

THE SOCIAL WEB: A PLATFORM FOR MARKETING IN TRAINING COMPANIES

Manuel Fandos Igado
Master-D Corporation, Spain
E-mail: mfandos@masterd.es

Abstract

Companies use many different marketing strategies in order to make their products known and place their corporate image and branding in the market. Besides, nowadays, being on the Internet is a must for every company striving for success.

A company devoted to open and distance learning such as Master-D Corporation is a clear example of how a proper and planned use of the different possibilities offered by the Web 2.0 –based on blogs- allows a company to achieve bigger market shares and brand positioning following the Win – Win Principle.

Blogs are, undoubtedly, channels of communication that prove the power of attraction of good information.

Key words: *open learning, social web, training company, blog, log-book, blogger, internet user, post, information, marketing.*

Some Possibilities Resulting from Technological Development

There is no doubt that web 2 (and 3).0 (Aguaded y Fandos, 2008) is opening a range of possibilities in every field, even the educational. As «Information Pedagogy» proves, saying, among other things, that teachers and students are «mediators» between information and human experience; progressing, implementing and using information and communication technologies is making us reconsider us to rethink many models and ways of acting that were valid up to the present moment.

We are facing a technological revolution that shows the «infoxication» we are immersed in. It is obvious that period of changes, which are even contradictory (Ortiz de Zárate, 2008) and in which the «invisibility» generated by an excess of information can be counteracted by the possibilities of altruist participation offered by technological development.

Blogs are important paradigmatic elements in this sense.

We all know that a blog is a web site where an author's information, messages, opinions and reflections (posts) appear in order by date (the most recent first). The readers can write comments and receive an answer from the author establishing an interactivity or dialogue between users.

At first, we agree with Lara (Lara, 2005) -amongst some others- in the fact that the use of blogs in a classroom allows to encourage a critical attitude to what has been read, provides with interactivity, facilitates the hearing of other opinions, allows the possibility of publishing, provides with material for study, encourages debate...

In short, it is a privilege place for cooperative work and it is also a potent social tool. These are two especially relevant elements in teaching-learning processes.

Nowadays, the use of technologies in education is unavoidable. In the information society,

we can scarcely discuss whether we need technologies anymore. A company that does not have (and does not apply) technologies either doesn't exist or is going to disappear.

It is obvious that at present/nowadays companies have to adapt to the changes we are living, in this case, those coming from Web 2.0. In the end, it is probably and approximation to what Andrew McAfee (McAfee, 2006) called *Enterprise 2.0* or what Julen Iturbe Ormaetxe called *Empresas 2.0*.

Finally he talks about taking advantage of the possibilities given by technologies being conscious that the way of acting can end up proposing (in fact, it does) other models to generate a change in the organization's system of values.

A Corporate View of the Social Network

Every company knows that its survival depends on its adaptation to modern times and the necessities of its clients. This «company Darwinism» obliges us to think about which are the necessary adaptations to warranty survival of companies. Master-D is not an exception in this sense. It has to be in the vanguard of these adaptations as a result of its own mission as a company: help as many students as possible to get their goals in the shortest time possible through an excellent product and service.

As we put in advance, digitalization and networks are the origin of a great number of changes in the tools and ways of communication. The ways of communication between company and (internal and external) client are adapting to this situation.

The new tools allow us to address and respond the client in a more personalized way. This situation prompts the emphasis on the contents and the information rather than the tool we use to get to our client. Information is not conditioned by periodicity of the media anymore. Nowadays, updating can be permanent, in real time.

Nowadays, companies are more and more conscious about the fact that information spread, brand and attraction of customer models are overcoming the «point-multipoint» paradigm (which is unidirectional). Bit by bit the «multipoint-multipoint» model is being imposed and furthermore is multidirectional. It is the user that accesses the servers where the information that they search for or want is. Furthermore it is this user that generates what some people call *viral marketing*:

Viral marketing and viral publicity are terms employed to refer to marketing techniques which exploit pre-existing social networks to produce exponential increments in brand recognition by means of viral auto-replication analogues to the spreading of a computer virus. It is usually based on word of mouth communication by means of electronic media. It uses the effect of social networks created for the Internet and the modern mobile telephone services to quickly reach a great number of people» (Wikipedia, 2009)

Not only is it to do with acquiring clients, but also gaining their loyalty. The actions in this sense achieve, in the first instance, two important objectives: brand creation and improving brand recognition. The simple fact is that in talking about something or offering something to potential customers, obliges companies to be constantly up to date with this knowledge.

Suffice to say, therefore, that in this context the user/client is «king». In the present moment companies have to be aware that the means of client acquirement have to follow a «user centred» model (Aguaded, y Fandos, 2008) which aims not only to obtain *feedback* but also, where possible, interactivity.

To summarize, the interest aroused by the social Web (represented in this case by blogs) in the company world is growing day by day. There are basically two reasons: it allows proximity between (real or potential) client and company. It is a clear relational marketing tool. It permits the creation of a network of mutual knowledge (in both directions) allowing the appearance of mutual trust.

Our Particular Corporate Experience

Master-D S.A. is an international group (based in Spain) whose commitment is defined as follows: «we assess, prepare and train people to triumph in the achievement of their professional and personal goals». In this way the defined objectives of this company are formation, preparation and training.

There are two axis that are holding our actions in this sense.

On the one hand, the development and implementation of a model of open formation (Aguaded, y Fandos, 2008b) that at the present moment allows us to have 30,000 new students each year (over the last 5 years).

On the other hand, the development of several technological actions to generate a «visibility», on the Internet in this case, which will allow the recognition of the company's brand, products and services and the attraction of potential clients. These actions appear in its own strategic plan (PEC 2004-2014).

For the last 2 years a series of weblogs have been implemented gradually, along with control and follow up mechanisms (which are still very simple and in a state of constant revision). These allow for the checking of the level of acceptance and the implications derived from them from the different weblogs which have, little by little, been put on the WEB:

Master-D Group appeared with its blog strategy on the net in the middle of June 2007, creating the «blog for the candidate for a competitive examination» (<http://blog.opositor.com>). The last of the blogs the company started (<http://www.masterdlabs.es>), which is a professional blog about I.T. and communication, appeared at the end of 2008. There are 18 months between them. In the meantime, 3 corporate blogs (specifically designed with the objective of communicating the essence and activity of the company in its international headquarters: <http://blogmasterd.es>; <http://blogmasterd.gr>; <http://blogmasterd.pt>) and 4 blogs with specific subjects: those two mentioned before and a blog about renewable energies: <http://www.blogenergiasrenovables.com> and another one dedicated to reflection about the use of ICT in education and open and distance learning: <http://www.masterdopina.es>.

As our project is but begun we can barely analyse the results of the work. But we have a first conclusion from our experience up to this moment: we want to keep working this line of implementing, upload on the net and keep them alive feeding with information these blogs that we are studying at this moment.

We are aware of the important potentialities that these blogs offer companies (Villanueva, Aced, Armelini, 2007). We talked about some of these questions in the previous section in this essay. Anyway, in this case and for the moment, we are only beginning with the external dimension of these blogs. We understand that the obvious advantages the social web offers to teaching companies to develop their function can only happen if they have clients (students). This is why we understand that checking the degree in which these tools (blogs) allow companies to attract a higher number of potential clients is a priority question.

In the first phase of our analysis, we have observed that a correlation between the visits to our different blogs and the traffic generated in our corporate web page (www.masterd.es) exists. In the same way, we have verified that a percentage of this traffic that comes to our corporate web page ends up requesting some kind of information and a percentage of these visitors end up being clients of the company. In this way, the presence of the weblogs firstly achieves the acquirement of more clients and therefore a greater business opportunity.

Evidence of the Range of the Results

We compare the semesters of these years because they show the moment when the blogs appear and start working. This way, we avoid variables such as seasonal variation, so that a reason or variable not taken into account cannot affect the same way in different controlled periods.

Table 1. Relation of visitors in the webs.

Period of time	Visits to blogs	Visits to the corporate web
July – December 2006	0	637.548
July – December 2007	14.611	893.676
July – December 2008	60.645	1.192.616
January – February 2009	46.392	506.460

We are aware that this variation in the traffic of our corporate web is not only due to the existence of blogs. There are many factors that affect the increasing number of visits. The traffic on the net substantially grew in the last few years due to different facts, but this is not the moment to attend this question. The permanent update of the information offered on the corporate web is a substantial element that affects the number of visits, the links to other webs, changes in design, reference to other websites... There are many factors that can be an influence. In any case, this is not the moment to analyse them.

Precisely to be able to determine what traffic is generated or derived from the different blogs, we did a test as an experiment. We put «pilots» on blogmasterd.es at different moments that allows us to better trace the origin of the visits. We proved that without doubt, the traffic to the blogs correlates positively with the traffic on the corporate web page.

Obviously, the traffic that supports the different weblogs relies on the «posts» and «tags» used on them.

Amongst the many remaining tasks, the priorities would be to improve these matters and achieve a better syndication (RSS).

At this moment, we have different «pilots» in the «blog for the candidate for a competitive examination» that show the same direction as the first conclusions.

Some Future Challenges

Following the reference previously mentioned about «company Darwinism», it is obvious that the adaptation of the company to the immediate future has to go through a revision of the use and possibilities of the ICT, which facilitate the «necessary visibility» for this time of «infocination».

For this, we have to take into account a work paradigm in which «being participant» substitutes «being looked at» and the directives of the companies have to be present (make themselves visible) on the Net to give answers to those who ask questions, to generate trust on the brand, the product and the service offered by their companies. In the end, the important thing is to come to the top/to emerge from obscurity, generate credibility, have the ability to «manage» the conversation and get some compromises.

With care, but being sure that this way of working is bringing us satisfactory results, we can say that corporate blogs provide with competitive advantages that can be checked in the companies using them.

It is evident that blogs are a potent corporate communication tool that facilitates interactivity with a public that can potentially become clients of the company promoted by the blog. Without a shadow of a doubt the first result is that it improves the positioning of the corporate web page in search engines.

In any case, it is a tool that has to be clearly aligned with the strategic and communication plan of the company. It has to be perfectly in tune with the corporate culture.

It also provides the company with an important source of information about the opinion of the users (potential clients) and even the works or development lines of other companies in the same field or competitors.

Therefore, suffice to say that this option (and the corresponding risks) brings with it «visibility» of the company, as we said, for the best positioning in internet search engines. Firstly,

it builds community «networking» between other blogs (and their corresponding bloggers), and even for the directives that feed the thematic blogs to be able to be considered an authority and reference in this area of knowledge. It allows for an immediate «feedback» and compels you to update (and create through diffusion) specific knowledge. This allows companies to «encourage talent» of their employees.

From a «stricto sensu» publicity standpoint, the company becomes its own billboard through its blogs. This, taken to the extreme, could even make it a trend setter.

In any case, we also hay to say that if the company is not transparent and if it is not absolutely ready to give all the information required and even accept reasoned and reasonable criticisms, the social Web and blogs cannot be their tools. In the end, it is a question of being as much «authentic» as possible.

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Advised by Naglis Švickus, SMC “Scientia Educologica”, Lithuania

Manuel Fandos Igado

PhD in Psychopedagogy, Master-D Coporation (International Group), Manager.
Carretera Nacional II, a. Km, 314,8. 50012. Zaragoza. Spain.
E-mail: mfandos@masterd.es
Phone: 0034976464100
Website: <http://www.masterd.es> / <http://www.masterdopina.es>