



How to build an e-learning product: Factors for student/customer satisfaction

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Abstract The increasing use of web technologies has changed the way business is done, including in the field of education. In the last decade, the development of electronic learning (*e-learning*) systems became crucial to meet students' demand. In this study, we adopt a relationship marketing perspective and apply the Kano Model to propose a way to build a non-academic e-learning course that can achieve student satisfaction. We measure the relevance of e-learning requirements from university students' perspective to identify their expectations about e-learning courses and obtain relevant characteristics that can help to plan an e-learning product capable of achieving high customer satisfaction. Our study is based on interviews of 239 students from the Faculty of Economics at the University of Palermo. Through surveys, we measure users' satisfaction of e-learning courses and classify quality attribute expectations into Kano Model categories. The indexes we create reveal key elements that can increase or decrease customers' perceived satisfaction of e-learning courses. This study has specific value for academics who work on new product development in the field of customer satisfaction. Highlighting the correlation between the classification of expectations and satisfaction level, we find practical implications for educational institutions and/or other companies interested in developing and selling e-learning courses based on students' needs using a customer-oriented approach.

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1. School in my computer: The emergence of e-learning

In the last decade, the increased use of the Internet and web technologies has grown so

considerably that it caused a technological revolution. Organizations of various types and sizes and across almost every sector are adapting their old brick-and-mortar systems into virtual systems and are integrating web technologies into their operations (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002; Currie, 2000; Murillo & Velázquez, 2008).

This technological revolution has affected many sectors, including the educational system. That is, the evolution of technology changed not only the

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way we live, but also the way we learn. The traditional context of teaching and learning now involves experiencing online alternatives to traditional types of education and training systems (Marold, Larsen, & Moreno, 2002; Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003).

In this article, we consider students as potential customers of electronic learning (*e-learning*) courses. In Italy, as well as in other European countries, policymakers have recently addressed the matter of attracting university students with more aggressive marketing programs. As a result, public universities have also started considering students as customers to whom university programs must be sold. We do not subscribe to this point of view about university courses, but believe this approach can be useful if adopted to create non-university e-learning courses that students can follow individually to gain more knowledge about topics in which they are interested or to accomplish professional goals. For this reason, we also think that university students represent a primary target for e-learning courses.

Referring to learning via the Internet, e-learning has been widely adopted as a promising solution to offering learning-on-demand opportunities to individuals to reduce training time and costs, as well as to reduce the gap between needs and preferences and regional, national, and international distances (Murillo & Velázquez, 2008; Wang, Wang, & Shee, 2007). E-learning is not synonymous with distance learning because while distance is one element of e-learning, it is not the main differentiator. In other words, e-learning is not synonymous with ubiquitous learning (*u-learning*), which refers to the possibility of learning in any place. In addition, it is more than personal learning, which is a self-organized kind of learning. What constitutes the distinctive feature of e-learning is basic technology support. The European Commission describes e-learning as the use of the Internet and new multimedia technologies to advance the quality of learning by providing access to resources and services, as well as enabling remote exchange and collaboration (Alptekin & Karsak, 2011).

E-learning service providers are becoming conscious of the implications of the Internet on their activities and are investing significant time and money in developing new instruments directly targeted to new interfaces and applications. In fact, the e-learning market has had a growth rate of 35.6% in recent years (Alptekin & Karsak, 2011). E-learning systems represent a valid solution of avoiding problems related to physical mobility, allowing students/customers to follow individual online courses within their homes.

Although we consider e-learning for university students in this work, it is important to note that corporate training is another major target for e-learning providers. To be competitive in the turbulent business environment, companies have to keep their employees updated with the latest knowledge and technologies. There are numerous examples of large companies adopting e-learning solutions for their corporate training, such as Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Cisco Systems (Zhang, 2002; Zhang & Nunamaker, 2003). Cisco developed a video e-learning platform, vSearch, to train employers and update their skills through video-based instruction on the web. vSearch videos have different topics, such as product information and features, and are available on-demand to employers around the globe. HP has aligned its e-learning strategies with employees' preferences, considering that they differ substantially by region. Hence, HP has customized its training programs to meet all employees' needs and expectations, and improve trainee performance (DeRouin, Fritzsche, & Salas, 2005; O'Leonard, 2004).

2. Student/customer satisfaction as the e-learning provider's goal

2.1. The relational approach to marketing and the relevance of customer satisfaction

The real aim of every business is not to supply, not to sell, or not to serve, but rather to satisfy the needs that drive customer satisfaction. Organizations able to rapidly understand and satisfy customers' needs make greater profits than those which cannot (Barsky & Nash, 2003). To focus on customer satisfaction is not an easy task; it is necessary to develop strategies, operative routines, and tools to identify consumers' needs and transform them into products and services. Customer satisfaction must not only be conceived as a key differentiator from competitors, but also needs to be considered a business philosophy that tends to the creation of value for customers, anticipating and managing their expectations and demonstrating the ability and responsibility to satisfy their needs. In fact, enterprises exist because they have a customer to satisfy (Valdani, 2009).

On the customer side, the proliferation of the Internet and the World Wide Web has increased the possibilities to interface and interact with web-based applications, empowering the role of the customer, which is progressively shifting from consumer to 'prosumer.' In *Take Today*, McLuhan and Nevitt (1972) suggested that electronic technologies would transform consumers into producers.

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