Customer Oriented E-learning Courses

Ludvík Eger, Jan Petrýl
University of West Bohemia, Pilsen, Czech Republic
leger@kmo.zcu.cz, petrtyl@kmo.zcu.cz

Abstract
The paper is focused on customer oriented courses. As e-learning we consider use of information and computer technologies to create learning experiences (by Horton, 2006). This complex definition covers a lot of forms and types of e-learning. Customer oriented courses are one of the emerging trends in the field of e-learning (see survey ASTD, 2011). The e-learning opens new opportunities for non-formal learning and creates support for informal learning. There is a possibility of using viral marketing to motivate students/customers in both ways: for the external and internal motivation. The appropriate motivation is of course the key point of a well prepared and well designed course. In this paper we briefly present some examples and open the discussion how to use principles of viral marketing to motivate students and to support customer oriented e-learning courses. In this context we must also consider the use of tools for social learning (wikis, blogs, social networking sites...).

Keywords

Introduction
We recognise customer oriented e-learning courses as one of the current trends in e-learning development. This fact has two faces. The first one is the face of marketing and communication with clients and customers (we considered this part as component of internet marketing). The second one is the learning and teaching process that is connected with ICT (instructional design of e-learning focused on informal learning is very important here).

Trend of the use of customer oriented courses is documented by research undertaken by ASTD (2011). 40% (2010) and 34% (2011) of respondents (deputies of companies) interviewed realise customer service training. Relationships with customers and their satisfaction have become an important factor for any successful business. Conversely, we can say that customer dissatisfaction comes from a less adequate knowledge of the product or service features and results in increased customer care costs, difficult sales and lost revenues (Data Center Solutions, 2012). It appears that providing training to customers on products or services is a growing area.

There are lots of definitions of e-learning but we use the so called complex one. (Horton, 2006, p. 1) “The e-learning is the use of information and computer technologies to create learning experience”. This definition is as an “umbrella” term that covered all old and new forms or types of e-learning. And of course for customer oriented learning we need to work with many forms and methods of e-learning that occur in practice. E.g. Conklin and Robbins-McNeish (2007) present next
“methods of delivery for e-learning”. For comments on customer use of social networking sites see (Eger and Petrtyl, 2011).

- Web based/Computer based learning – both types have already been in use for customer support few years yet.
- Wiki, blog – new types. Especially a blog is very well applicable to the previously known FAQ. The FAQs were static; wikis and blogs enable interaction and sharing of experience.
- Webinar – new type of e-learning. New technologies have enabled the development of this type. Its use in CRM (in the Czech Republic) is not yet common.
- Webcast (Podcast) – webcasts have quickly gained popularity thanks to YouTube etc.
- Electronic bulletin board – there are many types of this tool to be seen in practice.
- Electronic library as a knowledge base – structured information on products and services are now often offered in this form.
- Online help and context sensitive help – new tools for this area will again offer the necessary interaction and information sharing in customer clubs or in open communities on social networks, etc.

Proposed solutions

First, there are traditional materials delivered via ICT (manuals and classic tutorials redesigned to manuals and tutorials published on CD, DVD and the Internet).

Second proposed solution is use of the so-called rich multimedia and new ways of communication to make customer service more user friendly and achievable in real-time.

Third (most up-to-date) innovation is focused on benefits offered to us through new tools enabled by collaborative environment. Its purpose is to increase motivation for customer loyalty and the participation on communication to identify priorities of customers and of course to improve marketing activities.

The latest innovations not only reflect the fact that 80% of households with young children (ČSÚ, 2012) have access to the Internet, but also that younger and middle generations are increasingly using new communication tools like wikis, blogs and Facebook, YouTube etc.

Access to the Internet has increased, households are well equipped with (ICT), and some customer segments are even implicitly supposed to have some IT skills (Eger in Veteška a kol. 2009) = there are created prerequisites for customized courses enabled by ICT. Our pilot research (Eger, Petrtyl, 2011) also showed how young people communicate in the Czech Republic on Facebook. There are opportunities to communicate with young people, but also threats if companies do not understand the specifics of open communication in a social network.

What can we suggest as partial conclusions?

- Customers are connected (they are able to use the Internet and our support anytime and anywhere).
- It is possible to use rich media and new tools for communication with customers.
- The main problem is the question of motivation and development of a long-term relationship between company and its customer.
- The advantage of e-learning support is also possibility to personalise information and an easy update.
• We can obtain customers if we offer (needed) added value.

Then we bring to the discussion:

• It is possible to consider the effects of the use of viral marketing (viral message as a motivation to study and to post the link to friends etc.)
• Learning (and customer informal learning) should be flexible and available on mobile (Are we able to delivery the learning content via a smartphone or via a media tablet?)
• Which kind of teaching and learning approach we should choose to make courses useful but also interesting and relevant to a target group?
• How to change social learning through a traditional e-learning and tools as LMS (learning management system)? Social learning often takes place outside the organisation, but some organisations use social learning as a part of knowledge management inside organisation.

Viral marketing

“Viral marketing is a marketing strategy that is geared towards making an awareness about the company products and services that is being catered to a specified range of people. It primarily employs the word-of-mouth method to propagate the presence of the company and the existence of products and goods.” (Allen, 2008, p. 35), or “a marketing technique that seeks to exploit existing social networks to produce exponential increases in brand awareness” (Hollensen, 2007, p. 563). A guru of marketing using social media, Eric Qualman, sees not only significant advantages and a potential of the so called “Socialnomics”, but also warns that every company aiming to use the tools of online word-of-mouth, must “understand and be willing to unleash control over their brand” (Qualman, 2011, p. 179). In other words, word-of-mouth (or even Qualman’s term “world-of-mouth”) may be very convenient and powerful, but can also work in an opposite way: just imagine possible implications in case of experience with a bad product.

To be of viral character, the marketing must respect basic characteristics (Klofanda, Hacker, 2008):
• The message must contain/inform about certain value (sharing trigger).
• There must be a good starting point and appropriate points of sharing (web servers, discussion forums, blogs, e-mailing, instant messaging etc.).
• People who share the message (first wave, optimally containing an opinion leader; and people, who will share the message in a viral manner).

Although the latter authors see only commercial messages as „truly“ viral ones, the stated requisites are valid also in case of “simple”, and “spontaneous” sharing of unique content. That means the message can become of viral character even though it was originally not meant to. Or, in other words, customers themselves may create a message shared spontaneously and noticing something special. Notably, as in many other cases, many authors use many definitions. The most important point in case of viral marketing is the sharing itself and its impacts (both, intended and unintended) which they result in.

In case of education, the value of product itself is gained knowledge. As we will see, the form of a e-learning may differ case to case, and messages can involve fun (see e.g. Czech National Bank), or can be strictly practically oriented (see Gartner). Thus, it is clear that every concept must reflect target audience and values the members of target groups may expect.
Two model target group representatives may be (1) a random visitor of Czech National Banks website (looking for a general information on money), and (2) an IT professional who is looking for detailed explanation of certain current problem. Each of them will probably prefer different ways of attraction, but they both are looking for information mediated through the tools of e-learning.

**Examples of customer oriented e-learning courses**

Formal learning (CEDEFOP: Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically leads to validation and certification.

Certified courses are for example common in ICT or in management or marketing. Certification is often associated with face to face examination. This is not an area in which we are focused on our contribution.

We can classify the typical free access customer oriented courses as non-formal teaching and learning and support for informal learning.

Non-formal learning: Learning which is embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support), but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view. It typically does not lead to certification (CEDFOP Glossary, 2004).

Support for informal learning (CEDEFOP: Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure). It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner’s perspective.

Here are two examples from the field of finance and financial literacy.

The first course (Figure 1) was created by The Czech Consumer Association and is focused on frauds in the e-banking. The course shows how to prevent potential risks in customer transactions on the Internet. Course design and navigation are simple. This is an example of an older web based course.

---

**Figure 1: Podvody v e-bankovnictví** (Sdružení českých spotřebitelů, 2009)
The second course was created by The Czech National Bank. The animated film "Of Money and Men" presents the circulation of currency, the payment system etc. Currently it is available on the internet, see YouTube.

![Image](https://example.com/figure2.png)

Figure 2: Of money and men (CNBcz, 2011)

Customer oriented courses are typical for companies in the field of ICT. Some of them are paid (e.g. SAP), but some are available for free (open courses for MS Office). These support materials offer user friendly design and clear structure of the relevant content.

The third example of the e-learning (a webinar) comes from a consultancy company Gartner. The webinars are provided on-demand, and can be viewed in real-time or after the time of live broadcasting (lesson). The real-time webinars are interactive hence attendants can pose questions (when subscribed as attendants). Materials can be downloaded in PDF (presentation), or viewed online (commentary/audio), or both. All in all, the quality of content is high, and it implicitly promotes Gartner’s paid services. There are limits when wanting to share webinars on social networking sites: Gartner offers the only one default way of sharing, via e-mail. But, this kind of e-learning is not meant for masses of people, as it is dedicated to IT professionals. Nevertheless, support of easy sharing (e.g. on the professional network LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.) could be useful.

![Image](https://example.com/figure3.png)

Figure 3: Gartner webinar (Gartner, 2012)
Courses created by customers

Consider, for some products, possibility of finding many manuals, tutorials or courses. If searching e.g. for a manual or course “How to use Skype?” you receive links to PDF manuals, to web based learning courses or to YouTube video tutorials. In this case a lot of them are created and published by customers themselves, not by the company that operates and develops Skype software. Of course, the quality of these materials is may differ, source by source. See an example of a professional course:

Compare the picture with the example of a simple manual (web based support) that was created by society APPN for their members.

The last example represents informal learning and blog or wikis as a support tool for social learning (interaction and information sharing in a customer club).
Our idea of using viral marketing approaches in e-learning courses corresponds also to one part of Khan’s E-learning Framework (2004). Khan recognises next eight dimensions: pedagogical, technological, interface design, evaluation, management, resource support, ethical and institutional.

For evaluation of the course as a product, Khan emphasises marketing: “Effective marketing will help institutions to attract and recruit students for their courses and programs. An important marketing strategy for any offerer is to provide the accurate information about its e-learning offerings known to as many potential learners as possible”.

We believe that marketing (and viral marketing approach) is important especially for non-formal and informal customer oriented courses. Their purpose is to communicate the response on customers’ needs, to announce a value and motivate customers to use these courses or to study.

**In this way we see it as an important part of the external and internal motivation.**

**Conclusion**

When we return to our examples, what is the motivation to study these courses?

Example no. 1: Banking

- How to prevent malpractices on internet banking?
- How to spend time and money?
- And perhaps how to become a more skilled IT user?
This is certainly motivating by having the information on internet banking and to know how to save time and money...

Example no. 2: Of Money and Men

This course has a more general educational value. Its design is also interesting but the course has not strong impact on personal motivation (from authors’ point of view).

Example no. 3: Gartner

Gartner’s webinars are well-known educational tools aimed on IT professionals who are looking for the most up-to-date information on information technologies. The webinars are interactive, available for free and their added value lies in well-founded explanation, commentary and professional approach.

Example no. 4: Skype

Our example presents three possible ways. First – the course is created by company and delivered for free via You Tube. Second course uses some free external resource and offers web based supplements. The third one is not a typical e-learning course, but weblog – a part of informal social learning.

Although there are differences among the presented courses, the overall perspective of Skype e-learning is somehow similar. The second course is focused on activities for members of special group. The third one starts with internal motivation of an individual, but it is possible (through word of mouth) to send new useful information to friends and to share results of the learning process.

All in all, the e-learning has a strong potential to be used as an appropriate educational tool. Possible fields for use are almost everywhere (see ASTD survey: trends 2011, how the organisations use e-learning). As seen, various subjects can use it to educate the target groups in various domains, be it Czech National Bank or just a specific group of people with similar interests/objectives.

Like in every domain, also in case of e-learning the main target is to deliver value. Simple sharing, educational potential, and easy access to courses (even the advanced ones may be for free) are not the only triggers of interest. The possible use of tools of viral marketing is an important issue for consideration.

References


