deliver the product resulted in the site director's and school administrator's loss of confidence in renewed marketing promises and resistance to new overtures from the university. The factors contributing to success were consistent delivery of the expected product and collaborative communication among all participants, whether they were marketing, delivering or enrolling in the program. Research on marketing new programs should address effective marketing approaches to anchor positive and sustained outcomes for new educational innovations (Ellsworth, 2000; Ely, 2000; Gask, 2005; Robinson, 1995; Schott & Gannon-Cook, 2002).

The researcher and participants in this study would also recommend including action research in any marketing studies. Action research, if included in the initial marketing campaign, can expand the body of knowledge in the research areas of innovation and diffusion of technology. The learning environments in the next millennium could greatly benefit from these studies.

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