

A Change in Perspective

A change in perspective can be a wonderful thing. I recently participated in a conference on marketing and communication designed to help Mexican colleges and universities do a better job in recruiting, marketing, and public relations. It changed my perspective. Rather than beginning with what we know about colleges and universities, we looked outside—beyond the students' academic world.

Did you know that

- in Korea, there are eight television channels designed to be watched on cell phones,
- in Brazil, you can sign up to get a text message when your soccer team scores and then have the option of watching a video of the goal,
- in some cities, billboards encourage you to use your cell phone to “vote” in answer to a question (the ad asks you whether the woman in the picture is wrinkled or wonderful?)

People are constantly connected and making choices: they are interacting with the world around them.

It used to be that when you watched TV, you were stuck watching the advertisements unless you left the room. Today, remote controls make it easier to channel-surf and thereby avoid ads. The impact of the traditional thirty-second ad is declining. Ads are losing their air time not only due to the remote control: the loss is also due to “time shifting.” People are recording what they want to watch and viewing it later, at their convenience. Time shifting enables an unprecedented level of choice and control.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without digital technologies. Consider how technology is represented in our lives:

- The fastest-growing advertising medium is the Internet.
- The number-one way to find a job is through online job searches.
- The number of online searches in Google in March 2005 was 3.5 billion.
- In the last two minutes
 - 400 new users came to the Internet,
 - 1,000 auctions closed on eBay,
 - 2,100 cell phones were sold, and
 - \$30,000 changed hands in Amazon.com transactions.¹
- Over 75,000 new blogs are created each day.²
- The stickiest Web site is PokerStars.com, with 600,000 users—typically sixteen to twenty-five years old—spending at least eight hours per week on the site. (If you don't believe those numbers, ask a student about the site.)
- 50 percent of Americans play video-games.³
- The fastest-growing community site is eHarmony.com, a dating site.

In descriptions of the uses of technology in our culture, terms such as *self-service*, *self-publishing*, *self-control*, *personalized*, *remixing*, and *multitasking* appear often. The culture is shifting to one of distributed cognition—to a belief that “intelligence” is distributed throughout the network rather than being found in only a few experts. Traditional authority channels, such as national media outlets, are being bypassed by individuals publishing blogs. Opinions are being offered through podcasts and solicited through online polls. Individuals are interacting through instant messaging, social networking, and text messaging.

How does this level of self-determination and interaction compare with the level of engagement in higher education? At the recent conference mentioned above, our audience was recruiters, who went home thinking about building a

brand in a digital world, increasing mobile marketing, and adding interactivity to campaigns. I left reflecting on the tremendous level of interaction, engagement, and choice presented to learners in their daily lives. Do they miss that interaction in the higher education environment? Perhaps not, since they have plenty outside their academic life. But are we in higher education missing some important clues about how to engage our learners?

Interaction has always been important in learning; it is not something that matters only to the Net Generation. Adult learners also have a strong desire for engagement and experiential learning. Part of how learners are engaged is through pedagogy, which often hinges on the use of technology. Part of how students select colleges and universities is through Web sites. And, part of how students bond with their institution is through technology-enabled interaction.

Maybe, when it comes to engagement, those of us in higher education need a change in perspective. Maybe there is something that we can learn from advertising. If the thirty-second ad is losing its power, where does that put us?

Notes

1. Andrew Lark, “The Participatory Communications Revolution,” presentation at EDUCAUSE Australasia, Auckland, New Zealand, April 8, 2005, <http://incsub.org/andylark/Lark_Educause_Final.pdf>.
2. Cited in “State of the Blogosphere,” *Andy Lark's Blog*, February 6, 2006, <<http://andylark.blogs.com/andylark/blogs/index.html>>.
3. Entertainment Software Association, <http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php>, cited in Edward Castronova, “Gold from Thin Air: The Economy of Synthetic Worlds,” November 2005, <[http://www.nae.edu/nae/caseecomnew.nsf/0754c87f163f599e85256cca00588f49/85256d9f006047a9852570d5007251b4/\\$FILE/ATT3YoMo/Castronova.ppt](http://www.nae.edu/nae/caseecomnew.nsf/0754c87f163f599e85256cca00588f49/85256d9f006047a9852570d5007251b4/$FILE/ATT3YoMo/Castronova.ppt)>.

Diana G. Oblinger is Vice President of EDUCAUSE, where she is responsible for the association's teaching and learning activities and for the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI).