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Abstract

How do colleges and universities market online learning? This chapter explores contemporary approaches to marketing online courses and programs and uses the historical lens of marketing Athabasca courses and degrees as a backcloth for

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understanding the unique challenges for this work. The chapter introduces a new approach to the marketing funnel as well as an understanding of the growing importance of social media in marketing to potential learners. The growing global competition for learners is also explored. The growing use of analytics and the challenges of overcoming myths are also discussed. The chapter gives emphasis to the importance of retaining students as well as “capture” of a student registration.

Keywords

Strategic marketing · Marketing funnel · MOOCs · Brand differentiation · Target and niche markets · Social media marketing · Analytics · Student retention

Introduction: Understanding Context

Marketing any product or service in a highly competitive market is difficult and challenging, especially when the market constantly changes and the “customer” is a sophisticated buyer. It demands a deep understanding of what successful customers both expect and like about the product and services they have purchased and an ability to identify the unique value proposition associated with the organization offering that product or service. It also requires those engaged in marketing to position the products and services on offer with integrity – recognizing their strengths, limitations, and weaknesses. Marketing is not easy, as this chapter will demonstrate.

Based on 30 years of marketing experience in Canada and on significant reviews of marketing activities in Australia, Britain, Europe, and other countries, this chapter offers an overview of the work involved in marketing for online, distance, and open education.

The chapter is focused on the challenges faced in marketing something “different” (online learning) from what is understood as “normal” (face-to-face teaching) and on the core processes required to secure and retain a student registration and to build on student completion to secure the next registration.

The Products and Services Have Changed Over Time: Posing New Marketing Challenges and Opportunities

Before looking at marketing as a process and offering a description of the key components of contemporary marketing for online and distance learning, it is important to recognize that the challenges faced by those who market and secure registrations have changed over time. This is important because, as the sector has developed, the challenges faced have been different and each phase has demanded a different marketing response.

Distance education began with Pitman shorthand courses and, in 1858, the opportunity to use distance education and assessment by mail to complete a degree in law at the University of London. From the beginning, the three key issues of access, quality, and cost have shaped much of the challenge which marketing needed to address. This chapter uses a case study of Athabasca University – Canada’s leading online and distance teaching university offering courses from skills upgrading to masters and doctoral degrees to approximately 40,000 learners across Canada and around the world each year. This case study will highlight many of the challenges that those marketing online and distance learning continue to face and will set the stage for an understanding of what the current marketing challenges in this space are.

The 1970s Positioning the New and Responding to Issues About Quality

When open and distance education began in Canada in the 1970s with the founding of Athabasca University in Alberta and Télé-université in Quebec, marketing needed to convey a very specific value proposition. For Athabasca University, anyone over the age of 18 could begin studying a university-level course or program irrespective of past educational performance or experience – no prior educational admission requirements – which raised issues of quality in the minds of some. These were new propositions, alien to a great many.

Further, learners could begin their studies whenever they were ready (the university has 12 admission periods for undergraduate courses – it was not semester based) and learners could call for assessment when they were ready to do so, which changed the pattern of recruitment and registration. This too was new and required a lot of explanation.

Learning resources – mainly print with some audio and later video (1977) – were dispatched to the learners’ home and learners connected to their assigned tutor by telephone. Those studying science had mini-lab kits sent to their home for some basic experiments. This was very much the situation between 1970 and 1994, with audio and videoconferencing (optional) becoming available in the mid-1980s. This required marketing to position “self-study” and 1:1 tutoring as effective ways of learning – again, new to a great many people.

A specific challenge at Athabasca University was to increase the number of students pursuing programs and qualifications at Athabasca rather than simply using courses to transfer credit to other institutions. For example, in 1994–1995 there were some 11,386 Athabasca undergraduate students but 92% of these were taking just one or two courses and then transferring their credits to other programs across Canada. While this is a good thing and is in line with the lifelong learning mandate of the university, it meant the university was graduating between 200 and 250 students with a first degree annually and this created issues of brand perception for government and others.

The second challenge in this period was the low level of course completion. In the 1990s, completion rates for students new to distance education students at Athabasca were approximately 38% and for students who were continuing their studies about 47%. A key challenge for marketing was to overcome the idea that studying at a distance was “hard” and that completion rates “were so low that it was not worth the money.” Again, this posed significant challenges for marketing teams, as it continues to do for many engaged in marketing online and distance learning around the world.

The third challenge, which is connected to these first two, was just the scale of registrations needed to sustain the institution, tuition revenue being a key component of the financial health of the organization. Because of the high turnover of students (low number of courses taken and low completion rates), the university needed to grow by 10% each year from a base of 25,000 course registrations which meant securing some 23,000 new course registrations from approximately 17,500 individuals new to distance education. Securing new registrations from existing students or past students became a key marketing strategy – a point returned to below. Athabasca became resilient and robust because it knew how to do this work well.

1994 and the Arrival of Online Learning

In 1994 the Internet and online learning began to “take off,” with Athabasca University offering the world’s first fully online MBA alongside other graduate programs in distance education and nursing and some online undergraduate courses, especially in business, nursing, and professional studies.

The Internet posed new marketing challenges, since access to the Internet was not widely available (it is still not available in large parts of rural Canada and to Indigenous communities living on reserve lands) and required telephones to be hooked up to a telephone modem cradle device – something which few people had.

But online learning has grown very rapidly. By early 2011 in just one Canadian Province – Ontario – there were over 25,000 undergraduate-level courses available online from publicly funded colleges and universities which had attracted 830,000 registrations. What is more, completion rates for online learning were high – 76% for colleges and 85% for universities, both of which required program admission based on prior educational achievement, unlike Athabasca.

Satisfaction studies, whether at an institutional level or system level, have also shown a high degree of satisfaction with students’ learning experiences. A 2002 Government of Alberta study placed Athabasca University first among the four universities in Alberta for satisfaction with the relevance of courses, overall educational experience, and value for money. Frequent satisfaction studies undertaken by Contact North | Contact Nord in Ontario also show high satisfaction levels from students with their online learning experience.

2012 MOOCs and the Globalization of Learning

The first massive open online course (MOOC) was created by Stephen Downes and George Siemens and was called *Connectivism and Connective Knowledge* and offered through the University of Manitoba in 2008. But the real sea change from a marketing perspective came in 2012 when two professors at Stanford offered *An Introduction to Artificial Intelligence* for free and 160,000 individuals from around the world engaged with this course. The creators – Sebastian Thrun and Peter Norvig – saw potential and created *Udacity* (2012) which was soon joined by MIT's *EdX* (2012) and *Coursera* (2012), with the Open University (UK) and 11 other universities creating *FutureLearn* in 2012. Also in play was Udemy, founded in 2010 as an open marketplace portal for online courses developed by others. Unlike Coursera, which is a curated marketplace portal (only “topflight” institutions or organizations can offer courses on its platform), Udemy is open to any provider able to offer a course. Udemy's courses are largely vocational, with a strong focus on technology, business, and design.

Quite quickly, many quality and free online courses were offered which attracted very large numbers of learners. Not all were interested in qualifications or assessment – they wanted to access to quality learning, not credit. But the existence of MOOCs and their growth changed the dynamics of the market, not least by making online learning part of the fast growing, globalized market for education and demonstrating both the advantages and challenges of learning at scale.

Also at this time, other players entered the global market. The University of Phoenix, founded in 1976 as a private university (now owned by private investors), secured a significant market share in the USA when it moved its programs online in 1989, though repeatedly failed to gain a foothold in Canada. By 2010, it was registering over 470,750 students in its degree and diploma programs worldwide and was reporting revenues of US\$4.5 billion.

Various attempts by others to “go global,” such as the Open University's failed attempt to enter the US market in 1999 (it closed in 2002 – Meyer [2015]) and the failure of AllLearn – a consortium formed in 2000 by Yale, Stanford, and Oxford to offer online courses worldwide, point to the marketing and recruitment challenges of a global offer at that time. After spending over US\$12million, it closed in 2006. In 2000, Columbia University sank US\$30 million into an online learning initiative called Fathom, which failed to secure sufficient registrations and closed after just 3 years. Purdue University's global division, created following the university's acquisition of Kaplan, has lost over \$63 million in its first 2 years of operation. One explanation: “a deliberate and focused investment of \$28.5 million in marketing” produced a gain of just 2,000 new students. These examples show how complex securing student registrations can be: Even major universities with significant marketing resources and access to world-class academic expertise have failed (Watters, 2021).

MOOCs also provide an interesting case. Originally conceived as free, accessible, and fully online lifelong learning opportunities, the MOOC providers quickly

realized that revenues were key to survival. Launched in 2012 and pushed hard in the following 8 years, MOOC providers gradually shifted from free to fee and from being credential free to focusing increasingly on credentials, especially micro-credentials and degrees. EdX was created with a \$60 million “starting” fund from Harvard and MIT (it more recently sold for \$600 million to an online program management company); FutureLearn was launched with initial funding from the Open University (UK) and its partner institutions. In 2019, FutureLearn secured £50 million (approximately US\$69 million) from SEEK Ltd. in exchange for majority ownership. Coursera had raised \$300 million before the pandemic.

By December 2019, some 13,500 MOOCs were offered on a number of major platforms from over 900 hundred universities and colleges and had secured 120 million students worldwide. As part of their offer there were 820 microcredentials (certificates, nano-degrees, specializations, and MicroMasters) and 50 full degrees. Coursera was the single largest player in this market (45 million learners, 3,800 courses) followed by EdX (24 million learners, 2,640 courses), Udacity (11.5 million learners, 200 courses), and FutureLearn (10 million learners, 1,000 courses). These developments are important: They help create demand for all forms of online learning and give some credibility to this form of studying. The MOOC strategy 2012–2019 was to build capacity and gain market share. But now they are focused on profitability, which is moving them into the credentials space on a global scale.

2020 and the Pivot to Online During the Pandemic

The global COVID-19 pandemic forced 1.4 billion learners to pivot to some form of remote learning, with many experiencing this form of instruction for the first time. This created challenges and opportunities for new services and new approaches to the market.

MOOCs were already well positioned to respond to the challenge of remote learning. In 2020, Coursera attracted 31 million learners, EdX 10 million and FutureLearn five million. Indeed, according to Class Central’s MOOC monitor (Shah, 2020), one-third of all learners who ever registered for a MOOC since they began did so in 2020. What is more, MOOC providers secured in excess of US\$900 million in new funding, enabling the major players to rebrand and expand their market base through more targeted programming and the development of subscription-based services (an annual fee for access to a wide range of courses rather than “pay by course”). So successful was 2020 for the entire MOOC sector that Coursera launched itself on the New York Stock Exchange and was able to raise \$4.52 billion in its initial public offering. At the time of writing (October 2021), the company shares were trading at US\$32.81 indicating that the company is retaining its market value despite continuing to lose money (\$46.5 million in the second quarter of 2021) (Shah, 2020).

These developments are shaping aspects of the market: a demand for “on-demand” courses, skills assessments, and credentials; growing demand for short-duration courses and programs that demonstrate to employers that those who

complete them have skills and competencies they are seeking; and highly affordable courses and new forms of credentials.

This marketing journey – the building blocks on which current marketing strategies and work are based – demonstrates how agile and nimble providers of online learning have had to be, especially as the market becomes more complex, global, and competitive.

The Process of Marketing Online and Distance Learning Services

There are a variety of approaches to marketing educational services (Kotler & Keller, 2014; Miller, 2017). Experience suggests that there are six key elements for any marketing team seeking to ensure student registrations and growth in overall volumes. In this section of the chapter, we will explore these six elements in detail.

Element 1: Building the Brand Story: Differentiation

The beginning of any marketing effort is the need to build brand identity and brand story in the marketplace. The underlying task of brand development is differentiation – ensuring that the institution is seen to be both a way of meeting a potential student’s need and doing so differently from others. Differentiation in the market is the purpose of brand strategy (Porter, 1996).

This sounds straightforward, but it is in fact a difficult challenge. The brand story has to be powerful, different, and effective but cannot be so different from the brand story of other learning providers that it raises questions about whether the brand claims are realistic, out of line with the norms of the sector or just “whacky.” In particular, claims about the value of a course or program in terms of employment need especial care – job markets change, as does the value attached to specific programs and the skills needed for employment. The University of Phoenix, for example, has been fined for false advertising related to job placement and employment opportunities linked to its programs. In 2019, these false claims cost the university US\$191 million, \$141 million of which was paid directly to the students directly impacted by the claims (Brooks, 2019).

Key brand messages include ideas of “smart learning,” “flexible learning,” “anytime learning,” and “quality learning.” The brand identity is often presented through individual success stories, testimonials from employers, or others who act as brand ambassadors. For example, the popular comedian and star of award-winning TV show *Schitt’s Creek*, Dan Levy, recently championed the MOOC *Indigenous Canada* offered by the University of Alberta (Bench, 2020). By doing so, he significantly increased registrations but also created what is known as brand presence: ensuring that the University of Alberta was in the MOOC business and that this course was a high-quality experience across a range of public platforms (newspapers, television, and radio) and social media.

One challenge the marketing team has is ensuring that the brand they are building and sharing in the marketplace accurately reflects the experience students have of their courses and the institution. At the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, the marketing team have invested a considerable amount of energy and time mapping the customer journey in the institution and in identifying the moments of truth in that journey – those experiences which put the brand claims to the test. For example, if a tutor suddenly is unavailable to support the learner at a time of their greatest need or when a tutor takes 2 months to provide feedback on an assignment, what do these moments say about the claim to be “a highly personalized and responsive” learning service? Frequent surveys of student experience, such as First Impressions Surveys (Open Polytechnic, 2020) or focus groups looking at student satisfaction, are all key components of ensuring that the brand story aligns with experience.

Element 2: Target Marketing and Market Segmentation

Blanket marketing campaigns on radio, television, newsprint, or social media are used to create the large brand story, but most student recruitment campaigns are focused on targeted groups in specific communities. Blanket campaigns are expensive and produce some returns on investment, but they are more about brand positioning than recruitment.

For example, a study program focused on upskilling cybersecurity capabilities of people working in the financial services sector or an MBA in Hockey Management or a microcredential in chemicals handling has specific markets that can be directly targeted, and the impact of this investment can be measured in terms of enquiries, applications, and registrations.

To do this well, the marketing team need to have a clear understanding of who a course or program of study is intended for and what the demographics of that target market are. That is, they need to undertake a clear market segment analysis of who is taking the course or program now and how that profile suggests targeted marketing activities. The more we know about how existing students learned about the course or program, what the characteristics of these students are, and what the key factors influencing their decision to register in this program with this institution were, the more accurately the marketing team can target their marketing efforts.

If the program of study is brand new or the mode of delivery so different from how such programs are normally delivered, then a close understanding of the market segment can come from connections with employers, focus groups with potential students, and an in-depth set of conversations with those creating the program. For example, a new program for food service workers who work exclusively in eldercare facilities has a clear target market which, when well researched, can be reached quickly and effectively.

Element 3: Mining Niche Markets and Services

“Mining” a market – aggressively pursuing a specific segment over a long period of time to secure ongoing registrations and repeat business from the same segment of the population – is an established practice. For example, certain professions, like accounting, require both initial certifications through accredited learning and ongoing learning for continuing professional development. Universities and colleges recognize this market and “mine” it as a niche market, making sure that their courses and programs meet certification requirements of the profession, teach to the current practice standards within the profession, and are widely understood to be of quality.

Some examples of these market niches have produced rich returns for online and distance learning institutions:

- Helping practical nurses (PNs) become registered nurses (RNs) and then helping registered nurses secure a degree in nursing (and offering a route to masters and doctoral degrees). There is a range of online programs offered by a variety of institutions and also nursing degrees by assessment of competences and capabilities marketed by the University of Wisconsin and Western Governors University in the USA.
- Helping teaching assistants working in schools qualify as teachers through flexible and online learning. The Open University (UK) pioneered this development.
- Customizing master’s degrees for specific organizations. For example, AT&T partnered with Georgia Tech and Udacity to offer a master’s degree in computer science through Udacity’s MOOC platform. Athabasca University has a customized MBA for those seeking a career in hockey management.
- Courses and programs in mechatronics that begin online and include lab and fieldwork.

Access to specialist data-based partnerships and alliances with professional bodies and unions, using partnerships with lending organizations (banks, financial services) to ensure that those in certain sectors (e.g., IT and creative industries) know about available programs, are all being used as means of securing access to these niche markets.

Element 4: Social Media and Digital Marketing

According to a study by Converge Consulting (Oleson & Kelly, 2016), the majority of potential students for a course or program are significantly influenced in their decision to take the course from a specific institution by social media. Indeed, a variety of studies show that Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat are the “go

to” sources that will trigger an inquiry from a potential student – much more than any other media (Ascione, 2018; Credo, 2016; Lytle, 2012). Any modern marketing campaign must leverage these platforms.

The challenge is to know where to invest the available energy and scarce resources: There are so many platforms and so many competing “voices” on these platforms. The resolution, at least for most college and university marketing departments, is to focus on a small number of platforms that produce registrations. In particular, Facebook and LinkedIn are platforms which are most commonly used, especially when mature students are the target market.

The primary uses of these platform are: (a) to share student stories of success; (b) to provide employer testimonials of the value to them of a course or program of study; (c) to be a component in the launch of new programs and courses; and (d) to celebrate milestones and successes of the institution. All of these posts on social media are intended to drive traffic to the college or university website and all of this activity is traceable. Social media are primarily about building awareness and encouraging consideration, though some have been doing more with social media to make the decision to commit easier (Kim, 2020).

Supporting the inquiry process is also key and students expect rapid response to email, text messages, and phone calls. Some marketing departments have deployed artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled chatbots to support recruitment, admission, and financial aid. They are being deployed at American universities such as Purdue University (AtlasRTX), Rockhurst and Georgia State (Nazarenko, 2020), and by several colleges and universities across Canada and around the world. Their primary value is that they operate around the clock and can be trained to offer empathic, accurate, and appropriate advice. This is especially useful for international recruitments across a range of time zones.

Element 5: Focus on Retention Not Just Attraction

A great deal of energy is spent securing a first-time student for a university or college. The real opportunity is to continue to secure registrations in courses and programs from that same student over time. Between the offer of the first distance education course by Athabasca University in 1973 (the course was *World Ecology*) and 2003, it had secured over 490,500 course registrations. Just 142,681 (29%) had taken five or more courses. The cost of securing each new student in 2003 was approximately eight times that of securing a new course registration from an existing student. Retention is a lower-cost way of ensuring registration growth and of developing a “word-of-mouth” recruitment opportunity.

Ormond Simpson (2005) wrote about this challenge in the context of the UK Open University. He suggested that the cost of each new student recruited at that time was approximately £500 (US\$685), with some 30% of the cost of recruitment going to replace students who dropped out. Indeed, the starting point for his analysis is this statement:

Higher education is a strange business. No other form of manufacturing would take in tested components (new students) and produce a final product (graduates) with a wastage rate of 20% or more. Or at least if such a business existed then it would very rapidly go bankrupt. (Simpson, 2005, p. 34)

These kinds of observations have led to the widespread use of both predictive and prescriptive analytics to reduce dropout (when a student stops studying) and dropdown (when a student delays their studies for a period of time). Predictive analytics shows what will happen in the future, whereas prescriptive analytics recommends which actions to take to improve outcomes (Bilella, 2013).

A typical analytics solution uses both to determine how students respond to different marketing and recruitment campaigns throughout the enrollment cycle and makes suggestions for appropriate intervention. Using such analytics can have a significant impact on retention. For example, Texas Tech University was able to grow their enrolment at 9% annually but also increased student retention by 2.6% using their analytics solution. Others have reported more spectacular results, including a 22% gain in graduation rates at the University of South Florida (Civitas, 2020).

Element 6: Using Analytics and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems to Track Return on Marketing Investment

The growing use of data for evidence-based decisions in marketing is a key characteristic of an effective marketing strategy. The marketing team need to understand the return on investment from the marketing activities in which they are engaged. This requires a highly disciplined use of customer relationship management software like Salesforce, PeopleSoft, Intelliworks, or Azorus and the focused use of analytics from all of the digital activities in which the team is engaged.

Typically, marketing teams will describe the “funnel” – the stages in the journey to registration and completion of a program. There are a variety of versions of the funnel, but the University of Newcastle (UK) has adopted a particular language for their funnel which is insightful. Rather than use the traditional funnel (shown on the left in Fig. 1) they have adopted the language of building brand champions or advocates (shown on the right in Fig. 1).

The aim of the marketing team is to ensure that every student and alumnus is more than satisfied with their learning experience, but is an active brand ambassador. The best form of marketing is “word of mouth” and a recommendation from a graduate to a potential student is the strongest form of marketing, as well as the least expensive. This is why the question “would you recommend this course/program to a friend or colleague” is a critical piece of data when looking at student satisfaction.

The funnel helps the marketing team understand whether a particular targeted marketing campaign worked and if it did, in which market segments and at what

Normative Funnel	University of Newcastle Funnel
Prospects / Inquiries – securing enquiries and page views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider – a learner explores options and, in doing so, is steered towards Newcastle
Applications – securing applications for courses and programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decision – a learner decides both what they want to learn and where and makes an application
Acceptance – securing an acceptance of an offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adoption – the learner receives an offer and accepts it and begins to adopt the identity of belonging to the university.
Deposit – securing a payment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate – the learner becomes an active advocate for the university, its courses and programs and recruits others

Fig. 1 The marketing funnels

cost per registered student. It also helps us see the extent to which alumni and graduates act as advocates and brand ambassadors, championing the work of the institution.

Even After 50 Years, Marketing Still Has to Address Some Persistent Issues

Despite significant investments in marketing and branding of online and distance education over the last 50 years, some issues remain in the public domain that have been difficult to change. Three in particular have challenged every single marketing team.

“Face to Face is Best and Online and Distance are Not as Good”

Despite compelling evidence of there being no significant difference in learning outcomes between online and face-to-face learning (Russell, 1999; Nguyen, 2015) and substantial evidence of the inefficacy of face-to-face instruction (Bernard et al., 2004; Bethel & Bernard, 2010; Tamim, Bernard, Borokhovski, Abrami, & Schmid, 2011), the idea that face to face is better persists in the public consciousness. In part, this is understandable – almost all compulsory schooling is face to face and the bulk of higher education around the world is also face to face. Yet (before COVID-19) registration in face-to-face learning has slowed significantly and in some regions declined, while in North America, online registrations have grown dramatically (Lederman, 2018). In the USA, for example, 6.9 million learners (35.3% of all postsecondary learners) were enrolled in online courses at degree-granting institutions in 2020 (before COVID-19) and the majority preferred this form of learning to

face to face (Wallis, 2020). The online market is expanding even more rapidly in the Asia-Pacific region.

There is growing evidence for the efficacy of online learning – higher rates of knowledge retention (Keegan, 2020) and more rapid acquisition of knowledge, skills, and capabilities (Schoox, 2018).

“The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Learner”

This idea – that the student is on their own with little support and has to be a “self-starter to survive” – became a dominant kind of idea in the 1970–1994 period, before the Internet (Robinson, 1989). Sadly, the idea has persisted (Ferguson et al., 2020). Marketing has to be just as much about the range of supports and services and the ways in which help (from technical help to study skills, career guidance, and course choice) is available either by audio or videoconference or through integrated computer-mediated systems.

“It Must Be Easier to Do Online, and Therefore It Should Be Cheaper: After All, There is Not as Much Instruction”

Online and distance education courses that are effective and show significant outcomes are instructionally designed, highly engaging, and involve significant levels of both peer-to-peer and instructor support. Typical expenditure on an Open University UK course before the emergence of the Internet and its widespread use would be in the order of £3–5 million, including television production, radio, and high-quality course packages. The learning was more demanding than many anticipated and there were fewer places to “hide” as a learner. Tutors did know how you were doing and examinations and assessments were substantive. Rather than being easier, the learning and assessments were more comprehensive than in many face-to-face classes. Yet, this meme persisted for some time (and does so today in some markets). The marketing strategy of using academics from other institutions to praise courses as “challenging” and “comprehensive,” sharing independent assessments, and using student testimonials has largely countered this narrative.

“It Is Easy to Cheat in an Online Course: So Where Is the Quality?”

The earliest recorded cases of cheating involved a civil service entrance examination in China thousands of years ago. Cheating on exams and bribery for academic honors was written about in *The Book of Swindles* published in 1617. Benjamin Franklin also had to retract a 1756 paper for reasons of inappropriate use of other people’s data. It is not a new problem, but the perception in the marketplace is that cheating is rife in online and distance education.

The scale of the problem for all forms of higher education (face to face *and* online) is substantial. A 2018 study from *Turnitin* suggested 16% of the 38.3 million papers analyzed by their software-matched papers developed by essay mills. In an analysis of cheating, Eaton (2018) found between 3.5% and 7.9% of students surveyed across the world admitted to paying for writing services. One study suggests the figure could be as high as 22% (Thomas, 2015), with some students buying more than one paper. Canada ranks fourth in the world for these kinds of purchases (Eaton, 2018). These data relate to all students – there is no compelling evidence that online students cheat less or more than students studying in class or in blended learning. The challenge is that many in the market, especially some influencers, think that online makes it easier to cheat.

These perceptual issues – based on beliefs and a value set supported by some examples – have persisted over a long period of time. Developments in assessment, including the use of biometrics, virtual proctoring systems, AI-based pattern recognition systems, and plagiarism detection software, all make cheating online easier to detect. The evidence of no significant difference in learning outcomes between face to face and online is compelling. But market perceptions persist despite evidence, the development of new tools, and systematic evaluations of the challenges (Fig. 2).

Marketing teams cannot ignore these concerns and memes and others like them. What they need are direct, clear, and unequivocal answers to the challenge or

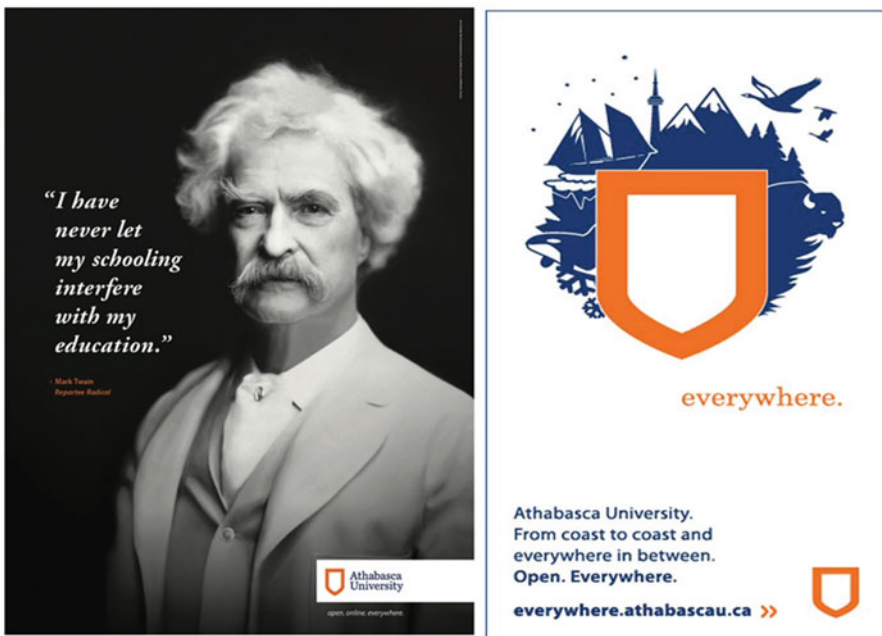


Fig. 2 Advertising materials from Athabasca University (2015), Canada

problem and for this to be the systematic, standard, and consistent response for the institution. Consistent, optimistic, and evidence-based but effective communication is needed to counter these challenges. Humor can also be helpful in this work, as the “tongue-in-cheek” advertisement below from Athabasca University makes clear.

Conclusion

There is a growing evidence base for the effective work of marketing teams, aided now by access to rich analytics and customer relationship management (CRM) tracking data. But marketing is still an art form that commands imagination and creativity. Not every university or college needs to use the image of a student in a cap and gown at graduation as a key component of the brand image of the institution, yet many still use this image. In seeking to differentiate an online and distance education, creative design and imaginative advertising have been used to sharply differentiate this form of learning from more traditional approaches, with varying levels of success. From powerful images, quirky images, and quotations the aim is to catch the eye, imagination and interest of a potential or existing student help them make a commitment to the next step in their learning journey. The ultimate aim is: recruit every student as a member of the marketing arm of the institution as brand ambassador and program recruiter. Creativity, imagination, evidence-based work, and effective communication are the hallmarks of this work.

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