

MARKETING EDUCATOR WEBSITE ADOPTION: WHERE ARE WE?

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the extent to which WMEA members and their academic units have a presence on the Internet. Specifically, the study evaluated the content and style qualities of web sites affiliated with current WMEA members. The authors posit that there is a shortage of such web sites and that the quality of existing web sites might be considered average when contrasted with commercial web sites.

BACKGROUND

In 1989, the Web, which allowed easy automatic site cross-referencing, was created and began its dramatic growth. Any site could become the gateway to many other related destinations with negligible additional effort. Since 1993, the introduction of browsers and search engines has produced an explosion of growth in Internet use.

The level of marketing exposure companies have on the Internet varies from minimal yellow page type listings to conscious marketing efforts to use the Internet as their main marketing channel. Many companies have created home pages to provide numerous information functions to customers, suppliers, and employees. Marketing uses range from simple advertising-type promotional messages to fully interactive product information and ordering service. There are even companies whose entire presence is electronic: advertising, sales, order taking, financial transactions, and delivery of an information product are done directly over the line.

The usefulness and quality of electronic marketing varies in how Internet capabilities are put to use. A McKinsey report evaluates efforts as falling "short of leveraging the full capabilities of interactive media" (Long 1996, p. 25). Criticism included the lack of ability to interact to receive additional information through useful links to other sites, little effort to collect information about their users, and little opportunity to allow cross-user connections.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is provide a benchmark of the current adoption level of internet activity of

marketing educators. Specifically it addresses how marketing educators use the Internet as a marketing tool for their institutions, departments, programs, and themselves. It assesses the degree to which academe "practices what it preaches." The study does not intend to address the extent to which marketing educators use the Internet in their specific marketing courses. The domain of the study is the membership of the Western Marketing Educators Association. This organization and its annual conference focus on sharing ideas and experiences to further improve marketing education. Thus, we wondered—are WMEA's members and their academic units using this new media channel to disseminate information to their markets? Do they use the net to improve service to their students? How well do they apply Internet power and usability criteria to this means of marketing?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focuses on three categories of Internet use: presence, content, and style. Presence is the simplest element. Is information regarding marketing education available from WMEA member institutions on the Internet? Presence may take place at multiple and progressively more specific levels: first the institutional level, second the college, school, or division level, third the department level, and fourth the individual faculty member. This study sought to identify whether or not Home Pages (i.e., web sites) were available at each level.

What content material is available on-line? Although the potential content options could be overwhelming, the following content topics were chosen to cover many substantial concerns students may have regarding marketing education: faculty and staff directories, electric contact information, direct on-line contact, current vitae, teaching interests, research interests, courses taught, course descriptions, syllabi, assignments, and links to other sites for academic units, government sources and commercial sites.

Is the Internet site style useful and easy to use? Although the technology to design and operate the Internet requires training and expertise, a few simple instructions will put the information seeker on-line in minutes. Home page design can facilitate or

complicate the user's experience. Although there is no generally recognized standard to evaluate the stylistic quality of home pages, several style systems include similar quality criteria. In addition to books on Internet marketing, some interesting guidelines are offered by widely recognized business schools like Yale (Lynch 1996) as part of their own web page development. Other books are specifically designed to address web site quality. Some of these resources are: 10 Secrets of the Web Masters (1996), Marr and Kirkwood Official Guide to Business School Webs, Criteria/Stars Page (1996), and Rate Your Site (1996).

As with content, stylistic attributes can seem countless. This study was limited to the following set of user friendly style criteria: ability to request information electronically and presence of a searchable index, audio clips, video clips, photographs, moving graphics, institutional logo/seal, date of last revision, and page author. Speed of graphic presentation, functionality of graphics, ease of site navigation such as button bars and headers, site organization, and of judgments on usefulness to potential and current students, alumni, businesses, and outside marketing faculty were also evaluated.

METHODOLOGY

Internet home pages or web sites were accessed with Netscape Navigator 3.0 browser software. The browser was used to locate institution home pages. College or school presence was determined by reference or hot links from the institution home page to the unit that included marketing, regardless of title. Similarly, whatever department included marketing was recognized for its home page. WMEA member faculty home pages, if they existed, were identified from hot links at any of the higher level units. If no Internet presence was found at any level, the survey was terminated.

The data collection instrument consisted of five basic areas: (1) questions dealing with the basic presence of a WMEA member institutional, college, departmental, and/or personal web site, (2) questions concerning the content of any web sites to which the WMEA member would likely have direct "reporting" responsibilities, (3) questions eliciting any available web site information about specific WMEA members, (4) questions used to assess the style of web sites, and (5) questions rating the usefulness of the web site to five different potential "market segments." A total of some 42 specific questions/variables were developed. If more than one WMEA member was located at any one institution, the set of eight

questions referred to in #3 above were repeated for each of those members.

The data collection instrument was pre-tested using a mix of WMEA member sites. The pre-testing process allowed the authors and the single data collector/observer to discuss and finalize decisions on how to handle cases where more subjective judgments would need to be made (e.g., assessing the speed with which a web site's graphics "paint"). The pre-test led to minor changes in the instrument and provided a range of excellent, good, and poor web site examples. It was possible to use the pre-test data in the final sample reported in this paper.

The sampling frame used in the study was the 1995-96 WMEA membership directory, available over the worldwide web (<http://www.csun.edu/~vcmk003/wmea.html>). However, it was decided to survey only those sites belonging to educational institutions. In all, a total of 320 WMEA members are listed in this directory representing a total of 166 institutions. All 166 institutions were randomly ordered before data collection began. A total of 119 institutions and 243 individual faculty members ended up in the study.

The data collection process began using widely available search engines to locate each WMEA member institution and/or faculty member. All data were collected by a single researcher/observer in order to produce data consistent across all sample units. Data collection occurred within a contiguous ten-day period during October 1996.

FINDINGS

A total of 111 out of the 119 (92.8 %) of the sampled WMEA member institutions were found to have a web site (university or college depending upon the school's academic identity). For the 111 institutional level sites, a total of 76 (68.5%) also had a college/school site. Of those with college/school level sites 33 (43.4%) also had a departmental level web site. If a departmental web site existed, WMEA members also had their own web site in 30 out of the 33 possible cases.

As shown in Table 1, faculty/staff directories were found on three quarters of the unit sites and most (60%) could receive electronic requests for information. Retrieving interactive information electronically was possible from less than half the institutions. Less than half provide course descriptions. Links to other useful sites were rare, and only two offered Internet based marketing courses.

TABLE 1
UNIT LEVEL WEB SITE CONTENT
 (For unit WMEA faculty member
 is assigned to n = 111)

Content Issue	Number	Percent
Have a searchable index?	25	22.5
Possible to request information electronically? (Present or hot linked)	60	54.1
Directory of faculty/staff?	75	67.6
If available, are electronic inquiries to them possible?	47	42.3
Course descriptions available? (full text or available via download)	42	37.8
Links to other academic institutions or units?	16	14.4
Links to government units?	13	11.7
Links to marketing organizations?	9	8.1
Links to commercial sites?	7	6.3
Links to student web sites?	13	11.7
Offer internet based marketing course?	2	1.8

Only 72, out of a potential 243 (29.6%) WMEA members at the 111 sites with web pages in this survey, have their own web site or home page (Table 2). For most, their personal site provides contact information. About half the sites do provide some information about the member, either some form of vita or biographical data. Of the 20 (27.8%) who have current courses listed, about two-thirds include assignments and syllabi.

While the above questions and information deal with web site content issues, the findings shown in Tables 3 and 4 represent our quality assessment of the site's style and execution elements. Those who spend any significant time on the web quickly realize that the quality of their interaction with any one site will strongly influence their feelings or attitudes about the site and the likelihood that they will return.

The web's powerful multi-media capabilities were conspicuous in their absence. Sites omit dynamic options like animation or video and audio clips. Visual impact was limited to static photographs or images. Even so, under 50% had photos, and over a

third didn't manage to show the institution's logo or seal. As with freshness dating, many site visitors like to know how old the information is that they read. Only about half of our sample provide their last revision date. Web site designers usually rely on user feedback to improve site quality, but nearly 30% of the sites show no way to contact the site author or webmaster.

TABLE 2
WMEA MEMBER WEB SITE CONTENT
 (n = 72)

Style Issue	Number	Percent
Contain audio clips?	0	0.0
Contain video clips?	0	0.0
Contain photographs?	54	48.6
Moving graphics in site?	6	5.4
Author or contact person identified?	79	71.2
Logo or seal of institution shown?	73	65.8
Date of last revision given?	54	48.6

TABLE 3
ELEMENTS OF UNIT LEVEL STYLE
 (n = 111)

Style Issue	Excellent %	Good %	Poor %	Mean*
Graphics paint quickly?	38.7	46.8	14.4	1.75
Graphics functional vs. decorative?	16.2	58.6	25.2	2.09
Easy to navigate site?	26.1	56.8	17.1	1.91
Use of button bars?	19.8	14.4	65.8	2.46
Use of headers?	24.3	63.1	12.6	1.88
Overall visual friendliness?	22.5	55.7	21.6	1.99

*Where Excellent = 1, Good = 2, and Poor = 3

"Poor" indicates the style element was missing or functioned poorly, "good" means the element worked and did adequately, and "excellent" indicates that the elements demonstrated imagination or extra benefits to the user. The overall observation is that WMEA site visitors find style features are used but not very impressively. Overall friendliness is reasonably good which may well rank higher than most would rate college catalogs.

TABLE 4
ASSESSMENT OF UNIT LEVEL STYLE
(n = 111)

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Table 5 displays our findings relative to assessing the degree to which we felt available web sites were of value to five unique market segments. In making these determinations the following content factors were considered to be items each particular segment might look for or expect at the web site: (1) current students: current courses, class schedules, faculty access information; (2) potential students: curriculum, application information, contact access; (3) alumni: events, placement information, student club contacts; (4) businesses: links to other web sites, employable students, faculty expertise, non-credit courses; and (5) marketing faculty at other institutions: faculty teaching/research interests, curriculum information, links to marketing related web sites.

Most sites appear better suited to the needs of current students than for the other segments. This is somewhat disappointing considering the limited access to student information observed earlier. Few are likely to find course descriptions or assignments on their professor's web site.

Outside visitors will have little reward for their visit.

TABLE 5
ASSESSMENT OF VALUE TO FIVE MARKET SEGMENTS
(n = 111)

Segment	Ex. %	Good %	Fair %	Poor %	Mean*
Current Students	25.2	46.8	24.3	3.6	2.06
Potential Students	18.0	52.3	22.5	7.2	2.19
Alumni	10.8	13.5	36.0	39.6	3.04
Businesses	4.5	20.7	44.1	30.6	3.01
Marketing faculty of other institutions	4.5	8.1	30.6	56.8	3.40

*Where Excellent = 1, Good = 2, Fair = 3, and Poor = 4

Significant opportunity appears to exist to offer more value to alumni and the business community. Electronic interaction can enhance relationships that are of growing importance to many institutions concerned with "friend raising" and fund raising.

CONCLUSION

Since WMEA members tend to actively involve themselves in using, developing, and disseminating information to enhance teaching quality; it would appear they would find websites offer exciting opportunities to expand their efforts. As yet, the potential remains relatively untapped. Internet provides a powerful, fast, and useful tool to accomplish the goal of WMEA and this conference to share pedagogical insights and tools for the advancement of marketing education.

REFERENCES

For complete references contact the authors or search the Internet where you will find all the style references and more.