



Student relationship management in English as Secondary Language education using information systems to improve the student-institute relationship

Mojtaba Gholamian Azad¹, Morteza Binesh²

¹Islamic Azad University, Bojnourd Branch, Iran.

² Ph.D, Islamic Azad University, Bojnourd Branch, Iran.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore customer relationship management (CRM) in an English language institute setting.

Design/methodology/approach – The development and implementation of a CRM project in an English language institute was examined as were the benefits realized by implementing CRM. Viewing students as customers provides a competitive advantage for English as Secondary Language education and enhances an English language institute's ability to attract, retain and serve its customers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals.

Findings – The benefits of implementing CRM in an English language institute setting include a student-centric focus, improved customer data and process management, increased student loyalty, retention and satisfaction with the college's programs and services.

Originality/value – Viewing students as customers provides a competitive advantage and enhances an English language institute's ability to attract, retain and serve its customers.

Keywords: Customer service management, English language institute, ESL, Students, Relationship marketing, Iran

Introduction

In this dynamic, competitive environment the future success of educational establishments rests on their ability to differentiate themselves and build meaningful relationships not only with existing students but with potential students as well. To achieve this, internal systems need to be maximized to their full potential through the integration and use of internal CRM which can pull together disseminated pieces of information from all types of databases and sources (King, 2005).

Customer relationship management (CRM) is a set of practices that provide a consolidated, integrated view of customers across all business areas to ensure that each customer receives the highest level of service (Karakostas et al., 2005; TDWI Industry Study, 2000). CRM enables an ongoing one-to-one relationship with the customer. When relationship management is enhanced by technology, a "seamless integration of every area of business that touches the customer" is provided (DCI, 2004). In higher

education, students are the customers; some areas that touch the students are the registration processes, transcript services, career counseling and academic support services.

Graduating high school seniors today have a wide variety of choices in higher education; competition for their business is keen, especially in a tight economy. Students can choose four-year colleges, technical schools, or community colleges in a face-to-face or online learning environment. While the academic reputation of a school is a major factor in determining its selection, other performance indicators that prospective students may examine include pass rate of licensure examinations, improvement in critical thinking and communication skills, alumni satisfaction with their college experience, and the percentage of graduates who find employment (Cleary, 2001).

Satisfaction with the college's programs and services is also a critical performance measure. CRM can play a significant role in this area. While being able to obtain information about a course prerequisite or a schedule listing is not germane to the student's learning, it is nonetheless an integral part of the college experience. Most students view administrative activities as a necessary evil; thus, an information system with an enhanced CRM initiative that provides an individualized fast-track to completing these activities can be a strong incentive for selecting a particular institution.

In this paper, we first define customer relationship management, discuss how technology facilitates CRM, and explain its place in ESL education. We then explore the concept of students as primary stakeholders.

CRM

CRM has been described as "a customer-focused business strategy that aims to increase customer satisfaction and customer loyalty by offering a more responsive and customized service to each customer" (Croteau and Li, 2003). In the early twentieth century, managing customer relationships was a fairly simple task. Merchants had fewer customers and most were local. Recordkeeping was done in the merchant's head or in a simple ledger. Merchants knew who their customers were and what they wanted.

In the last 20 years, the super store concept, the internet, the rise of the suburbs, and increased consumer mobility, have made the customer relationship more complex. Customers had more choices and marketing needed to become customer-centric. While information systems provided far more customer-related data, making sense of that data became nearly impossible. Attempting to glean useful information from myriad sources was very labor intensive. The organization needed to identify, acquire and retain new customers, to understand what they wanted, and to develop customer loyalty. CRM systems accomplish this task by consolidating information from all customer touch points into a central repository accessible by all business areas.

CRM systems enable customers to interact with the business in an individualized, need-specific manner, and include processes to bring together information about both the customer and the business. The tasks performed by CRM systems fall into two main areas – operational and analytical. In brief, the operational side gathers data from various touch points; the analytical systems make sense of it.

Although CRM systems employ sophisticated technology, a CRM initiative involves more than just technology. CRM is both a business strategy and a technology-software set. The technology and software automate and enhance the processes associated with managing customer relationships. The business strategy positions the customer as the focus of the organization, creating a "customer centric" orientation (Grant and Anderson, 2002).

In implementing a CRM system, the firm must first decide what information it needs about the customer and what it will do with it. Next, it must determine how the information is gathered, where the data are stored, how it is used, and who uses it. In the typical firm, information about a customer might be gathered from a web site, a physical store location, sales reports, and mail (electronic or traditional)

campaigns. Using the data gained from these customer touch points, analysts can develop a complete view of each customer and pinpoint where additional services are needed (Deck, 2001).

While CRM efforts are often daunting, the benefits achieved are impressive. Firms who successfully implement CRM systems report improved customer data and process management, increased number of transactions and improved analysis and reporting. Information is more timely and accurate and customer complaints are reduced (Integrated Technologies Corporation, 2005).

CRM in education

English language institutes are increasingly challenged to maintain student enrollment levels. Enrollment management programs to market the institution are growing in number and their efforts are paying off. Once students arrive on campus, however, the challenge is to keep them there. Retention activities had focused traditionally on comprehensive orientation programs, in-depth student advising, and a variety of student-focused activities. Community colleges in North Carolina realized that an enterprise-wide information system, focused on the student as customer, could also enhance enrollment and retention.

A total of 75 percent of incoming traditional-age freshman have significant experience with information technology (Milliron, 2001). This experience translates into higher student expectations regarding the available technology resources. Students expect technology to be an integral part of their entire educational process and anticipate a higher level of access to information. From the “student-as-customer” perspective, an educational CRM system would provide interaction with all the traditional student touch points – admissions, registration, financial aid, etc. – through a single system that would facilitate a complete understanding of each student’s unique situation (Grant and Anderson, 2002).

Students as stakeholders

All English language institutes have a variety of stakeholders, and while each institution must work to satisfy them, the stakeholder with the most influence is the customer – the student. The typical English language institutes’ student makes several trips to campus before classes start. These include one visit prior to English language institute selection, a registration visit and another visit to pay fees and purchase textbooks. While telephone and web-based registration systems have alleviated some problems, students are still faced with numerous administrative tasks to be completed during their college careers. All too often, these tasks involve considerable time spent waiting

For English language institutes’ students, many of whom work full-time, these tasks can be a deterrent to completing or even initiating their education. A CRM system can ease the complexities of accomplishing these administrative tasks by providing a means of anytime-anywhere registration, as well as payment, advising and requirements checking that is individualized to meet the student’s needs.

The student system as a CRM system

To support the goal of student-centered learning, the student information system features a streamlined application process that allows anytime, anywhere registration with a date-driven set-up to support traditional and distributed learning offerings. Student services access is provided, and students can access and update their information without requiring assistance or service from a staff member unless problems arise. In addition, comprehensive date tracking maintains all history and status changes with student records available via the web. All transactions are immediately reflected in the database and in related processes (such as a student dropping a course and immediately having financial aid recalculated). Information about students and employees is accessible to all functions (with appropriate security).

With the elimination of multiple databases and resulting duplicate records, the student view is no longer fragmented across the organization. Instead, student data is stored in one place on a single system. This

data integration increases coordination among functional areas and synchronizes processes, thereby improving customer service. Information about all colleges can be collected and stored centrally in the data warehouse. This central repository accommodates information retrieval and reporting for both analytical purposes such as data mining and for operational tasks such as scheduling and registration. All systems utilize electronic forms and workflow instead of paper forms that must be carried or sent between offices. This enhanced efficiency improves speed, customer service and satisfaction (NCCCS, 1999).

Challenges

The disparity in the accounting system was deemed the biggest challenge by those interviewed. It caused the above-mentioned delays in the implementation and brought unwelcome and extremely negative publicity about the issue, which made the job of “selling the system” to colleagues difficult.

While the involvement of functional experts throughout the system added knowledge, it was not as successful at ensuring buy-in throughout the English language institute system as had been hoped. Build team members were absent from their duties often and for lengthy periods. This separation caused some difficulties both for the builders and their co-workers. Burdened with extra work and lacking in supervision and guidance, many employees began to see the system in negative terms.

One implementation problem cited by team members was that the IT employees at the individual colleges were not trained early enough. One individual felt that the infrequent user would require lots of training because the system was not user friendly.

Successes

Despite delays in implementation of the entire student system, student services personnel remain excited about the benefits to come. They cite the move to a student focus as long overdue. Individuals involved with the admissions and application processed expressed enthusiasm that students can register for classes on-line. With students able to do business with the school when convenient for them, registration personnel expect the students to be delighted with the new system.

Counsellors see convenience as the greatest student benefit. Although the system requires marketing to the non-traditional student who may not be comfortable with computer technology, these students will benefit most from the convenience of a system that allows online transactions. For the younger students at area high schools, the system provides a great recruiting tool. Even while recognizing the need for careful communication, training and marketing for the new system, counsellors envision students taking ownership of their education. With access to online curriculum sheets and graduation checklists, scheduling and grades, students gain both control and responsibility for their education.

Often, student services and instructional activities operate as separate entities. By providing a common platform for customer communication and interaction, faculty can utilize the system to access student learning profiles to customize student learning or to refer students to support programs. Staff and faculty members envision using the system to more effectively interact with and serve students or prospective students.

Conclusion

This paper explored customer relationship management in an English language institute setting. The development and implementation of a CRM project in an English language institute was examined as were the benefits realized by implementing CRM. These include a student-centric focus, improved

customer data and process management, increased student loyalty, retention and satisfaction with the English language institutes' programs and services.

As colleges increasingly embrace distance learning and e-business, CRM will become stronger and more pervasive. Viewing students as customers provides a competitive advantage for higher education and enhances a English language institutes' ability to attract, retain and serve its customers.

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