

Perceptions of the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for first-time students in an ODL institution

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Abstract

Technology has the ability to open up completely new markets and to radically shake up existing ones. The major breakthroughs in technology have altered the relationships between marketers and consumers, and did so on a global scale, but according to Ryan and Jones (2009), marketing is not about technology, it's about people. Technology is only interesting, from a marketing perspective, when it connects people with other people more effectively. Digital marketing, like traditional marketing is not about the technology and tools used, but it's also about people, it's about people connecting with other people, and building relationships.

The World Wide Web (WWW or the web) is a universal platform for information exchange, and it provides a channel through which businesses may display and generate sales on their offerings and communicate with their targeted audiences. The purpose of the proposed study is to explore and study how effective internet marketing strategies are for new students at ODL institutions, specifically Unisa. As Singh's (2002) research clearly indicate the tremendous potential of the Internet and its ability to exposes new business opportunities for organizations, the study aimed at exploring the perceptions of the new students as to how helpful and effective the internet marketing strategies are before and and/or during the pre-registration period. This study found that there is considerable variation in the students' perception of the website's navigation and link functionality, overall performance and the quality of education information.

The effectiveness and usability of a website as a marketing strategy lies in the successful interaction of the students (and other users) with the website and this can only be accurately measured by assessing user performance, satisfaction, and acceptability (Bevan, Kirakowski, and Maissel, 1991). The main purpose of a university website is to provide information to current and potential clients and to promote and market the organization, which means university website is primarily a means of communication, first to inform and second to promote. This study provided evidence that in order for university to effectively market itself using their website, the university's relevant bodies need to engage in continuous improvement of the website.

One of the most effective ways of evaluating one's website is to involve those users for whom the website is designed for, in this case, firstly students, and other relevant stakeholders. The results clearly indicated a need for the university to conduct further research that may include a wider population.

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I thank all the respondents who took part in my study, your graciousness with your time and opinions confirms to me the value of university interaction with the students to continuously improve products and services.

Lastly, many thanks to my two beautiful blessed daughters, Itebogeng and Galaletsang, and my sister Kadima, whose sacrifice and support I will forever appreciate.

I certify that, except as noted above, the report is my own work and all references used are accurately reported.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

1.1 Introduction

The internet is a universal platform for information exchange, and it provides a channel through which businesses may display and generate sales on their offerings and communicate with their target audiences. For the web to function as an effective market place, prospective buyers must be able to find information on products and services easily and quickly.

Berthon, Lane, Pitt and Watson (1998), report that the web has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years, particularly in the influential business press. Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) or Website addresses, appear in many advertisements that are meant to market businesses (Berthon *et al.*, 1998). According to Mamaghani (2009), marketing one's enterprise via the web involves two general efforts. The first effort transforms marketing content into a format that makes the best use of web protocols, that is, the design of a website. But having a perfectly working website is no guarantee that anyone will visit it. The second effort involves making the best use of any number of marketing communication methods to lead visitors to one's site.

The adoption of digital technology, the internet, and software applications that run on it and the various devices, allows people to connect both to the networks and to each other whenever and however they want to. This herald the single most disruptive development in the history of marketing, which may represent an opportunity or a threat to marketers (Ryan and Jones, 2009).

Technology has the ability to open up completely new markets and to radically shake up existing ones. The major breakthroughs in technology have altered the relationships between marketers and consumers, and did so on a global scale, but according to Ryan and Jones (2009), marketing is not about technology, it is about people. Technology is only interesting, from a marketing perspective, when it connects people with other people more effectively.

Digital marketing, like traditional marketing is not about the technology and tools used, but it is also about people; it is about people connecting with other people and building relationships. Technology merely affords the marketer new and exciting platforms that allow them to connect with the consumers in increasingly diverse and relevant ways. Similarly, digital marketing is not about understanding the underlying technology, but rather about understanding people, how consumers interact with the technology and how marketers can leverage that to engage with them more effectively.

Topics explored in this study include internet marketing, website design, usability studies, theories driving internet marketing, and other related topics.

1.2 Objectives of this research

The objective of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for first time students at an open and distance learning (ODL) institutions institution, with website design as the main focus of study.

The aim of the study is therefore to explore whether or not the ODL institution's website facilitates good decision making, searches for study and course information and how this affects the online registration process for its students.

Furthermore, the aim is to make recommendations regarding effective use of website design as a form of internet marketing strategy, and how the potential and first-time students' information needs can be effectively met through the effective design of a website; also to contribute to the current body of knowledge within the marketing business.

1.3 Statement of the problem and sub-problems

An important goal of a university is to systematically increase enrolment of students in programs, it is important to identify and acknowledge how the Internet has changed ways that people find out about university programs (Schroeder, 2007).

University websites requires an interface that can accommodate the different needs, scholarly disciplines and capabilities of the many and varied users, (Raward, 2001). Some of the activities done online include search, directory services, games, social networking, instant messaging, E-mail, chat, shopping, research or obtaining information, or reading current news and articles online.

Open and distance learning institutions thrive on technology, strategies selected and implemented should be the strategies that will serve the students, the potential students and not put them at a disadvantage.

Taking into consideration the tremendous increase in ever-changing technologies, and the instantaneous nature of the online marketplace, the proposed study will be guided by the following primary question:

- *How effective is the design of website as an internet marketing strategy at an ODL institution for first time students?*

Ryan and Jones (2009) warn that marketing should not be about technology, it is about people. Technology is indeed only interesting, from a marketer's view, when it connects people with other people more effectively.

1.4 Significance of the study

Many higher education institutions, including open and distance learning (ODL) institutions make use of websites to market their programmes and to communicate with their students. Most students served by these ODL institutions come from previously disadvantaged communities in rural areas, or technologically less developed countries. Therefore, the design of marketing and communication strategies should be effective in attracting and retaining such students, first within the borders of South Africa, then in Africa and finally the World.

Research reports show that the volume of students' enquiries and complaints increases each year, especially during application and registration periods.

Furthermore, issues reported relate to the online registration process, incorrect or outdated contact information on the website, and many other issues (Ashton 2012; WikiStudent Blog, 2009).

1.5 Concept Clarification

The following theoretical concepts will underpin the research topic and are relevant to the purpose of this research:

First-time students

First-time students are defined as those students who register for the first time at a higher education institution, whether for first graduate or post-graduate studies.

Internet marketing

Ward (2012) defines internet marketing to be the strategies that are used to market a product or service online. Marketing strategies include search engine optimization and search engine submission, copywriting that encourages site visitors to take action, website design strategies, online promotions, reciprocal linking, and email marketing.

Also known as digital marketing, online marketing, electronic marketing or web marketing; internet marketing is the art and science of selling products and/or services over internet networks such as the internet and cellular phone networks (About.com, 2014). The term internet marketing may be interchangeably used for digital marketing, online marketing, web marketing or e-marketing for electronic marketing, the term used in this study.

Website

Website is defined as a set of interconnected web pages, usually including a homepage, generally located on the same server, and prepared and maintained as

a collection of information by a person, group, or organization (yourdictionary.com, 2014).

Website design

Website design describes the tasks of designing HTML driven web pages to be displayed over the World Wide Web. Web design encompasses a number of important elements including colour, layout, and overall graphical appearance. Web designers consider the site's audience, function and traffic to specific sections when deciding on designs (businiessdictionary.com, 2014).

Open and distance learning institution (ODL)

Unisa (2008) defines distance education as a set of methods or processes for teaching a diverse range of students located at different places and physically separated from the learning institution, their tutors/teachers as well as other students. Unisa defines open distance learning as a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, and educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and coursework and student and peers. Open distance learning focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

Search engine

A search engine is a software program that searches for sites based on the words users designate as search terms (Duermyer, 2008).

According to Dictionary.com (2012), search engine is a computer program that searches documents, especially on the World Wide Web, for a specified word or words and provides a list of documents in which they are found. Often website designers build in some words or search terms in each web page, which is then

retrieved through the search engines. Some of the commonly used search engines include Google, Yahoo, Bing, Altavista and others.

Usability

There are many definitions of usability from books by usability professionals. For an example; Brooke, Brigham and Youmans (1990) defined usability as the effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction with which specified users can achieve specified goals in a particular environment.

Eason's (1988) definition was ease-of-use oriented - the degree to which users are able to use the system with the skills, knowledge, stereotypes and experience they can bring to bear.

Bevan, Kirakowski and Maissel (1991) defined usability as the ease of use and acceptability of a product for a particular class of users carrying out specific tasks in a specific environment.

1.6 Delimitation of the study

The study is delimited as follows:

- Use of Unisa's website as a subject for evaluating the effectiveness for higher education institutions.
- Website design as the focus study.
- Only those students with access to the Internet/email were included in the research study.
- Only the students who are registered in the College of Education (CEDU) are invited to participate in the study.

1.7 Outline of the research report.

Chapter One introduced the study, stating the research problem, aim and purpose. The following chapters are outlined as follows:

- **Chapter Two** explains the background of the research project and addresses some pertinent theoretical opinions about the research topic. Website design is introduced as the focus of the study, as part of marketing communications, discussing the theory that anchors it within the context as a way of engaging the participants collaboratively and effectively.
- **Chapter Three** discusses the details how sampling, capturing data, analysis and interpretation of data collected were conducted.
- **Chapter Four** processes the evidence and results of both data interpretation and findings, and
- **Chapter Five** provides an outline summary and recommendations of the study based on the findings. This chapter assesses the data collected, indicating its gaps, shortcomings, flaws and limitations.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE STUDY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1 of this study, which examines the perceptions of the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for first-time students in an ODL institution, was introduced. This second chapter lays a theoretical foundation of the study as well as to examine literature to gain an understanding of what has already been researched in the field of internet marketing. As such, the following issues will be discussed in this chapter - a brief background to internet marketing, a discussion on internet business and the ODL institutions, internet technology and marketing, challenges of website designs within the higher education environment and lastly, a review of literature.

2.1.1 A brief background to internet marketing

The Internet is a mechanism for information dissemination and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers, without regard for geographic location (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, Postel, Roberts and Wolff, 2000). The Internet is changing the way businesses are operating and how IT supports business operations (O'Brien, 2000).

According to literature, internet marketing evolved around 1995 to 2000 (Raward, 2001; Mamaghani, 2009; Ryan & Jones, 2009). According to Kiang, Raghu and Shang (2000), this period was known as the dot.com boom, with many companies all over the world, mainly using the internet for advertisement or for promoting corporate activities. As we moved into the twenty-first century, the way that firms and companies do business has changed, and it is readily apparent that such changes are attributable to the advent of the Internet (Dehkordi, 2012).

In the twenty first century the Internet represents a significant change in the competitive landscape. Scholarly research has devoted considerable attention to

this new marketing medium and has focused on such issues as the Internet as a communication medium (Sultan and Rohm, 2004).

Higher education has also followed suit with its marketing endeavours. This is particularly the case with Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions which rely mainly on internet for their practices and processes. The following discussion addresses the effectiveness of a website design as an internet marketing strategy for first-time students in an ODL institution in South Africa and examines literature most relevant to this area of study.

2.1.2 The internet business and the ODL institutions

ODL institutions are now heavily involved in providing access to information through websites and it is a challenge to design websites that continuously provide reliable content and a user interface that is easy and effective for those who use it. The multiplicity of users and information needs that exist in the university environment requires effective use of interactive and integrated marketing communications with students. University websites require an interface that can accommodate the different needs, scholarly disciplines and capabilities of the many and varied users, (Raward, 2001). The competition is increasing as the residential universities also offer online courses, thereby competing for the distance students.

An important goal of a university is to systematically increase enrolment of students in programs. It is important to identify and acknowledge how the Internet has changed ways in which people find out about university programs (Schroeder, 2007).

Many higher education institutions make use of websites to market their offerings and communicate with their students. Unisa is one of the mega universities in the world offering open and distance learning education; therefore, the main means of communication is their website.

Most of the students served by UNISA come from previously disadvantaged communities, rural areas, or technologically less developed countries in Africa. Therefore, the design of marketing and communication strategies needs to be effective in attracting and retaining those students, first within the borders of South Africa, then Africa and also globally.

The volume of students' enquiries and complaints increases each year, especially during application and registration periods; and concern issues relating to the online registration process, incorrect contact information on the website, and outdated information, amongst others, (Ashton, 2012; WikiStudent Blog, 2009; HelloPeter.com, 2013). Problems experienced with educational institutions' websites are often frustrating and stressful for some students (the Eagle; 2005). These problems are experienced by Unisa students. This research focused only on first-time students in the College of Education and the website design as a marketing tool.

Open and distance learning (ODL) institutions' offerings are among the most highly competitive products and services on the global platform. Competition is getting tougher as many institutions start offering their courses online. The nature of their business requires that they be visible on the internet, or even operate their business online. In this environment, there must be a balance between the knowledge and understanding of technology and understanding of target audiences.

The online registration process must meet the needs of the users; and the system must be functional at all the times hassle-free. In case of a hassle, correct and updated contact information must be readily available for students.

ODL institutions should ask and seek to find out firstly whether their audience is online and what they are doing online? If yes, then they must embrace digital marketing in order to engage and to retain their target audiences; at the same time design their websites in a manner that accelerates and/or supports the organization's internet marketing strategies.

Some of the activities done online include: search, directory services, games, social networking, instant messaging, E-mail, chat, shopping, research or obtaining information, or reading current news and articles online.

Formulating a digital marketing strategy helps organizations to make informed decisions about their entry into the digital market arena, and ensures that their efforts are focused on the elements of digital marketing that are most relevant to their business.

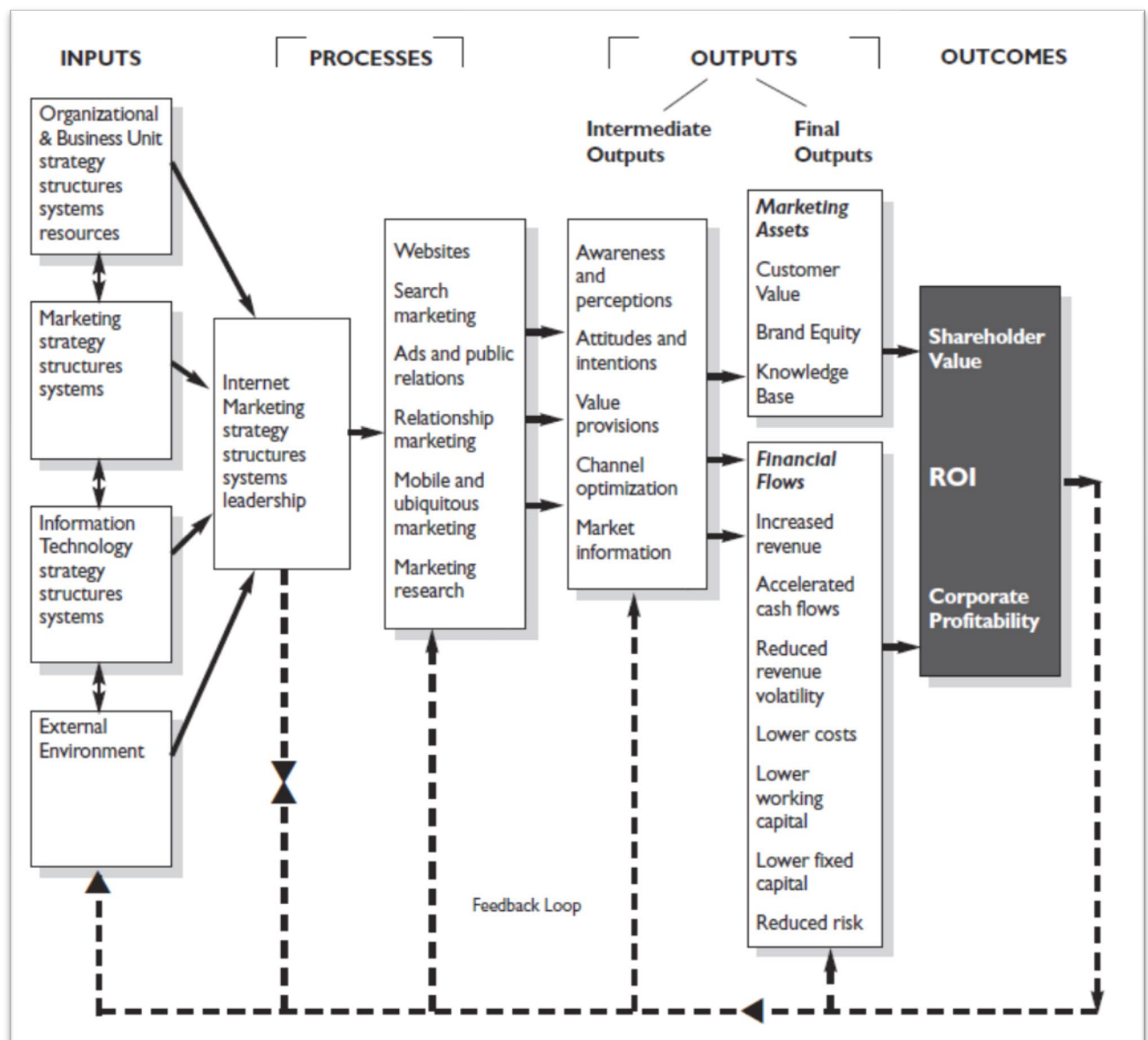


Figure 2-1: Internet Marketing Payoff Model: Antecedents and Consequences of Investments in Internet Marketing (Epstein and Yuthas, 2007)

This helps the organization to understand how the constantly evolving digital marketing place relates to them, and how it affects the relationship between their business or brand and their customers and prospects. Epstein and Yuthas' (2007) model, amongst many depict the importance of thoroughly looking into inputs, processes, outputs, outcomes, and feedback loops when designing an internet marketing strategy.

2.1.3 Internet technology and marketing

The adoption of internet technology such as the internet and software applications that run on it allows people to connect both to the networks and to each other whenever and however they want. This heralds the single most disruptive development in the history of marketing, which may represent an opportunity or a threat to marketers (Ryan and Jones, 2009).

According to Vieraşu (2012), the internet has now become indispensable for many people and organizations. It is a way of socializing, exploring, finding information, playing games, watching movies and videos. Simply said, it is a way of living, working and spending leisure time. When it comes to online marketing practices, the internet is the newest, fastest and one of the most efficient ways of doing business.

The Internet, unlike the conventional forms of mass media marketing, is unique in its capacity to both broaden the scope of an organization's marketing reach and also narrows the focus at the same time. Besides transcending traditional constraints like geography and time zones to connect with a much wider audience, it has really become inevitable not to use digital channels to conduct business. This brings along a more challenging, dynamic and diverse marketing landscape.

Figure 2.2 depict the place of digital marketing within the general marketing discipline and Figure 2.3 further outlines the place of a website within the digital marketing discipline, and how it fits into general marketing.

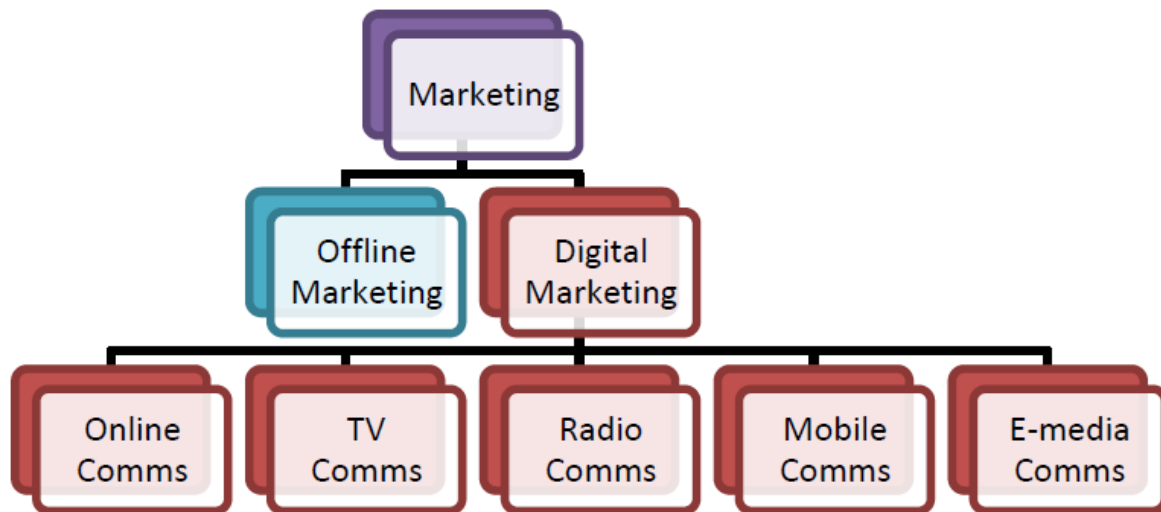


Figure 2-2: Digital marketing's place in marketing (Ashley-Roberts, 2012)

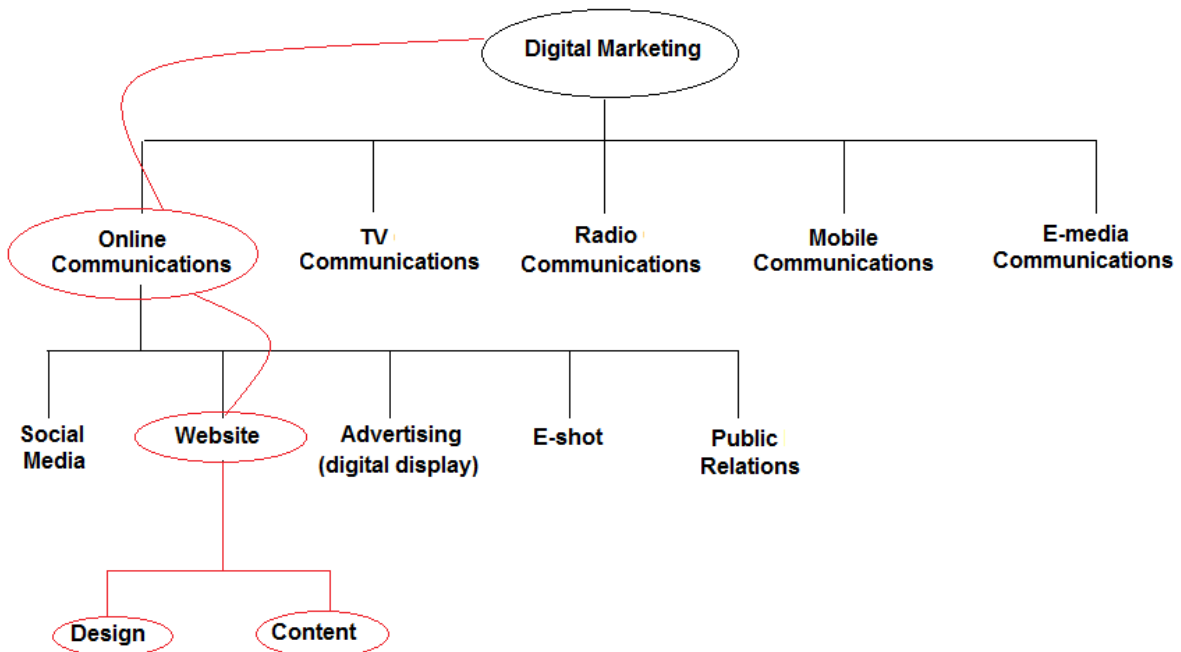


Figure 2-3: Website strategy's place in digital marketing (Ashley-Roberts, 2012)

One of the most important factors to note is how digital marketing fit into the traditional marketing mix, viz. the four P's - place, price, product and promotion. Once an organization has established the fit, then it becomes easy for marketers in ODL environments to pursue the digital marketing strategies and/or implement them.

Technology has the ability to open up complete new markets and to radically shake up existing ones. The major breakthroughs in technology have altered the relationships between marketers and consumers, and have done so on a global scale. But according to Ryan and Jones (2009), marketing is not about technology, it is about people. Technology is only interesting, from a marketing perspective, when it connects people with other people more effectively.

Marketers can learn to use the tools at their disposal but understanding people is the real key to unlocking the potential of digital marketing. Increasingly widespread adoption of technology is influencing consumer behaviour. Networked digital technology is enabling consumers to connect to each other more readily, be it through e-mail, instant messaging, mobile messaging, or web based social networking platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter, or more likely a combination of all these platforms.

Consumers are connecting with each other on a global level, and word goes around more faster than ever before. What we promise our consumers, whether online or through traditional marketing communications, should be followed by a real deal.

The consumers are better informed through the increased ability to access and sift through an abundance of information anytime, anywhere. With such glut of information available to them, digital consumers are learning to sift out items and/or information relevant to them and to easily ignore anything they perceive as irrelevant.

Research shows that an increasing number of prospects and target markets rely on internet technology every day for research on products and services (Ryan and Jones, 2012). Without a coherent strategy of engagement and retention through internet channels, businesses will lose or miss golden opportunities, and could be left behind by competitors. It seems that more businesses are going online today, and for good reason. The use of the internet is increasing at an incredible rate. According to Internet World Stats, internet use in Africa alone has grown by 625,8% in just six years (Cinman, 2007).

According to Ryan and Jones (2012), Forrester Research has predicted that in America, in 2016, \$77 billion will be spent on interactive marketing. In 2005, South Africa had 23.1 million mobile subscribers and 3.6 million internet users (Isaacs, 2007). A survey by Eighty20 (2012) reported that 8.6 million South African adults (25% of all adults) use the internet for social networking; up from 4.9 million in 2011 (14% of all adults). A survey conducted by Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007 showed the proportion of US adults online and their demographic make-up. According to the survey, about 75% of adults used the internet in the USA in 2007; and 92% of them were between the ages of 18-29 and 85% in the age group of 30-49, with as high as 64% of the sample accessing the internet from the rural areas.

These are significant statistics which include relevant data for ODL institutions anywhere in the world. Internet technology has made it possible even for rural audiences to connect with the world.

The design of marketing strategies such as websites in open and distance learning institutions should be done in order to enhance the communication and learning process of students. They should also effectively facilitate information searches, decision making and the registration process.

The Web provides an opportunity for customers to experience an organizations atmospherics without actually being there. Consequently, firms must ensure they take full advantage of the technology available to maximize their impact (Watson *et al.*, 2000).

2.1.4 Challenges of website designs within the ODL environment

Since the communication in an ODL environment is mainly at a distance, it therefore depends heavily on the use of communication technologies, synchronous and asynchronous. Educational institutions need to maximise the impact in their chosen mode of communication with their current and potential students.

Marketing is about communicating your products and services to current and potential customers, more like an invitation for them to come and make a purchase. Marketing is about the bottom line; after all, communication is always directed at making profits, inviting the customers to buy and buy repeatedly (Webster, 1992).

Websites have a powerful ability to satisfy the need of both the organisation and its consumers – it gives both parties the opportunity to engage with each other even beyond ‘office hours’. It transcends time and geographical limitations; therefore it has been one of the most effective tools and channels of communication and marketing.

While organisations may employ various tools and options for their online marketing communications, the design of the website should be optimised to reduce dissatisfaction as it represents the organisation’s office. Once a customer has landed (entered) the organisation’s ‘virtual office, irrespective of how they reached the website, care must be taken to meet all basic needs of the customer. A customer must be provided with a clear and easy navigation system, and not be subjected to travel through many pages before reaching their relevant destination. (Rawson, Duncan and Jones, 2013) warns that the customer might have had a long journey to reach the website, and should not go through hassles to get what s/he needs or wants.

- Institutions must be aware that there are no or low switching costs for university students, and so if they do not make use of the time they have with a student, they might easily loose the students to competitors.
- It is also true that the geographical widening of the market due to the Internet, and the vast choice of content, services, and products available online have weakened customer loyalty. It is thus important that institutions tie customers emotionally more closely to them and engage their customers.
- The internet has made it easy for everybody to access information about products and suppliers. Customers are able to evaluate and compare value because of the easy access to product and organisation information.
- The decision process has also been affected. When customers are faced with variety, they are able to make a decision based on the value

propositions of the product and/or organisation. The platform for this decision making is the internet, a web or pages making a noise to be chosen, without the marketer's influence. Therefore, the design of websites and content should outperform those of competitors.

Ashley-Roberts (2012), defines digital marketing as a sub branch of traditional marketing and uses modern digital channels for the placement of products, primarily for communicating with stakeholders about brand, products and business progress. Ashley-Roberts (2012) surmises that digital marketing be about two things: access to an organisation's products and communication.

Unisa, like many distance learning institutions make use of a combination of online and mobile marketing strategies to effectively communicate their products and engage with their students and other relevant stakeholders.

Consumers go online to research, evaluate and compare their choices. Ashley-Roberts (2012) warn that the purchase decisions made by consumers are mainly based on the quality of their online experience and head to the brick-and-mortar store, or an institution's campuses to hand over their cash. With the current increasing efficiency of banking technologies, many consumers do not even bother to go the organisation's office, they make their purchase online.

Digital customers are normal people with needs; they are the same people who walk into an organisation's store or office every day, they call organisations, or make an order for something from a mail-order catalogue. There is no great mystery about how they think or what they want, Ashley-Roberts (2012).

Simões and Soares (2010) studied the students' decision-making process for higher education institutions, focusing on the pre-purchase period, and, in particular, the information sources and choice factors students draw on when selecting a higher education institution. They found out that higher education institutions are facing increasingly complex challenges, which demand a deeper understanding of the sources prospective students use when applying to a higher education institution.

The operating environment is undergoing major transformations, including changing demand patterns, intensifying global competition and declining funding, Simões and Soares (2010).

Understanding how students make decisions regarding college selection has led to the development of several student behaviour models, Simões and Soares (2010) concluded that using these models as background, the marketer can design websites that will facilitate the decision-making of students visiting their websites.

2.1.5 South African education systems and digital marketing

Learning through ODL institutions requires a lot of intensive reading; firstly, reading from the website or any other form of communication; secondly, reading through stacks of study material, tutorial letters, prescribed and recommended textbooks and so on. It is important to remove jargon and unnecessary clutter in website content, and design websites that makes it pleasurable reading from the computer screen.

It is also important for the ODL marketers to note the effects of the outcome-based education (OBE) systems on the culture of reading and learning among the current generation, from 1994 to 2011, up to the introduction of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) system.

With the OBE system in mind and the current increased and ever-changing technological tools and systems, and their effects on the culture of reading, writing and learning, marketers need to be on the alert about the kind of communication they use to connect with the users. The competition in ODL higher education is also intense, with some of the residential educational institutions also offering some of the courses online.

The new entrants into the higher education arena are mostly young and energetic; and some are fresh out of school, whereas some are working and are studying for

the purpose of improving employability. The profile is diverse in age, cultural backgrounds, interaction with the technology, issues of discipline, etc.

Institutions face the challenge of satisfying both the communication and information needs of these highly diverse populations, and the effective way is to engage the organisation's target populations, and to study their needs; also to continuously improve the services and products in the midst of fierce competition.

According to Msila and Setlhako (2012), there is a move towards online learning in South Africa. They warn that online learning has begun to make indelible inroads in South African higher education institutions. Although in its incipient stages, online learning shows much promise for the future student who will study away from the actual university.

In the earlier days, websites were only used to communicate and sell educational products and services to learners; but they are now being used as a platform for learning. With this in mind, designers and marketers need to be careful how the website is designed and structured, for the purpose of communicating (and not learning).

2.2 Literature Review

Smith (2011) indicated that there is general agreement that digital media have greatly impacted the way a marketer reaches today's consumer, and the fact that the internet is a prominent venue of digital marketing. According to The Economist (2010) the average American spends approximately six hours per week surfing the Internet. It is said that a 13 year old in China spends even more time on the internet, using mobile technology and other technological tools (Chiu, Lin and Silverman, 2012). South Africa is also advancing its access to the internet, with more and more people accessing the internet, even from the rural areas (Singh, 2002).

2.2.1 Marketing: Theory or Research?

O'dell (1966) holds that marketing research is more useful than marketing theory in the selection of the most appropriate course of marketing action. O'dell (1966) asked whether marketing theorists have developed an adequate set of marketing principles that are useful to the marketing decision-maker and believes that a marketing theorist is better suited to improving the design of marketing research activity rather than in theory itself.

According to O'dell (1966), marketing research offer the flexibility in its application and/or applicability to marketing decisions of a very specific nature, compared to marketing theory which may strive to develop the overly general statements which are relatively impotent in the construction of adequate theory, Halbert, (1964) in O'dell (1966). Theorists' work merely contributes primarily to the recognition of the marketing environment and not to the selection of the course of action.

In their article, Sutton-Brady, Voola and Yuksel (2010), investigated whether western management philosophy is the final point of management evolution that is being approached globally, and ask if there is no other viable alternatives, for developing countries. In answering this question, they looked at globalisation debates.

The challenge of marketing theory in digital marketing, which is dependent on technology, is the inherent ever-changing nature of technology, and therefore it may not always be relevant or even applicable to current marketing practices, unless theorists, like marketers, continuously work on improving their theories.

According to Sutton-Brady, Voola and Yuksel (2010), there is evidence that much of the management and marketing practices in China are still very much based on indigenous philosophy and intelligence. In Africa, there are many philosophies which can drive marketing wisdom. For example, in South Africa, the Batho-pele principles and Ubuntu can be used innovatively in the design of marketing strategies, such as design of websites, and other marketing activities.

Denyer and Neely (2004) report that evidence-based practice (EBP) has become accepted and well embedded in practice in many industries, including the education sector. EBP comes from the belief that practice should be informed by the best and latest knowledge, including knowledge emanating from research. According to Tranfield (2004), EBP policy and practice offers an integration of the best research evidence of a specific problem and its integration with a practitioner's pre-existing experience and expertise on that subject, along with end-user preferences.

The concept of EBP seeks to link practice and theory, with the purpose of improving managerial practice, and decision-making. This could also be applied in the marketing area, as marketing decisions are indeed evidence-based – through market research.

The literature on evidence-based management is intertwined with that of the 'practice–theory divide'. They both acknowledge that researchers and practitioners occupy different worlds and have different agendas, Rowley (2012). Nutley and Davies (2002) put it poignantly that researchers and practitioners occupy different worlds – they operate on different timescales, use different languages, have different needs and respond to different incentive systems.

One needs to note the definition of market research. In its simplest form, market research is a process and a collection of techniques through which managers and marketers gather intelligence about customers, competitors, and marketplaces (Rowley, 2010).

Educational institutions have the benefit of both researchers/academics and practitioners under the same roof and can use these optimally to achieve business goals, while at the same time building theory and knowledge.

2.2.1.1 Online marketing theory

The battle of business has evolved from a traditional market to networking cyberspace (Wei-naim, 2007), with the online marketing concepts and strategies developing to correspond with new economics.

According to Wei-naim (2007), the most important factor of online marketing is targeted communication with the customers, and it has many compelling benefits; such as the elimination of regional boundaries, multimedia, instantaneous, collaboration, entrepreneurial, and Hi-Tech prowess is a bonus.

Online marketing theory is still developing and the theoretical system and content needs to be improved. A lot of writers came up with a few theories and strategies which have crept up on the market in the previous decade. However, (Ashley-Roberts, 2012) believes that the basic theory of online marketing shares the same foundation of a traditional marketing discipline which includes direct-response marketing, relationship marketing, merging marketing, database marketing, etc.

Watson *et al.* (2000) asserted that communication is the very heart of marketing, and for years, companies have fashioned communication strategies based on print, radio, and TV media to broadcast their message. But times have changed, and many companies have recognized the Internet as an all-purpose communication technology.

With the comparison and analysis of online and traditional marketing, the connection is visible, because both keep the same essential principles, with both developing and improving along with each other. What is also interesting is that online marketing theory also has the basic rule of the four-C theory – **C**ustomer's wants and need mix, **C**ost that customers are willing to pay to satisfy their needs, **C**onvenience, and lastly **C**ommunication.



Figure 2-4: The traditional marketing mix combined with the online marketing theory's four-C theory

2.2.2 Internet shopping experience and social media

Marketers need to understand online consumer behaviour in order to design and support effective marketing communications strategies that match the preferences of their target market. Doolin *et al.* (2008) describe a technology-centred approach to understanding consumer acceptance of Internet shopping. This approach focuses on technological factors that encourages or inhibits adoption of this innovation. Doolin *et al.* (2008) also define the consumer-centred approach, which also according to Tarvenpaa and Todd (1997) focuses on the perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of consumers in relation to online shopping. This document focuses on the consumer-centred/user-centred approaches to designing web marketing strategies.

Increasingly widespread adoption of technology is influencing consumer behaviour; and networked digital technology is enabling consumers to connect to each other

more readily, be it through e-mail, instant messaging, mobile messaging, or web based social networking platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter, or more likely a combination of all these platforms.

Consumers are connecting with each other on a global level, and word goes around much faster than ever before. Therefore, what we promise our consumers, whether online or through traditional marketing communications should be followed by a real deal.

The consumers are better informed through the increased ability to access and sift through an abundance of information anytime, anywhere. With such a glut of information available to them, digital consumers are learning to sift out items and/or information relevant to them and to easily ignore anything they perceive as irrelevant.

For many consumers, shopping is an important personal and social activity. Attributes of the shopping experience include enjoyment, convenience, and social interaction (Jarvenpa & Todd, 1997). Lee *et al.* (2003) found that shopping enjoyment and convenience were positively associated with online customer satisfaction. The two are a significant influence on the decision to purchase online, or to follow through with physical contact with an organization, as in registering for a course or qualification.

Many of the teens of today are not conventional readers (Horn, 2011). Moreover the introduction of the social media networks and blogs, has seen many of the teens increasingly switching books for technological gadgets. School libraries are being replaced by social networks such as Facebook, Tweeter and search engines, now easily accessible, either on mobile phones or in internet cafes found almost at every street corner.

The evolution of social media, technology-driven tools and fancy gadgets has introduced a new kind of language, which can only be used on mobile phones (text messages), social networks (shorthand) and so on. These and many other factors

may reduce the reading activities, abilities and interest of consumers, who now may want specific shortened customized communication.

It is important that marketers are selective in what they put on their websites, how much information; and are also careful not to overwhelm the user with unnecessary marketing jargon.

Models have been created to give more specific guidelines on how customers may respond to marketing communication. These are all derived from what can be referred to as the old “learning theory”. The new approach toward marketing communication and advertising planning generally reflects the methods and assumptions of cognitive psychology.



Figure 2-5: Lavidge and Steiners Hierarchy of effects theory (Kitchen, 1994)

According to Kitchen (1994), advertising aims to progress customers through the cognitive, affective and behavioural stages before they buy the products (Figure 2-5).

2.2.3 Enhancing customer value

The focus on enhancing customer value is also the cornerstone of many high-profile e-commerce books (Porter, 2008). According to Porter (2008), the consensus from these sources is that the firm’s web marketing efforts will only be successful if the website offers something of value to the site visitor. Research on value creation further emphasizes the importance of creating value for customers as a means of competing more effectively in the market place.

Porter links the website features with the perception of value and depicts this in his model of value creation, Figure 2-6.

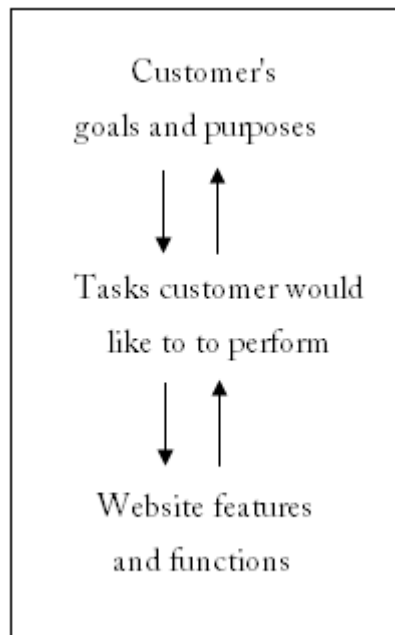


Figure 2-6: Porter's revised model of value creation (Porter, 2008)

A combination of website features and marketing strategies somehow affect the creation of perceptions in the user's mind. The kind of marketing communication strategies, the invitation to users to visit a virtual organization's offices through the website, the service they receive in the rooms of the website, and other factors, may have a bearing on the expectation, level of satisfaction, and ultimately the attitudes and perceptions, that may lead to whether the user decides to purchase or move on to the shop next door.

When potential learners search for a course on a search engine, and the name of an organization appears at the top, the first expectation is formulated, and the level of excitement at the thought of a possible opportunity for the user to find the information they need or the possible solution to their problem, also increase. The marketers should take advantage of this excitement, anticipation and expectation and create a first entry point that will not create confusion but rather bring the solution to the user.

The fact that your organisation's name came up first in the user's search results says to the user that you are the best in the market; and the organisation then needs to live up to that expectation. The design of the website, the content, the

experience, and all features must work together in helping the users perform the task for which they entered the virtual office door – website.

Value for a customer, in every business, is a vital factor and businesses must always seek ultimately to understand the needs and wants of their consumers better, (Dehkordi *et al*, 2012). Several marketing strategists emphasise that the creation of a superior customer value is a key element for ensuring the company's success (Rowley, 2008).

2.2.4 Customer engagement

It is important for organisations to create a dialogue with target consumers in order to stimulate their engagement with the organisation's brand, online and offline.

Customer engagement is about customers engaging with one another, with a company or a brand. This includes stages consumers travel through as they interact with a particular brand. The stages of engagement may include; awareness, consideration, inquiry, purchase and retention (Wikipedia, 2013).

Shelvins (2007) alluded that CE is repeated interactions that strengthens the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand.

A customer's degree of engagement with a company lies in a continuum that represents the strength of his/her investment in that company. Positive experiences with the company will strengthen that investment and move the customer down the line of engagement.

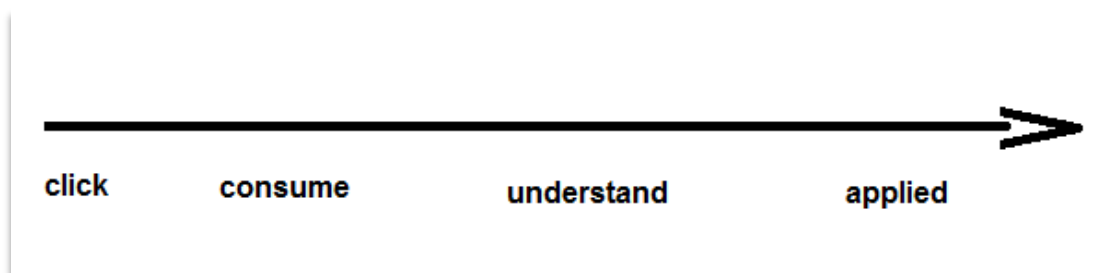


Figure 2-7: Line of engagement

In their research, Berthon, Lane, Pitt and Watson (1998) surmised that the Web has a lot in common with a trade show - a large international exhibition hall where potential buyers can enter at will and visit exhibitors and prospective sellers.

They argued that the central and fundamental problem facing a conventional trade show marketer is how to convert visitors, casually strolling around the exhibition centre, into customers at best or sales leads at least.

Similarly, a central dilemma confronting the Web marketer is how to turn surfers (those who browse the Web) into interactors (attracting the surfers to the extent that they become interested; ultimately purchasers; and, while staying interactive, repeat purchasers, (Berthon *et al.*, 1998).

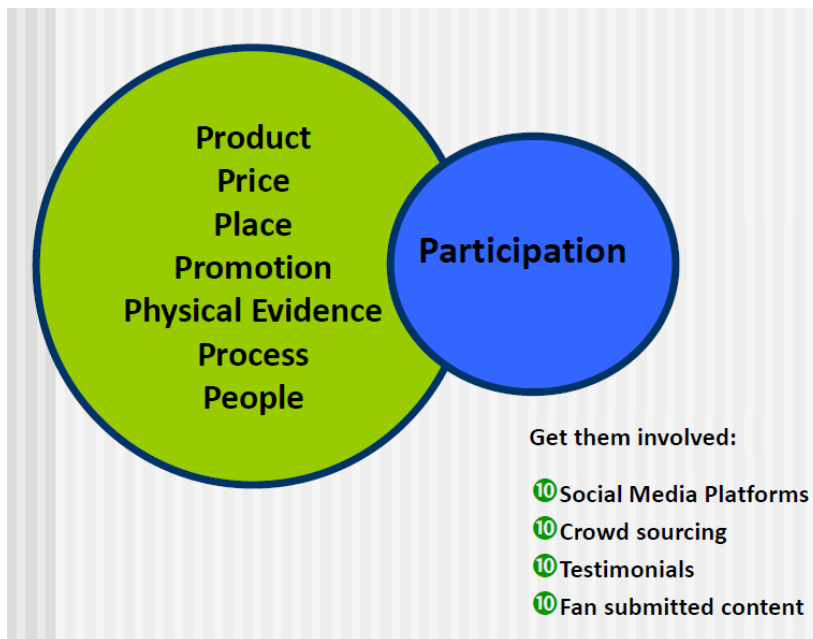


Figure 2-8: New trend - participation (Farrell, 2013)

According to Rowley (2001) in Patsioura *et al.* (2011), the unique characteristics of the Internet led to a new marketing e-communication model with companies using their websites in order to contact, interact and relate with their customers.

Nambisan and Baron (2007) argue that increasing consumers' involvement within the virtual environment is essential to co-create customer value, build and manage relationships. Patsioura *et al.* (2011) suggest that the quality of the "dialogue"

established between the company and the consumers within the website is the key element in building relationships on the World Wide Web. While enabling “dialogue” through communication facilities is important, companies should go one step forward in order to enhance consumers’ overall online experience.

2.2.4.1 Knowing how you are doing as a business.

Leveraging customer contribution is an important source of competitive advantage, whether through advertising, user generated products reviews, customer services frequently asked questions (FAQs) or forums.

According to (Singh, 2003), businesses have lost the power to dictate the communications agenda. The Forrester Research North American Consumer Technology Adoptions study (Anderson, Reitsma, Sorensen and Munsell, 2010) shows that people in the 18-26 year age group spend more time online than watching television.

Customers have also become broadcasters; a company’s position is no longer just inside the consumer’s mind. As they increasingly speak their minds, with the power of circulation, the power of shouting over everyone else is lost. It may be easy to believe the person who has experienced something than believing the one promising you something. It is thus important to be relevant to your customers in every context to improve brand recall and enhance engagement.

Marketers need to be aware that their industry is changing every day. Marketers need to look at user-initiated solutions that respect the user’s time and interests, instead of throwing money at any new channel in the market.

2.2.4.2 The effect of word of mouth (mouse)

Research shows that the power of word-of-mouth buzz online cannot be ignored and understated. Online word-of-mouth or word-of-mouse (OWOM) is a popular

strategy used by marketers and advertisers to expand their customer base and build brand equity, (Sun, Youn, Wu and Kuntaraporn, 2006; Farrell, 2013).

Whereas technology enabled organisation to communicate the same messages to the masses, the same technology allows for individual customers to send other messages to the masses too. It is up to the organisation to create and manage positive perceptions and brand experiences to each individual that comes into contact with the organisation, being it through a website or office or telephone, so that these individuals can carry the same messages to their masses. The diagram below depicts the powerful effects of word of mouth or word-of-mouse.

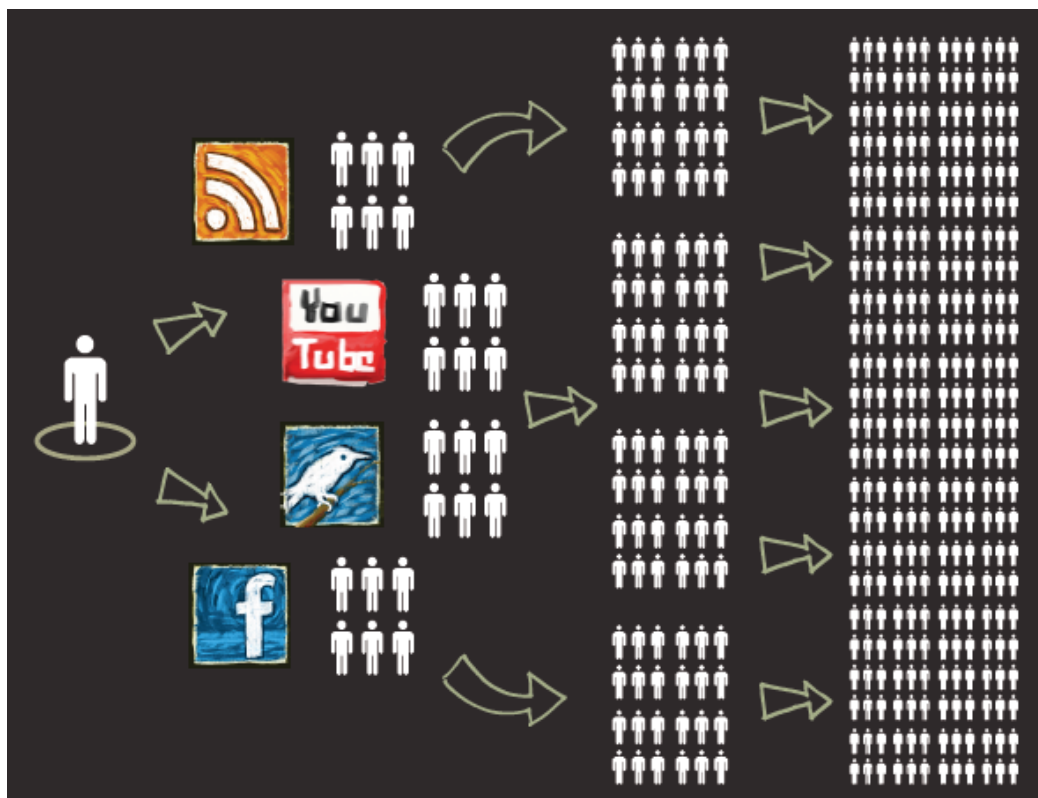


Figure 2-9: The effect of word of mouth/mouse (Farrell, 2013)

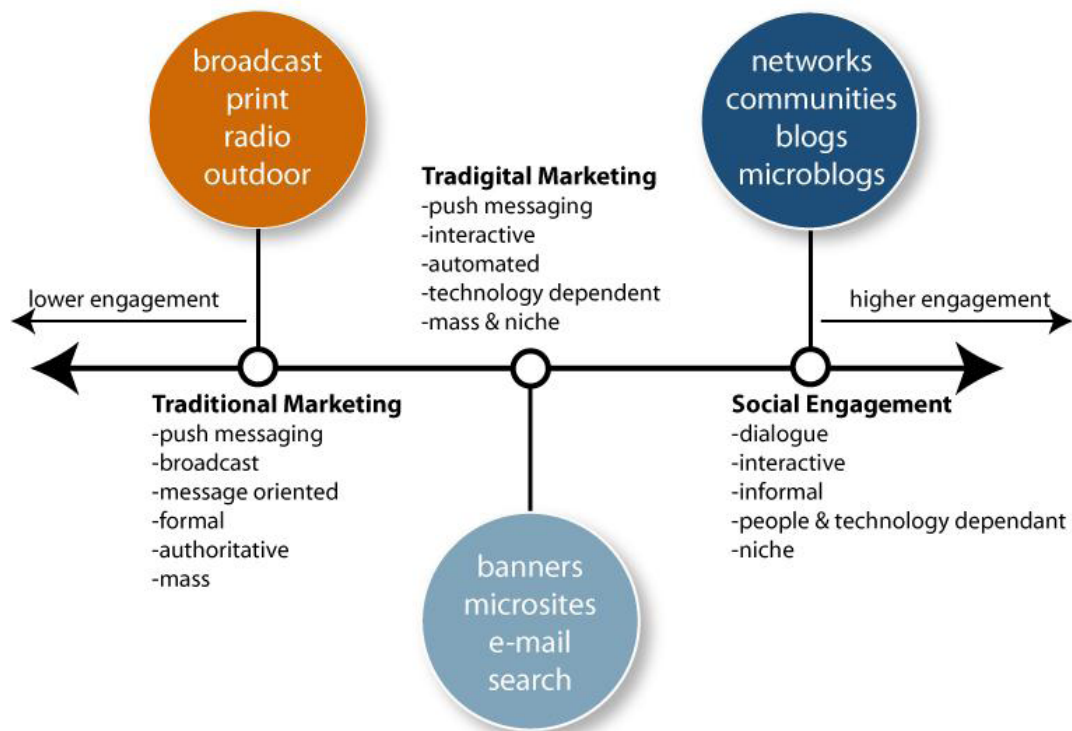


Figure 2-10: New trend - communication style (Farrell, 2013)

2.2.5 Globalisation

Due to globalisation, studies in America have a direct bearing on South Africa, and vice versa. It is therefore important for marketers to understand the market place beyond geographical boundaries. Unisa is competing with distance learning institutions over the world, the strong emerging online educational programs, offered wholly or blended, therefore the website must be designed and maintained in such a way that it will satisfy the information needs of the target markets.

Today's increasingly interconnected world requires that organisations take customer relationships to a different level. Often organisations' website do not live up to the expectations of customers; once the first step into the website is passed, either through a search engine, word-of-mouth, URL or other ways, then the website must have all the necessary features enough to satisfy the need that brought the customer to the 'virtual' shop or office front.

In 2009, the landscape of European higher education was inevitably diverse with around 4,000 institutions involved (Alexis, 2009). This number excludes the exposure to the international competition, created by the internet technology which makes academic degrees and quality standards more comparable and compatible.

A website is a key tool in digital marketing and is used to communicate brand, product and service information as well as sell some products. Ashley-Roberts (2012) asserts that online marketing is now arguably the most far reaching and dynamic form of communication, most targeted and measureable. Digital marketing is progressive, driven by people and technology, constantly enduring. Ashley-Roberts (2012/13) shares a continual loop of digital marketing principles, which are; be clear, be measurable, and be found, as illustrated in Figure 4:



Figure 2-11: the three principles of digital marketing (Ashley-Roberts, 2013)

The principles revolve around the most important element of any business – the target audience.

The principle of **'be found'** is all about reaching your target audience, being prepared to engage them, be found in the rooms they open, ranking high in major search engines. Organisations that employ the 'be found' principle can reap many benefits as it uses all of the digital marketing communication channels to reach one's audience.

Table 2-1: Be found disciplines and communication tools (Ashley-Roberts, 2013)

Disciplines	Communication Tools
Marketing Planning	Website
Search Engine Marketing	Social Media
Social Media Optimisation	Blogs & Forums
Advertising	Radio
Web design/optimisation	TV
eBillboards	
Mobile Devices	

The principle of '**be clear**' thrives on the 'be found' principle. Once you have been found by your target market, remember that consumers are empowered to quickly make up their mind about your brand and products. They need to immediately recognize what the value is as they will move on if they cannot see the benefits straight away.

Once an organisation has been found and delivered a clear message, it must ensure that it sticks in its audience's mind for the right reasons. According to Ashley-Roberts (2012/13), the main purpose for being memorable is for repeat business and to '**be memorable**' until the customer is ready to buy.

The design of marketing strategies, including the organisation's website should be excellent, be able to deliver on its promise, be consistent, and create an emotional connection with the customer.

2.2.6 Website design

There are many types of online marketing practices; and online marketing strategies are, without a doubt, more and more popular and are greatly used all over the world, (Vieraşu,2012). The most important step in creating an online presence is that an organization develops a presentation site or page.

Marketers need to design a website to market. A website should focus on the navigation system, look and feel, providing web surfers most information, and the website should also stand out from the millions of other websites, (Wei-naim, 2007).

The underlying goals for creating an effective website are similar to those for creating an effective office, namely to provide the conditions and environment that minimize student dissatisfaction and maximize student satisfaction by allowing them to focus on and achieve high task performance (Maurer and Liu, 2007).

The web-pages are primarily intended to be sources of information for prospective international students. Leyland (2010) stated that the main web-page is of central importance to the marketing strategy and the identity construction of the university and international student – thus it is worthy of critical examination. The web-page must offer the prospective international student reasons why he/she should choose to study through your university.

Internet marketing strategies are designed to attract more people to the organization's website, increase customers for the business, and enhance branding of the company and products. There are various strategies that companies employ to conduct business online. For example: web promotion is an effective web design and development strategy, with search engines employing search optimization techniques, email marketing, affiliate, reseller, and associate programs, blogging, social media, and many other strategies.

Organizations should build on website designs that ensure essential functionality, increase users' satisfaction, and motivate their return to a website. Wei-nian (2007) advises firms to design their website to market, to inform, to communicate and to engage.

It may seem that websites work well for retail markets, but the services organisations are also thriving on the web, selling education on the web is even more challenging. It requires an innovative and creative approach.

Analysts agree that the most suitable products for e-commerce are those high-circulated products such as books, newspapers, software information, audio and video products such as DVD, CD and VCD, air ticket reservations, and related services, etc. (Wei-naim, 2007).

For educational products and services, marketers need to be more creative and innovative in how they promote their programs and the brand online. Online marketing is also based on the 4-Ps – Place, Products, Price and Promotion, and the promotion strategy works well on a well-designed website.

The point of a promotion strategy is to take advantage of online features to realise the communication between the business and customers. An organisation can take advantage of this feature by also promoting and improving its public image, a public relations strategy combined with promotion.

Many authors suggest basic principles in designing a website, including the following:

- Design a good website and promote the site,
- The website structure must be well-designed (simple, convenient to navigate, and easy to browse),
- The website must be maintained.

Designing a website is a long-term job, which does not end up at the setting up of the website, but involves maintaining the website, updating the product/service information, fixing broken links, images, and keeping it interactive.

Even with all these available principles, organisations still spend lots of money in implementing horribly designed websites. Many organisations fail because there is a lack of internal communication between the key stakeholders; focus on technology and not on the user or organisations following the crowd without evaluating their objectives and reasons for a website.

2.2.6.1 User-centred design (UCD) models

User-centred design (UCD) models can be used in developing effective digital marketing communications, because they include continuous and early focus on customer's goals and tasks.

UCD emerged from researchers and practitioners of human-computer interaction (HCI), which is an interdisciplinary field of made up of research from numerous fields including psychology, cognitive science, engineering and information systems.

HCI researchers and practitioners are focused on creating more usable systems by ensuring that technology matches people's needs and supports the tasks that people would like to perform. For instance:

- Search terms according to career or study of choice
- Results linking directly to the relevant pages
- Avoid subjecting the user to travel through pages before they can reach the relevant destination
- Provide a clear and easy navigation system
- Provide printable versions of web pages that can also be easily saved on the user's computer for later viewing.

A customer interface refers to the screen-to-customer interface, which includes the look and feel, content, transaction capability and community building aspects (Singh, 2003). According to Rayport and Jaworski (2002), there are seven design elements of the customer interface, namely context, content, community, customization, communication, connection and commerce. Using these seven design elements as a basis for evaluation, a university can ascertain whether its website has an effective interface. Many studies suggest that user-centred design approaches can assist organisations to design website interfaces that will give solutions to the user's needs and facilitate effective task performance and completion (Gulliksen *et al.*, 2003; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2002; Damodaran, 1996).

2.2.6.2 Web Usability

Usability is the key and appears in many research works related to web design, (Farmer & Gruba, 2008; Vrontis, *et al.*, 2007; McCracken & Wolf, 2004; Wind & Mahajan, 2002).

Redesigning websites may often have a negative impact on the customers' perception of the organisation. Changing the homepage may also not be effective as the users often spend more time interacting with the content or products information than on the homepage. Many organisations tend to change the look and feel of the homepage, leaving the rest of the pages static and unchanged. Research and website evaluation must first be done in order to determine the areas of your website that need improvement, and one can then develop a strategy to effect the changes.

Apart from employing various strategies to generate and direct traffic to your site, an organisation's website must be able to live up to the expectation of the visitors.

Usability is an approach to product development that incorporates direct user feedback throughout the development cycle in order to reduce costs and create products and tools that meet user needs. There are many definitions of usability from books by usability professionals.

Bevan (1991) defines usability as the ease of use and acceptability of a product for a particular class of users carrying out specific tasks in a specific environment.

Usability is the ease of use of a human-made object. The object of use can be a software application, website, book, tool, machine, process, or anything a human interacts with. A usability study may be conducted as a primary job function by a usability analyst or as a secondary job function by designers, technical writers, marketing personnel, and others.

In human-computer interaction and computer science, usability studies the elegance and clarity with which the interaction with a computer program or a web

site (web usability) is designed. Usability differs from user satisfaction and user experience because usability also considers usefulness.

Studies indicate the need for continuous usability studies of institution's websites (Rukshan and Baravalle, 2012). These usability and other related studies help organizations to know whether or not their websites are achieving the objective for which they were designed and implemented. The quest for better and effective designs cannot be achieved without involving the users of the products and services.

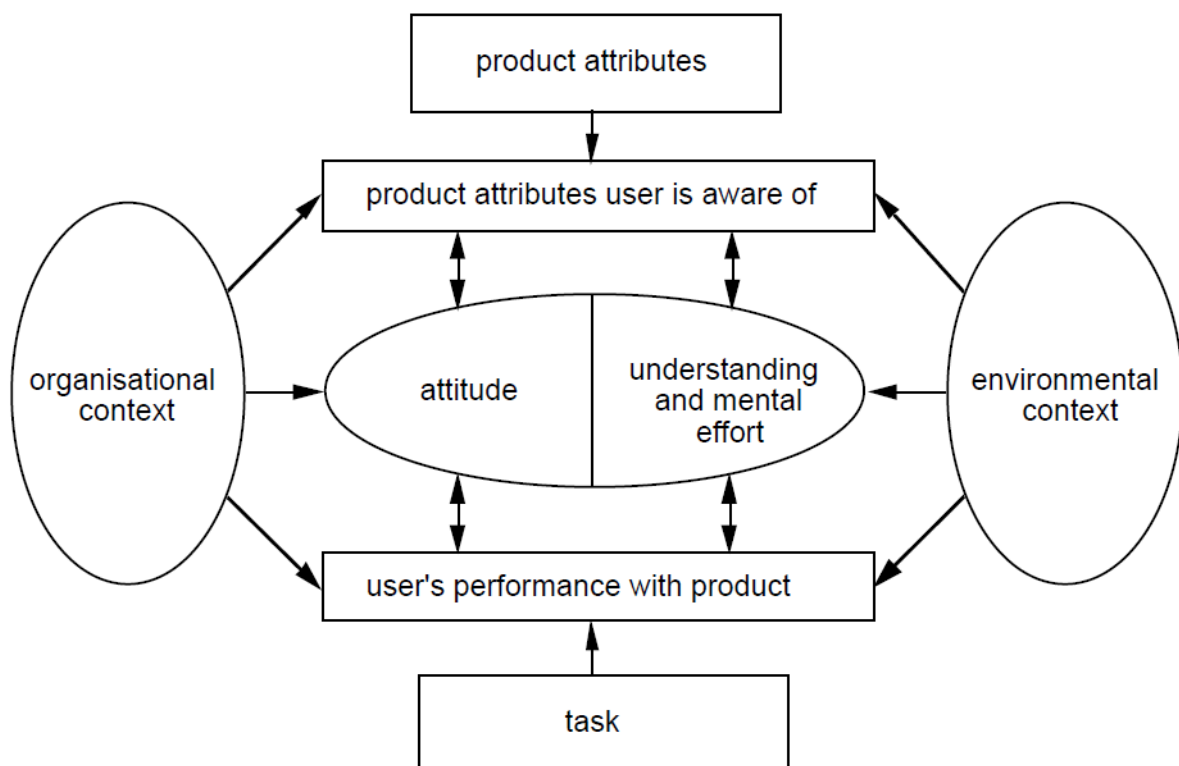


Figure 2-12: Determinants of usability (Bevan, et al. 1991)

2.2.6.3 Web accessibility

Peters and Bradbard (2007) defined web accessibility as the practice of making Web sites accessible to people who require more than just traditional Web browsers to access the Internet. For example, a screen reader translates text and graphics on the computer screen to an audio format so the visually impaired user hears the screen content via a speech synthesizer or sound card. According to Peters and

Bradbard (2007), an accessible Web site is designed to accommodate a wider set of ways users can access the site.

There are four types of disabilities (visual, auditory, cognitive, and motor) especially relevant to Web accessibility (Peters and Bradbard, 2007).

Visual disabilities include blindness as well as colour blindness and low vision;; audio disabilities such as deafness or a hearing impairment are impacted when Web sites use audio files or low quality recordings. Cognitive impairments (also called a learning disability) range from disabilities such as autism to dyslexia. Consumers with this type of disability can have difficulty reading text or lack the full ability to identify links within a Web site. Motor impairments include people with Parkinson's disease, muscular dystrophy, strokes, or conditions that can cause tremors and loss of fine muscle control. Consumers with this type of disability often have difficulty using their hands to navigate Websites.

There are a variety of assistive technologies to access the Web. Peters and Bradbard's (2007) study highlighted the potential for Web accessibility as an effective corporate social responsibility marketing strategy. Designing a Web site with accessibility not only serves people with disabilities, but also results in a wider set of benefits for marketers.

2.2.7 Relationship marketing

Li (2011) reported that many writings about online marketing and internet business received much attention between 1994 and 2010, but the trend has since changed; the focus is now on relationship marketing.

The primary objective of relationship marketing is to increase the lifetime value of a customer and to develop long term relationships with stakeholders (Lehtinen and Mäkinen, 2012). They emphasized the importance of a consumer centric focus to marketing practices and the fact that long-term buyer-seller relationships are critical for firm longevity.

Morgan and Hunt (1994) propose that relationship marketing refers to marketing activities aiming at establishing and maintaining “relational exchanges”. Also, Gronroos (2004) defines relationship marketing as a continuous process focusing in three communication elements: interaction, dialogue and value. Within a web site’s online environment “communication” could be translated to information exchange, direct two-way communication and customised interactive transactions. The elements of these marketing relationship concepts are defined in Table 2-2.

Table 2.2: Definition of relationship concepts (Patsioura et al. 2011)

Relationship Marketing Components	
Factor	Definition
Direct communication	Website’s capability to provide tools that enable direct communication between consumers and the organisation
Feedback	Website’s capability to gather information regarding consumers’ requirements, preferences, attitudes towards the brand
Customer Support	Website’s capability to provide services in order to facilitate visit and support pre-sale and after-sale consumers’ activities

- **Communication:** communication remains the primary integrative element in establishing and managing relationships with consumers both in traditional and internet marketing.
- **Feedback:** gathering consumer feedback is a critical communication activity in advertising.
- **Customer service:** Features like search facilities, product comparison functions, FAQ are often included in brand advertising web sites to enhance customer satisfaction.

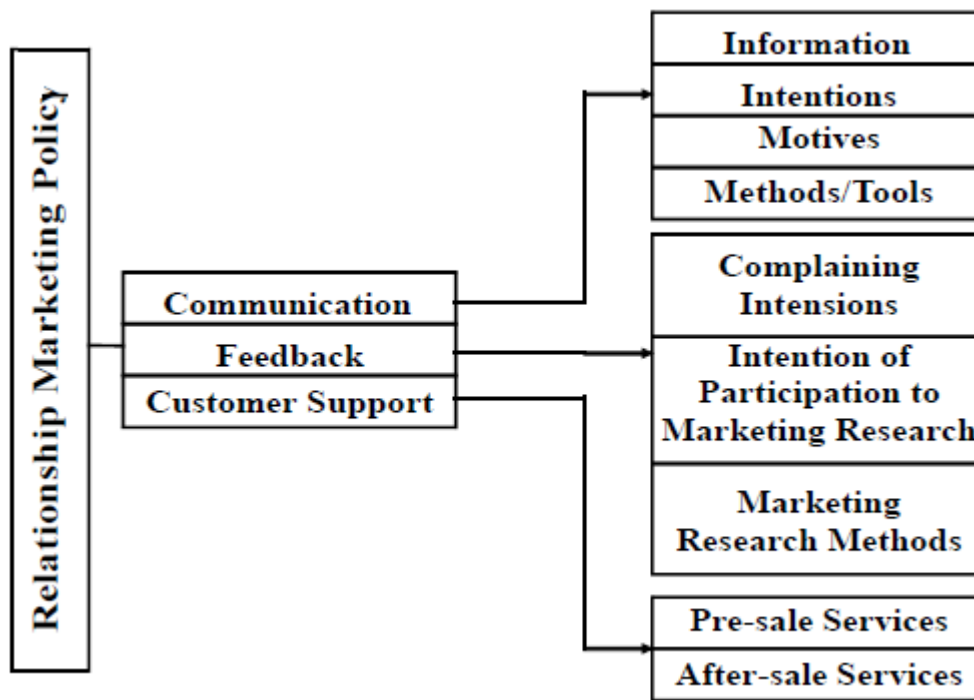


Figure 2-13: Analysis of Relationship Marketing Components (Patsioura et al. 2011)

Laczniak and Murphy (2012) hold that marketers are relative latecomers to the stakeholder perspective. According to Freeman’s (1984: 46) seminal definition, stakeholders consist of “...any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization’s objectives.” The authors state that marketers have an understandable disposition to examine the business environment through a customized lens—that is, the effects of their value propositions on customers and how that formulation affects the financial position of the firm, (Laczniak and Murphy, 2012).

According to Kotler *et al.* (1998), building strong customer relationships is not just the role of the marketing department and sales force, but is also the responsibility of the total company, which includes all its functional areas, and will result in high customer loyalty.

Research shows that today’s customer is empowered and has much control on what marketing content they want to consume. The customer adapts the Web site to his or her needs. Even more advanced is an approach where the Web site is

adaptive. Using demographic data and the history of previous interactions, the Web site creates a tailored experience for the visitor.(Watson *et al.*2000).

Relationship marketing involves the dimensions of inter-relationships, consumer behaviour, segmentation, measurement, CRM, relationship-based selling and top management support. Technology must be used as a support function for the parties involved in the interrelationship triangle.

The value proposition encapsulates the relationship offering or value-add to the customer in totality. It covers all aspects of one-to-one contact, reliable performance, trust, accessibility, education, individuality, service, quality, assistance, communication, recognition and preferential treatment.

According to Grönroos (2004), the relationship marketing process framework includes an interaction process as the core, a planned communication process as the marketing communications support through distinct communications media, and a customer value process as the outcome of relationship marketing. If the interaction and planned communication processes are successfully integrated and geared towards customers' value processes, a relationship dialogue may merge.

One of the main objectives of relationship marketing is to create a higher level of customer loyalty and develop this loyalty over time. The benefits include retention of customers and staff, customer satisfaction, trust, word of mouth referrals and growth, cost reduction, cross-sales, profitability (relationship lifetime value) and enhancement of an organisation's competitive advantage.

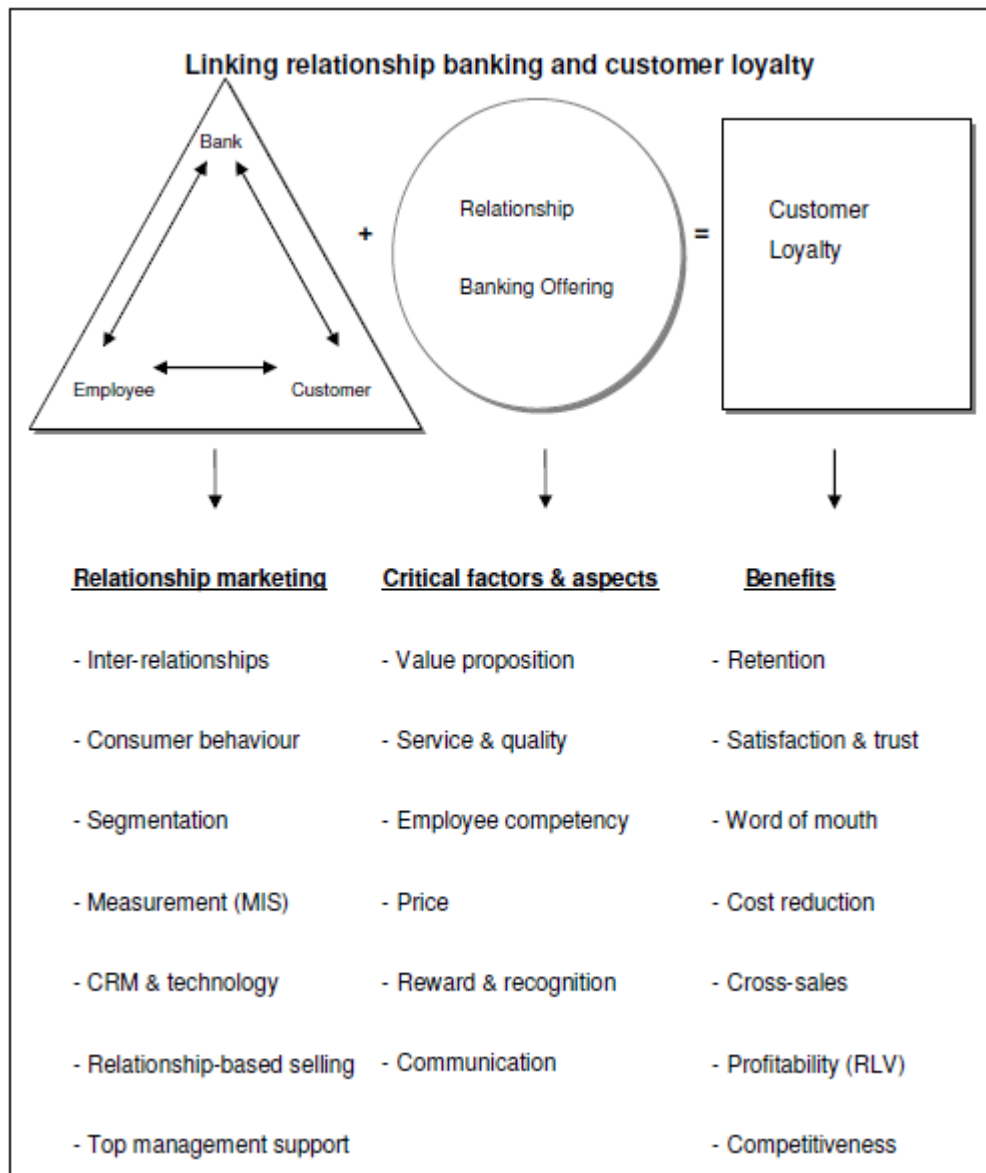


Figure 2-14: Linking relationship with customer loyalty

In online environments, brands, as in other channels, are seen as central to the relationship with customers, and integrally connected with loyalty, brand messages, values and even personality. All of this needs to be communicated through the web page (Rowley, 2008). The brand message needs to be integral to the web site design.

A marketing mix approach and a relationship marketing (management) approach are generally considered as the major approaches of marketing theory and practice; and researchers claim that a paradigm shift is occurring from mix marketing toward relationship marketing (Lehtinen and Mäkinen, 2012).

According to Daj (2012), the newly acquired knowledge has led to a profound change in the way marketing professionals conceive marketing, as a whole, and the marketing mix, in particular. Therefore, the new mind-set of contemporary marketers emphasizes the importance of co-generating value by involving customers in the design and improvement process of goods and rendered services.

2.8 Conclusion

The chapter looked at various aspect of internet marketing within and outside the higher education sector. It is clear from literature how important the design of an organisation's website is in advancing the organisation's marketing objectives. Usability is now widely recognized as critical to the success of an interactive system or product (Maguire, 2001). A formal usability study is the optimal method of gathering user input to achieve a user friendly website design or redesign. Many universities engage in website redesign all the time, therefore is it importance to check one's website performance against the *best practices in website design* (Mellone and Williams, 2010).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

According to Fouche and Delport (2002), most authors agree that in real life, human sciences research uses both qualitative and quantitative methodology – sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. Creswell (2003) is of the opinion that a mixed methods design is useful to capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. De Vos *et al.* (2011) reported that there was a ‘widespread’ acceptance of a mixed methods approach in research.

This study however followed the quantitative research methods in order to describe and explore the effectiveness of digital marketing strategies as a means of communicating with first-time students.

3.2 Research design

A research design, according to Higson-Smith and Bless (1995), is the plan of how to proceed in determining the nature of the relationship between variables. Allison (2000) defines a research design to include the planning of the research procedure as well as the procedure for data collection and analysis.

This study followed a quantitative *design*, using a questionnaire as a data collection instrument. There are four major types of quantitative research design; correlational, causal-comparative/quasi-experimental, experimental and descriptive designs. In order to investigate the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies – website, as a means of communication with first-time students, the study employed a descriptive design, which seeks to describe and explore this phenomenon.

Aliaga and Gunderson (2000) describe the quantitative research method as explaining phenomena by collecting numerical data that are analysed using mathematically based methods, in particular statistics.

Quantitative research methods differ from qualitative research methods in that the latter are subjective in nature and the former are viewed as being realist or sometimes positivist.

Quantitative research methods are used in cases where a large sample of the population of interest can be drawn to quantify and generalize the results to a bigger population.

Quantitative data often requires random sampling, so that each individual has an equal probability of being selected and the sample can be generalized to a larger population. Sometimes this type of sampling can be followed by qualitative research to explore findings further. In most cases a qualitative research method is used to recommend a final course of action.

While the researcher is aware of the limitations of the selected design, this design was chosen for its relevance to the main object of the study, and the size of the population. Care was taken to minimise the possible bias, and interpretations were monitored in order to provide an objective view of the matter under investigation, and to ensure the quality of validity and reliability.

A descriptive research design was relevant for this study to enable an effective description of the web design as a digital marketing strategy for ODL institutions, and to explore how these might shape the perceptions of first-time students.

3.2.1 The sample

The targeted population and sample was randomly selected from the Unisa student body, specifically first-year 2012/2013 students, 18 years of age and above.

According to De Poy and Gilson (2008), Druckman (2005), Grinnell and Unrau (2008) and Unrau *et al.* (2007), a probability or random sample is one in which each person in the population has the same unknown probability to be representatively

selected. This permits the researcher to compute an estimate the accuracy of the sample even before the study is done.

Stocker (1985) provides guidelines for sampling. If the size of a population is 1000, the suggested population size is 14%, thus 140 respondents. The sample size will then be deemed statistically sufficient (de Vos, 2011).

According to Grinnell and Williams (1990) in most cases a 10% sample should be enough for controlling sampling errors. The total number of first time students in the College of Education, according to the statistics from the Unisa Department of Institutional Statistics and Analysis (DISA) was 21 836.

This research used a simple random sampling method to select participants. A 10% guide was used, and a questionnaire was distributed to a sample of 2 184 students. For this size of a sample, a 10% response rate was used, that is a minimum of 218 respondents was sufficient to draw conclusions and generalisations based on Stocks' (1985) guidelines in de Vos (2011).

Due to the low response rate, a further 10% (1 967) sample was drawn, giving a total of about 4 153 students who were sent the link to the online survey. A 10% of 1967 response rate would yield about 196 responses sufficient to draw conclusions and generalisations, a total of 223 completed questionnaires were returned.

The questionnaire was first sent to the first sample of 2 186 and later to a new sample of 1 967. The responses that were used came from the second sample only.

3.2.2 Questionnaire

Babbie (2007) defines a questionnaire as a document containing questions and/or other types of items designed to solicit information appropriate for analysis. Questionnaires are used to gather information when a researcher is interested in determining the extent to which respondents hold a particular attitude or perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2001)

Surveys are sometimes difficult to manage as some respondents return incomplete questionnaires, and it takes a little convincing and motivating for the people to participate in the study, but once this challenge is managed, questionnaire designs are cost-effective and easy to work with for statistical analyses.

The questionnaire was designed in a Likert-type scale, using Vagias' (2006) scale response anchors of 'level of agreement' to the questions and/or statements made about the website, ranking from 1 to 6:

- 1 = strongly agree,
- 2 = agree,
- 3 = neutral,
- 4 = disagree,
- 5 = strongly disagree, and
- 6 = don't know.

The questionnaire was sent to the entire sample by means of email. The respondents' email addresses were obtained from the ICT department through a vigorous ethical clearance process. The emails and other relevant information were requested using the ethical clearance letter from the CEMS ethics committee and the ethics committee of the university.

The email contained the request to participate, explained benefits of the research, informed consent, and all relevant ethical information, together with the link to the website where the questionnaire was hosted. The survey was done completely online, using LimeSurvey, hosted by Unisa ICT.

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The data was collected using an online survey questionnaire, and was analysed using a software system, IBM SPSS Statistics. SPSS Statistics uses powerful analytic techniques and time-saving features to help you quickly and easily find new insights in your data, and helps researchers make more accurate predictions and achieve better outcomes for one's research.

3.2.4 Challenges of the study

The following challenges were observed:

- One of the limitations to this study was the time to gather all the necessary data within the University's stipulated time period. The ethical process proved to be a lengthy process, because of the set schedules of the research committees within the university. However, the type of research design and data collection strategies that were chosen for this study assisted in alleviating the impact of this limitation.
- Another limitation was finding a sufficient number of participants within Unisa, although this concern may be unfounded, Unisa requires that all communication with students be done through their MyLife email account; it provides the email for free to students. This email is also linked to myUnisa, whereby to join myUnisa, a student must also sign up for the MyLife email address. It is widely known within the university that many students do not prefer this email address.
 - Based on this opinion, the researcher assumed that the first time students may be keen to read all the emails coming into this email address since it is the institution's primary communication tool with them.
 - The research was also on a small scale, with the initial sample of about 2 184.

Due to the above challenges, as initially anticipated, there was a low response rate, and resampling had to be undertaken to select another sample. This partially supported one of the research's objectives – to find out how effective the marketing communications tools used by the university are.

The ICT department of the university also ran an upgrade of the LimeSurvey database a few days after the researcher's survey was launched. This required the researcher to wait and resume as soon as the upgrade was completed.

3.3 Measuring instruments

3.3.1 Internal validity of the research design

The research investigated the perceptions of students about the effectiveness of the website in achieving their information search and other related tasks on the website; therefore it was important for the researcher not to interact with the participants directly, in collecting data. The questionnaire was sent from the LimeSurvey email facility and not from the researcher's personal email account.

3.3.2 External validity of the research design

The research study focused on the CEDU first-time students who use the Unisa website to look for study information, register on the website and perform other online tasks. The results may not be generalized to the whole Unisa student body, but it is hoped that the results will induce a more comprehensive research study by the relevant departments within Unisa to include all the students of Unisa.

3.3.3 Reliability of the data gathering instrument

The research used a borrowed questionnaire which was used by researchers in an academic department at Unisa. In their paper titled "Evaluating the usability of an academic marketing department's website from a marketing student's perspective", Bothma and du Toit (2009) used this questionnaire to investigate the effectiveness, efficiency and satisfaction – that is the usability – of the website of the Department of Marketing and Retail Management (DMRM) from a marketing student's perspective. The objective of their study was to determine best practice guidelines for the development of an improved marketing department website for the University of South Africa.

The instrument was used within similar parameters of the study by Bothma and du Toit (2009), investigating the effectiveness of the website as a marketing strategy, but in this case, the focus was on the College of Education.

Bothma and du Toit (2009) sourced some of the items in the instrument from other authors (Bothma and du Toit, 2012; Mustafa & Al-Zoua'bi, 2008), who were studying the usability of an academic department's website.

The data gathering instrument for this research proved to be reliable and valid for this type of study.

3.3.4 Validity of the data gathering instrument

As mentioned in the previous section, the instrument had been used by various authors to measure the effectiveness of a website in an academic environment from the students' perspective. The instrument can therefore be trusted to be valid for this research project. The questionnaire was slightly adapted for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire is attached as Annexure A.

3.4 Data analysis

Levine 1996) defines data analysis as a body of methods that help to describe facts, detect patterns, develop explanations, and test hypotheses. It is used in all of the sciences, in business, in administration, and in policy.

Data analysis is an activity that permeates all stages of a study. According to Schneider (2005), concern with analysis should (1) begin during the design of a study, (2) continue as detailed plans are made to collect data in different forms, (3) become the focus of attention after data are collected, and (4) be completed only during the report writing and reviewing stages.

After the data were collected, the researcher used the services of a qualified statistician who assisted in the analysis of the data, using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Microsoft Excel was also employed in analyzing the data.

3.5 Ethical considerations

When conducting research, care must be taken about the ethical implications and the treatment of participants. The following ethical considerations were adhered to in this study:

- Permission to use Unisa students was requested and obtained from the CEDU management, then CEMS (Appendix D) and SENRIC (Appendix E) ethics approval/clearance.
- Once permission was granted by all relevant bodies within the university, the permission letter was sent to the ICT department, which then gave the researcher the required email addresses of students in the College of Education.

The ICT department extracted only the details of students who were 18 years and older; and, who registered for the first time in the year 2012/2013.

3.5.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

Once the researcher received the email addresses of the first year students within the College of Education, the next step was to invite the students to participate in the study. An email was sent to students informing them about this study so that they could decide whether or not to participate in the study. The email was clear and no force or form of manipulation, such as payment, was used.

Even though informed consent may involve signing a written consent form, which forms the basis of the person's willingness to participate in a study, this study was conducted online and anonymously in which case the signing was not necessary.

However, a letter of consent was attached to the email, together with the link to the online survey, and the research process was clearly explained. Even though withdrawal would have had a bad impact on the study, participants were also advised that they could withdraw at any time during the process if they wished to do so, without any adverse results to them. The letter of consent is attached in Appendix C.

3.5.2 Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity

Burns (2000) emphasises the importance of confidentiality of the results and findings of the study, and advises that both the researcher and the participants must have a clear understanding before the research starts.

The participants were not asked to divulge their names and other personal information in the questionnaire. The researcher intends to keep the participants' responses and whatever information shared during the study private and the results are presented in an anonymous manner in order to protect the identities of the participants.

3.6 Conclusion

High levels of data quality are achieved when information is valid for the use to which it is applied and when decision makers have confidence in and rely upon the data. Data quality is more than accuracy and reliability.

In addition to the ethical aspects discussed above, the research was continuously conducted according to the Ethics and Research Standards as set out by the Unisa Research Ethics Committee.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

The study involved a questionnaire that was administered online using Lime Survey software. The survey was run between April and June, 2013. MicroSoft Excel was used to analyse the data. The questionnaire was designed using Vagias' (2006) Likert-type scale response anchors of 'level of agreement'.

The questionnaire had five categories related to the research questions; with each category containing six questions evaluating various elements of the website:

- Questions for evaluating content, organisation and readability;
- Questions for evaluating navigation and links;
- Questions for evaluating user interface design;
- Questions for evaluating performance and effectiveness and lastly
- Questions for evaluating education information.

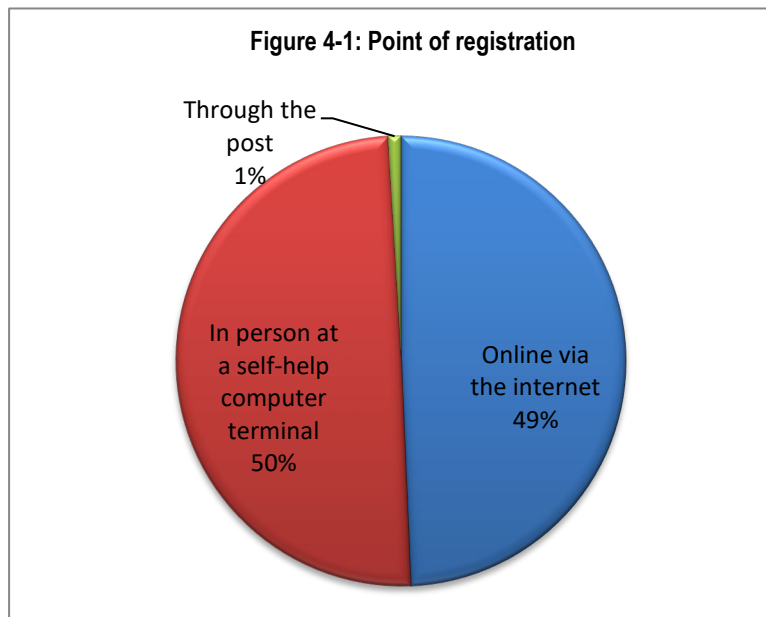
The research followed Stocks' (1985) guidelines where a sample of 2000 students was invited to participate. A total of 223 completed questionnaires were returned.

A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix A. The following sections present the summary of findings for each category, along with relevant cross-tabulations and an analysis of the responses.

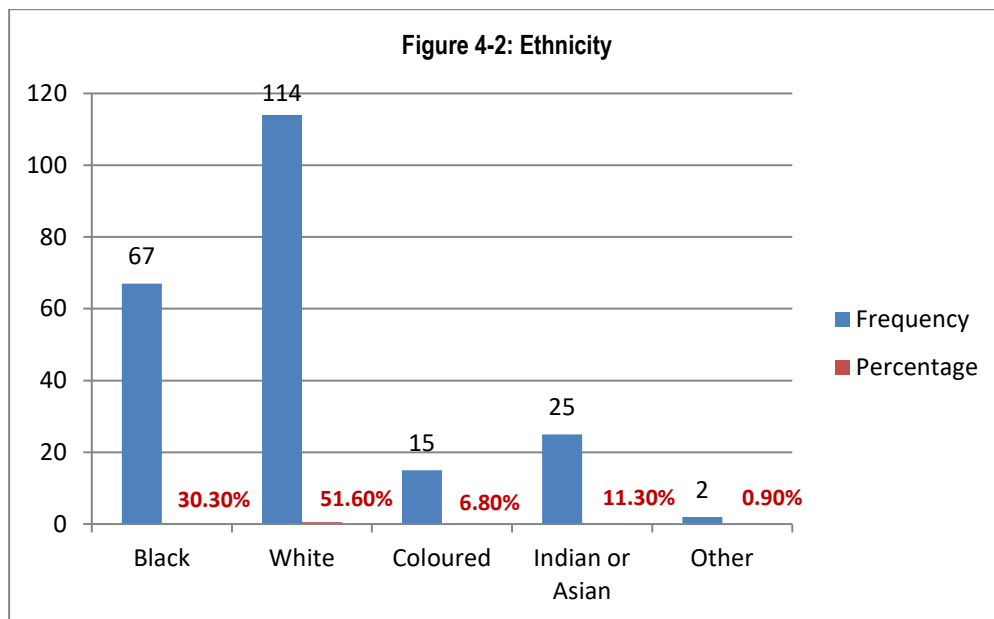
As described in the methodology chapter, a descriptive data analysis approach was chosen. Frequencies and cross-tabulations were the predominant method used to summarise the results of Likert scale questions. Data tables including all the values have been included in Appendix H for further reference.

4.2 Profiles of respondents

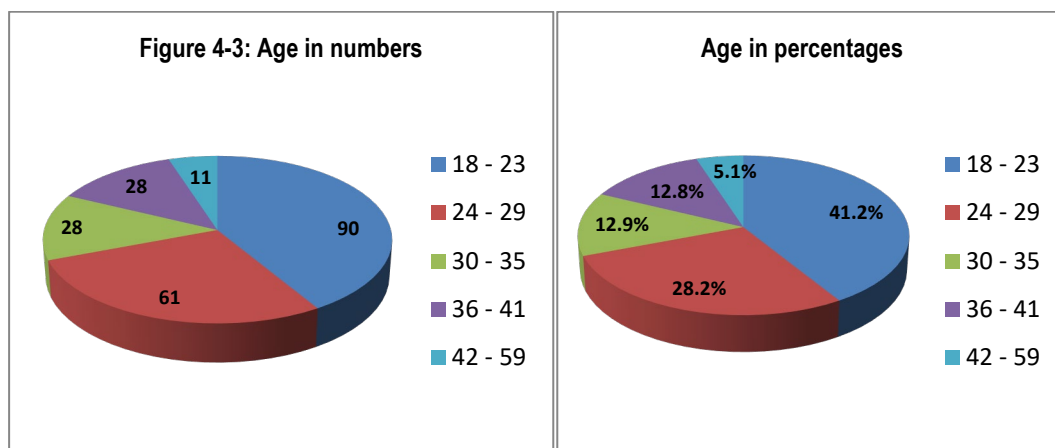
It was interesting to note that almost equal amounts of the students in the sample registered online via the internet (49.3%) and in person at the self-help facilities at the institution's campus (49.8%). Only 0.9% of the sample registered through the post (figure 4-1).



Almost 80% of the sample was females and 20% were males, and 79% came from urban areas and only 21% from rural areas. More than 50% of the sample was white, 30.3% were black, and only 18% was spread between Coloured, Indian and Asian (figure 4-2).



It was interesting to note that fairly equal numbers of students aged between 18 and 59 years (figure 4-3).



In this technologically driven era, it is important to know one's target market as this information will drive the design of products and services, suitable for the target market. Age is therefore one of the key elements in understanding a segment of the target market making enquiries and looking for information on the website.

4.3 Research results and analysis

Students' views and/or responses are presented in summary on data tables and graphs, and then in a narrative format. This will reveal consistencies and patterns

which may explain current perceptions and will later be used as a guide to derive possible recommendations. Table 4.1 is a snap shot of the overall responses to the five categories, depicting the responses in a percentage and the number of respondents per item.

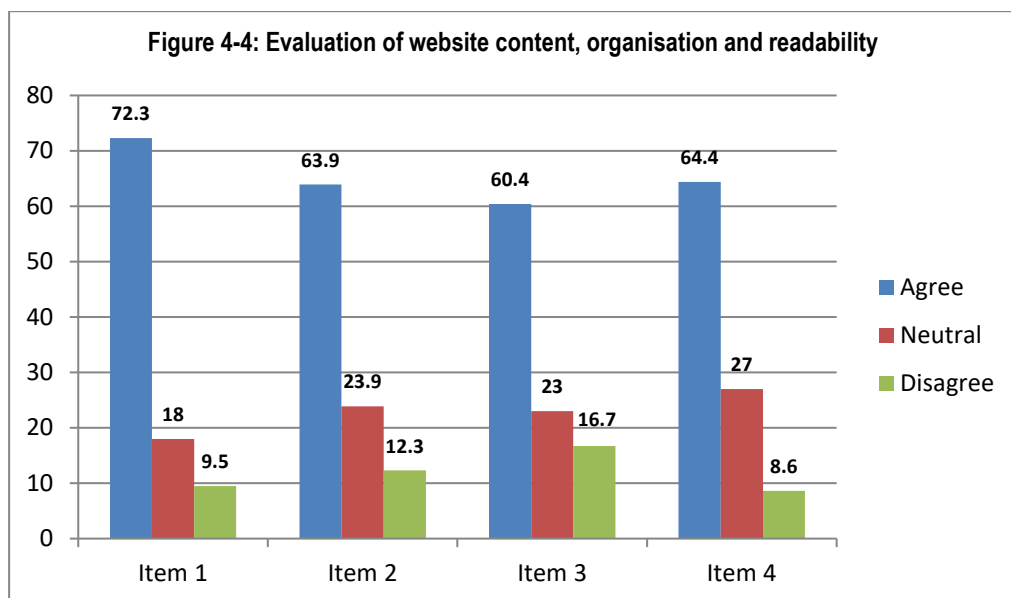
Category 1 – questions (items) evaluating content, organisation and readability

The aim of this category (Table 4.1) was to evaluate the organisation and readability of the content on the institution's website. Issues concerning language, scrolling, and display of information were asked in this category. The graphic view of this category is depicted in Figure 4.1.

Table 4.1: Category 1 – questions (items) evaluating content, organisation and readability

Items	Combined Scores					
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
1. This website contains most of the information that I'm looking for as a student.	72.3	161	18	40	9.5	21
2. This website is up to date	63.9	142	23.9	53	12.3	27
3. I can easily find what I want on this website	60.4	134	23	51	16.7	37
4. The content of this website is well organized	64.4	143	27	60	8.6	19

The questions asked in the questionnaire dealt with the overall design of this institution's website, addressing both the primary and secondary research questions as discussed in section 1.3 of this report. These included questions whether or not the website design was facilitating good decision making, and whether the interface of the website facilitated effective communication with students.



According to the results for item one in this category (Table 4.1), the readability of and organisation of content in this institution's website seemed to satisfy most of the respondents. About 72% of the sample, (161 out of 223) agreed to the statement that "the website contains most of the information that I'm looking for as a student". Sixty four per cent (64%) seemed to believe that the website was up to date, 60% agreed that they can easily find what they were looking for on this website, and another 64% said that the content of this website was well organized.

There was a general average of 12% of students in the sample who showed dissatisfaction with the general organisation and readability of content and who said that the website was not well-organised. About 17%, (37 out of 223) of the sample, said that they cannot easily find what they were looking for on the website.

There was a neutral response from 23% (53 out of 223) of the sample, who neither supported nor disputed the statements in this category, their response was neutral. Though, this was a small group when compared to the group that showed a high satisfaction, it was high when compared to those who clearly reported some level of dissatisfaction.

A general overview of the results in this category showed that students were satisfied with the standard and level at which the university was maintaining the website, in terms of organisation and readability of the content on the website.

Category 2 – questions (items) evaluating navigation and links

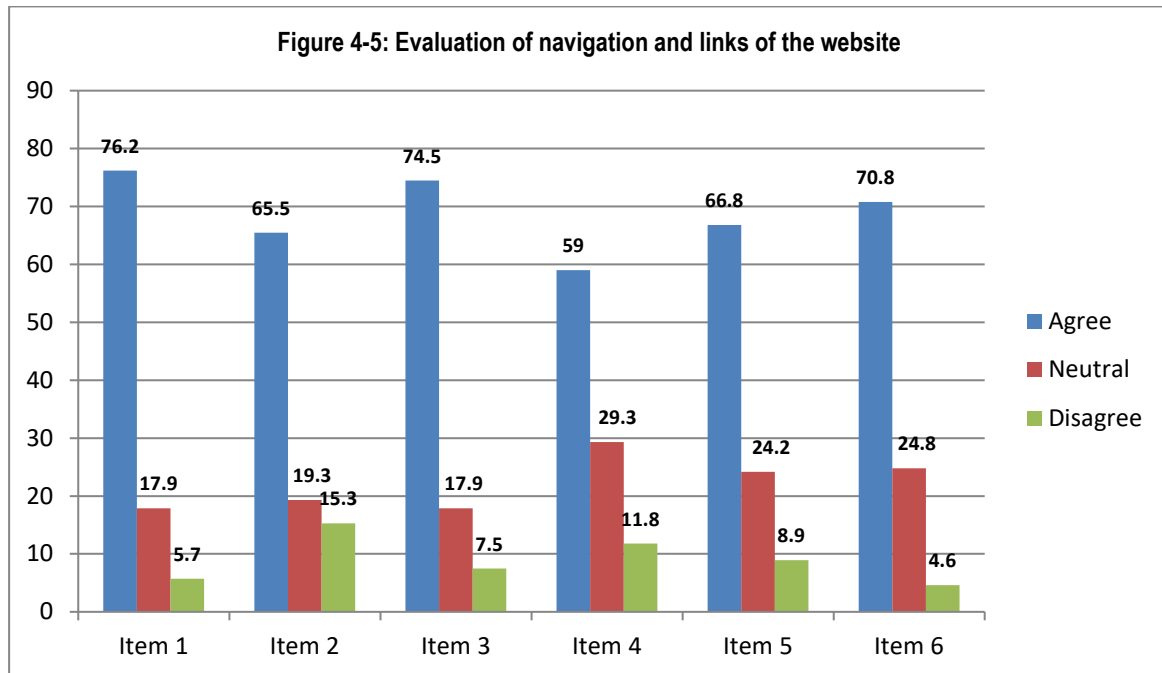
This category addressed six items, each dealing with matters relating to the evaluation of the navigation and links on the website, as indicated in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.2.

The category, like the first category, received an overall positive rating, with 59% to 76% of the sample agreeing to the statements made about the navigation system of the website. There was a low level of dissatisfaction, with 5% to 15% of students disagreeing. For an example, 5.7% of the sample disagreed that “it is easy to know where I am on this website”, compared to 76% who agreed to the statement.

Table 4.2: Category 2 – questions (items) evaluating navigation and links

Items	Combined Scores					
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
1. It is easy to know where I am on this website	76.2	170	17.9	40	5.7	13
2. This website provides useful cues and links for me to get the desired information	65.5	146	19.3	43	15.3	34
3. It is easy to move around on this website by using the links or back button of the website.	74.5	166	17.9	40	7.5	17
4. The links on this website are well maintained	59	131	29.3	65	11.8	26
5. The website does not open too many new browser windows when I am moving around	66.8	149	24.2	54	8.9	20
6. Placement of links or menus is standard throughout the website and I can easily recognize them	70.8	157	24.8	55	4.6	10

Another trend for concern was noticed in this category, as a high number of students expressed neutrality to statements about the navigation system of the website. An average of 22%, (about 50 students out of 223), chose to neither support (agree) or dispute (disagree) whether they found it easy to know where they were on the website, or whether the website provided useful cues and links for them to get the desired information, or whether links on this website are well maintained, and so on.



Although 59% of the sample agreed that the links were well-maintained, half of this (29%) neither agreed nor disagreed. However, a general overview of the results in this category also showed that students were satisfied with the standard and level at which the university was maintaining the website, in terms of the navigation system on the website. For example, when asked if it was easy to know where one is on the website, 76% agreed and supported the statement, compared to only 6% who disagreed.

Category 3 – questions (items) evaluating user interface design

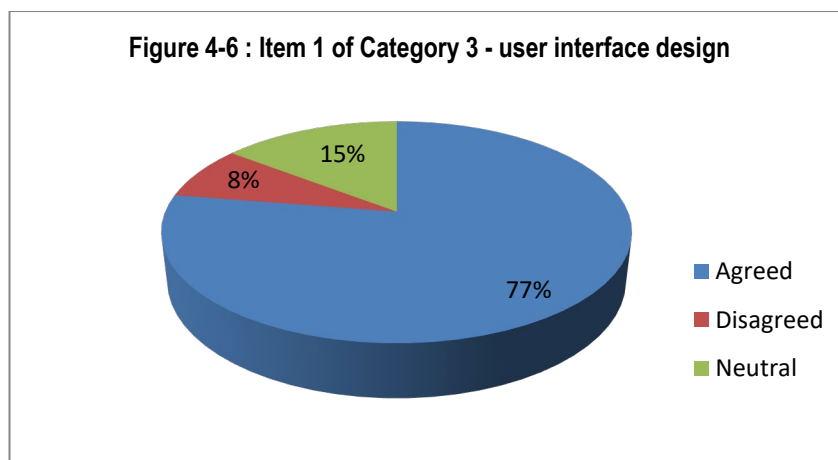
The third category of questions dealt with the evaluation of the design of the website, user interface. Six items were asked and the results are displayed in Table 4.3 and Figure 4.3.

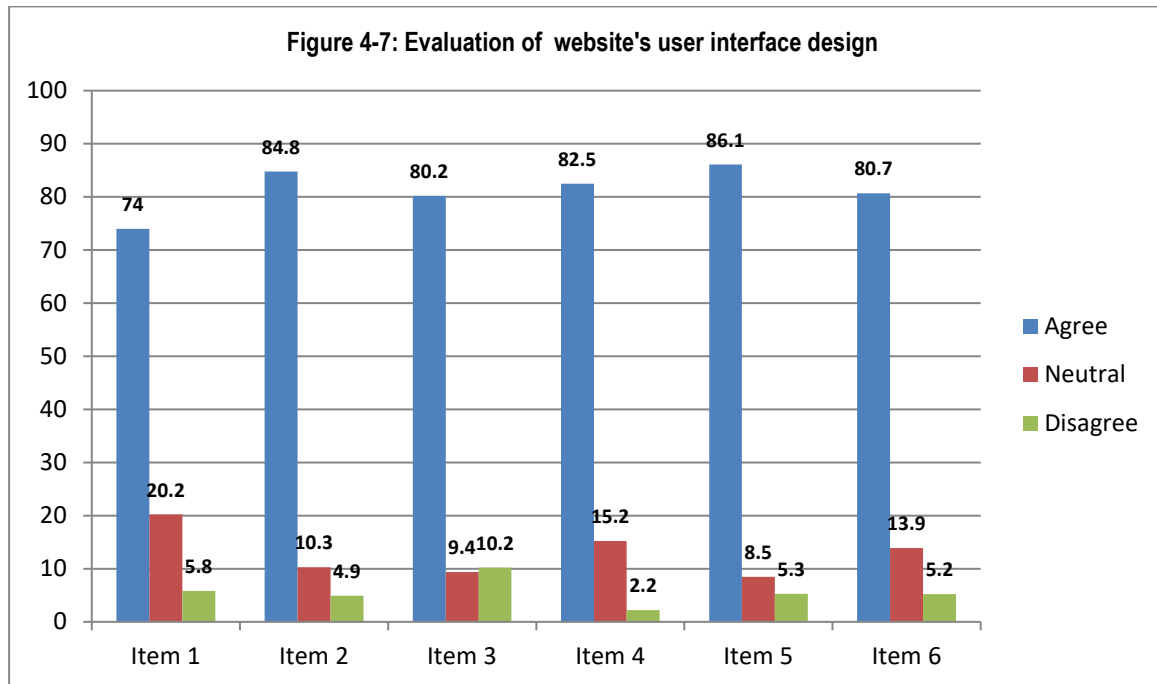
Singh (2003) defined customer interface as the screen-to-customer interface, which includes the look and feel, content, transaction capability and community building aspects. According to Raward (2001), university websites require an interface that can accommodate the different needs, scholarly disciplines and capabilities of the many and varied users.

Table 4.3: Category 3 – questions (items) evaluating user interface design

Items	Combined Scores					
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
1. This website's interface design is attractive	74	165	20.2	45	5.8	13
2. I am comfortable with the colours used on this website	84.8	189	10.3	23	4.9	13
3. This website contains no feature that irritates me, for example scrolling or blinking text and looping animations	80.2	179	9.4	21	10.2	23
4. This website has a consistent feel and look	82.5	184	15.2	34	2.2	5
5. This website does not contain too many web advertisements	86.1	192	8.5	19	5.3	12
6. The design of the website makes sense and it is easy to learn how to use it	80.7	180	13.9	31	5.2	12

The positive perceptions of the sample for this category far outway the negative perceptions expressed by other students in the sample. Figure 4.5 clearly depicts the different opinions regarding the user interface design of the website. For example, an average of 69% of the sample agreed that the website user-interface was attractive and good, whereas only 13% was neutral and 7% of the sample disagreed. Figure 4.4 compares the results in averages between the positive and negative responses.





As many as 74% agreed, compared to 5.8% who disagreed that the 'website's interface design is attractive'.

Interestingly, 84.8% agreed that they were 'comfortable with the colours used on this website', compared to only 4.9% who reported that they were not 'comfortable with the colours used on this website'.

When asked whether the 'website has a consistent feel and look', only 2.2% disagreed and an amazing 82.5% agreed.

This huge difference in opinion was prominent in this category for all the items addressed in the questionnaire.

Category 4 – questions (items) evaluating performance and effectiveness

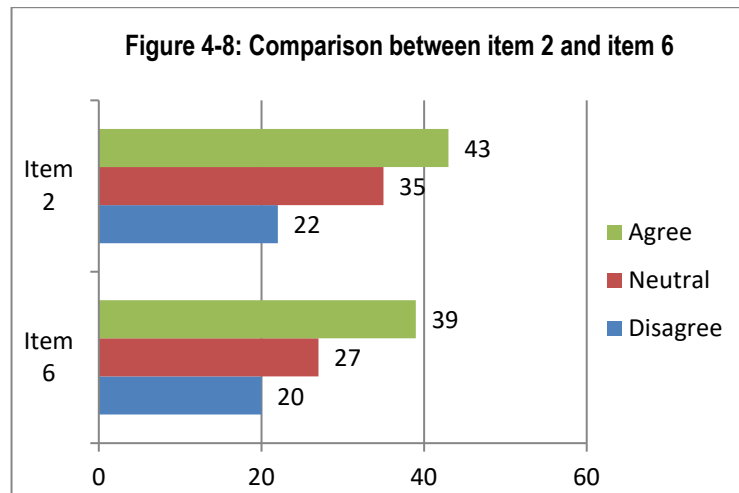
Performance and effectiveness of a tool is evaluated by how well the tool helps the user to achieve his/her objectives. For websites, issues such as availability, accessibility, response time, cues and messages and how much of the requested information a user receives, are key in evaluating the performance and

effectiveness of the website. This category addresses six questions as displayed in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Category 4 – questions (items) evaluating performance and effectiveness

Items	Combined Scores					
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
1. I need not wait too long to download a file or open a page	57.4	128	26	58	16.5	37
2. I can easily distinguish between visited and not-visited links	43.1	96	35.4	79	21.5	48
3. I can access this website most of the time	53	117	24.4	54	22.7	50
4. This website responds to my actions as expected	61.1	149	29.4	65	9.5	21
5. It is efficient to use this website	67.5	149	26.9	59	5.9	13
6. This website always provides clear and useful messages when I don't know how to proceed	38.5	116	27.1	60	20.3	45

When comparing this category with the other four categories, the number of students who reported a neutral approach to the questions asked in the category is of concern.. Item 2, was of special concern . This item addressed the question of visited and non-visited links; and only 43% (96 respondents) agreed that they were able to easily distinguish between visited and non-visited links, whereas 35% (79 respondents) were neutral and 22% (48 respondents) reported that it was not easy for them to distinguish between visited and non-visited links. Figure 4.6 displays the specific comparison or responses for item 2 and item 6.

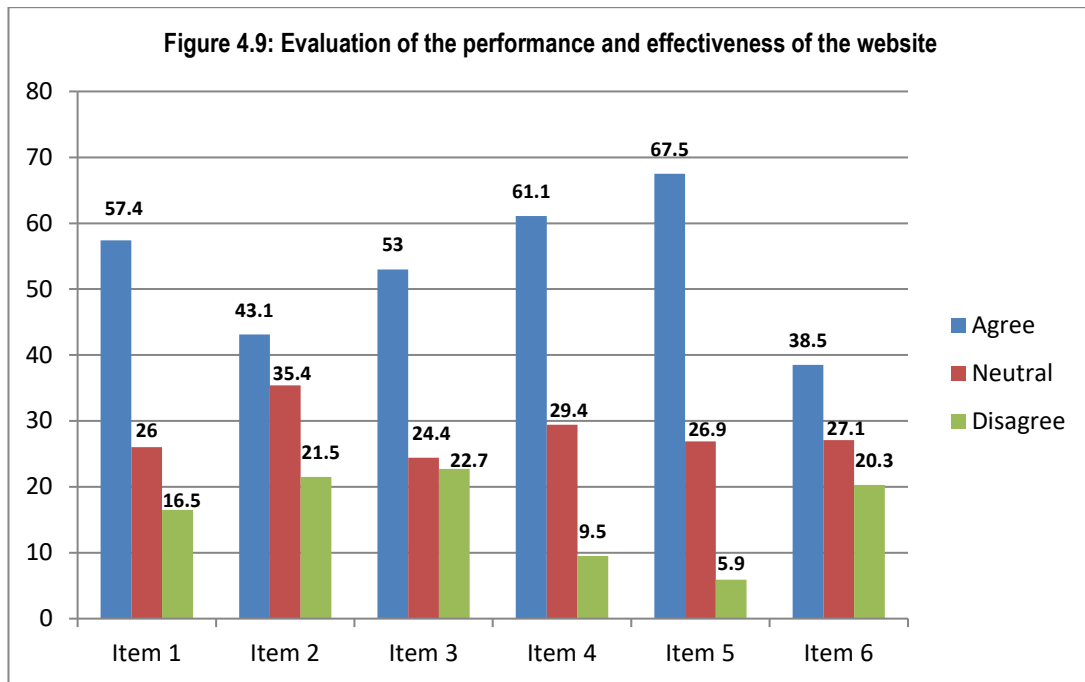


Item 2 addressed the question of whether students find it easy to distinguish between visited and not-visited links, and item 6 addressed the question of whether or not the website always provides clear and useful messages when the student did not know how to proceed.

For item 2, as already mentioned, 22% of the students reported that they did not find it easy to distinguish between visited and not-visited links. Just about 43% said they could distinguish between visited and non-visited links.

The questions of whether or not the website always provides clear and useful messages when the student did not know how to proceed yielded just below 40% of students who agreed and 20% of students who disagreed.

There was a fair spread of positive responses and a medium spread of negative responses, which were of concern, in this category. Figure 4.7 displays the results for all six items in this category.



The number of students who returned a neutral response on all items in this category is also of concern. For example, 35% were neutral to the question which addressed distinguishing between visited and not-visited links; 29% also responded neutral to a question addressing whether or not the website responded to their actions as expected.

Category 5 – questions (items) evaluating education information

Websites have become one of the major communication channels for many higher education institutions. Institutions make use of websites to market their offerings and communicate with their students. Therefore a continuous evaluation of the educational offerings' information needs to be established and well managed.

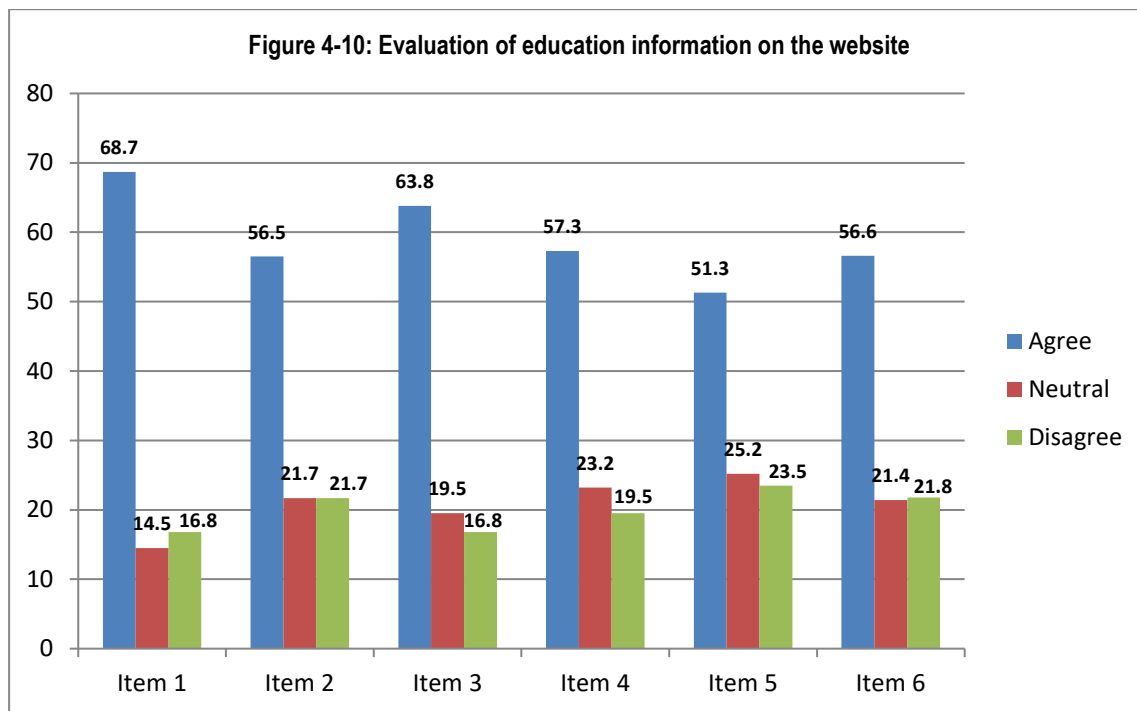
As with all the other categories, the results showed a positive perception with regard to the education information on this website as addressed in this category. For example, 64% of the respondents agreed that the website was regularly updated in terms of current personnel and course information. A further 69% of students agreed that it was easy for them to access the registration page compared to 17%

who disagreed. Table 4.5 and Figure 4.8 display the frequencies in this category.

Table 4.5: Category 5 – questions (items) evaluating education information

Items	Combined Scores					
	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
1. I can easily access the registration page	68.7	151	14.5	32	16.8	37
2. When I need to register, the website provides adequate information about what courses are offered	56.5	125	21.7	48	21.7	48
3. This website is regularly updated in terms of current personnel and course information.	63.8	141	19.5	43	16.8	37
4. I can easily contact my lecturers because this website provides information about their office location, hours and e-mail addresses	57.3	126	23.2	51	19.5	43
5. This website sometimes hangs or times out during the registration process for students	51.3	112	25.2	55	23.5	51
6. This website tells me whom I can contact for more information about studying at Unisa	56.6	125	21.4	47	21.8	48

Item 5 in this category, which addressed the question of whether or not the ‘website sometimes hangs or times out during the registration process for students’, 112 out of 223, almost half of the sample (51%) agreed, and only 24% disagreed. When compared with a similar question in category 4 (item 1), 57% of the students agreed that they did not ‘need to wait too long to download a file or open a page,’ with only 17% disagreeing.



Sixty-three per cent of the respondents indicated that the ‘website was regularly updated in terms of current personnel and course information’, as indicated in Figure 4.8. This correlates with the 64% that agreed that the website was up to date in item 1 of category1.

4.4 Conclusion

The results presented in this report were based on the responses of 223 students. Due to a low response rate, the questionnaire was first sent to the first sample of 2186 and later to a new sample of 1 967. The responses that were used came from the second sample only. The following chapter discusses the results, conclusions and makes recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the concept of website design as an effective internet marketing strategy for first-time students in an open and distance learning institution. The results were presented in the previous chapter, and the outcome is fully discussed in this chapter. The outcomes are discussed relative to the research problems presented in the study with reference to other relevant studies as covered in the theoretical foundation and literature review in Chapter 2. The chapter further discusses the recommendations for possible further research, points out limitations and closes with a conclusion.

5.2 Discussions

In order to fully explore the primary research question and the secondary research questions, an online survey was administered. The questions were designed to fit into four categories, as discussed in chapter 4.

The study found that first-time students in the college of education at an ODL institution are generally satisfied with the design and functionality of this institution's website. The students, who represented the research sample in this study, clearly agreed about the importance of keeping a university website updated and performing optimally at all times.

University websites require an interface that can accommodate the different needs, scholarly disciplines and capabilities of the many and varied users, (Raward, 2001). A high percentage of students in the sample, agreed that the user interface design of the institution's website is attractive, consistent, and easy to use.

Creating and maintaining a dynamic, useful website involves many considerations. In its overall structure, the website needs to be accessible, professional, and appealing to the target audience. It needs to meet the needs of its users. It should

also load quickly. The results in this study showed that most students in the sample agreed that this institution's website is up to date, education and other information is updated, the navigation system is well designed and the user interface is attractive. However, of concern was the high response rate of students who did not agree or disagree (neutral) to various statements about the institution's website design and performance and education information.

5.3 Recommendations

The effectiveness and usability of a website as a marketing strategy lies in the successful interaction of the students (and other users) with the website and this can only be accurately measured by assessing user performance, satisfaction, and acceptability (Bevan, Kirakowski, and Maissel, 1991). The number of students who responded 'neutral' to some key questions, is of concern and suggests a need for a further study. These students reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed to various statements concerning the evaluation of the navigation, performance and effectiveness of the website, and evaluation of the quality of education information on the website.

This study found that there is considerable variation in the students' perception of the website's navigation and link functionality, overall performance and the quality of education information. Thus, website developers in this regard may need to engage students to study and define the level of this perception further, to improve on those specific areas of their website design. As (Bevan, *et al.* 1991; Rukshan and Baravalle, 2012) noted, involving users in the design or improvement and/or redesign of a system will help institutions to make a positive impact on their target audiences.

The perceptions of students may be manipulated by the overall design of the website interface in institutions and vice versa, for example how effective the website is in helping them achieving their tasks. In turn, their perceptions can inform the continuous improvement of the design of the website. The research conducted for this study corroborated these suggestions. Additional studies could address several issues that emerged in this study.

The university's free email system may also need to be looked into. There is a university-wide perception that, for various reasons, students may prefer to use their personal email addresses instead of the email address provided for free by the university. Though not founded on facts, this perception was partially confirmed in this study when the response rate of the first sample was low, even after a reminder was sent to the sample. A second sample had to be drawn in order to reach a sufficient response rate for this research.

5.4 Limitations

One of the limitations of this research study was the constitution of the sample. Firstly, due to the scale of this study, the population for the sample of students was limited to a specific college in the university; and not all of the university's registered students were included. Secondly, the use of the university's student free email addresses for the purpose of communication, may have contributed to the low rate of responses in the first sample, even after a reminder was sent. Therefore, the results of this research study cannot be generalised to other student populations in other colleges in the university, and/or to students in other universities.

5.5 Conclusion

The general theoretical literature on this subject and specifically in the context of marketing educational programs online is well documented, yet with much emphasis on international universities, therefore raising a need to focus studies within the context of South Africa.

The main purpose of a university website is to provide information to current and potential clients and to promote and market the organization (Bauer, <http://www.martinbauer.com/Articles>), which means university website is primarily a means of communication, first to inform and second to promote. This study provided evidence that in order for university to effectively market itself using their

website, the university's relevant bodies need to engage in continuous improvement of the website.

One of the most effective ways of evaluating one's website is to involve those users for whom the website is designed for, in this case, firstly students, and other relevant stakeholders. The results clearly indicated a need for the university to conduct further research that may include a wider population.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions in the relevant block or write down your answer in the space provided.

Section A: Background information

This section of the questionnaire refers to your background or biographical information. You are not obliged to respond to the questions, but we assure you that your response will remain anonymous. Your cooperation is appreciated.

1. Are you a first-time student at Unisa?

Yes	
No	

2. Gender

Male	1
Female	2

3. Age (in complete years)

--	--

4. Ethnicity

Black	1
White	2
Coloured	3
Indian or Asian	4

6. How would you describe the area in which you live?

Urban	1
Rural	2

Section B

This section of the questionnaire explores your views and preferences, if any, with regard to the Unisa website.

Category 1: Questions for evaluating content, organisation and readability

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral/ Don't know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.1	This website contains most of my interest material and it is up to date.					
1.2	I can easily find what I want on this website.					
1.3	The content of this website is well organized.					
1.4	Reading content on this website is easy.					

1.5	I am comfortable and familiar with the language used.					
1.6	I need not scroll left and right when reading on this website.					
Category 2: Questions for evaluating navigation and links						
2.1	It is easy to know where I am on this website.					
2.2	This website provides useful cues and links for me to get the desired information.					
2.3	It is easy to move around on this website by using the links or back button of the browser.					
2.4	The links on this website are well maintained and updated.					
2.5	The website does not open too many new browser windows when I am moving around.					
2.6	Placement of links or menus is standard throughout the website and I can easily recognize them.					
Category 3: Questions for evaluating user interface design						
3.1	This website's interface design is attractive.					
3.2	I am comfortable with the colours used on this website.					
3.3	This website contains no feature that irritates me, for example scrolling or blinking text and looping animations.					
3.4	This website has a consistent feel and look.					
3.5	This website does not contain too many web advertisements.					
3.6	The design of the website makes sense and it is easy to learn how to use it.					
Category 4: Questions for evaluating performance and effectiveness						
4.1	I need not wait too long to download a file or open a page.					
4.2	I can easily distinguish between visited and not-visited links.					
4.3	I can access this website most of the time.					
4.4	This website responds to my actions as expected.					
4.5	It is convenient to use this website.					
4.6	This website always provides clear and useful messages when I don't know how to proceed.					
Category 5: Questions for evaluating education information						
5.1	I can easily access the registration page.					
5.2	When I need to register, the website provides adequate information about what courses are offered.					

5.3	This website is regularly updated in terms of current personnel and course information.					
5.4	I can easily contact my lecturers because this website provides information about their office location, hours and e-mail addresses.					
5.5	This website sometimes hangs or times out during the registration process for students.					
5.6	This website tells me whom I can contact for more information about studying at Unisa .					

Thank you for your cooperation in completing this questionnaire. Please click the send button when finished.

Regards,

Research Team

CONSENT FORM

**RESEARCH TOPIC: PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF INTERNET
MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR NEW STUDENTS IN AN ODL INSTITUTION**

Name of Researcher: Ms MP Modise

Please initial

box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

☐

3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team.

☐

4. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations.

☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Date: 30 October 2012

Research topic: Perceptions of the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for new students in an ODL institution

Dear prospective participant,

My name is Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise. I am doing research with Mr. Hennie Visser, a senior lecturer in the Graduate School of Business Leadership (SBL) towards a MBL at the University of South Africa.

We invite you to participate in a research survey in which the effectiveness of internet marketing communication strategies for ODL institutions as experienced by new students, by focusing on Unisa's website. The research study may influence the development of user-centred website designs at Unisa, making it more easy and user-friendly to use.

The study involves a questionnaire that is completed online for a minimum of 15 minutes. You have been selected to participate in this study because we value your experience of using the website. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Your name will not be recorded anywhere and no one will be able to connect you to the answers you give. The information will be stored on a password protected computer for a period of 5 years for use in scientific publications resulting from the study.

I appreciate your help through your involvement in this study. There is, however, no reimbursement for participating in this study.

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University and the Senate Research and Innovation Committee. Should you be interested in the final research findings, please contact Ms Modise on modisj@unisa.ac.za. The findings will be accessible for six months, after completion of the research report in May 2013.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Mr Hennie Visser on Vissejh@unisa.ac.za or Dr Retha Visagie on Visagrg@unisa.ac.za.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.



.....
MP Modise

Appendix D: Ethics Clearance Certificate (CEMS)



Ref #: 2012/CEMS/006 (2)

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE: COLLEGE OF ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

2013-06-12

To the applicant:

Ms Mpho-Entle Puleng Modise (Student #:70499454)

School of Teacher Education

PO Box 392

Unisa

0003

012-429 6879

**Request for ethics approval of a Master in Business Leadership research project,
entitled:
Perceptions of the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for new students
in an ODL institution**

The abovementioned project has been approved by the College of Economic and Management Sciences' Research Ethics Review Committee (CRERC). You may proceed with the study provided that the research principles as outlined in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics are adhered to throughout the entire project.

This certificate is valid for two years from the date of issue. Please be advised that the committee needs to be informed should any part of the research methodology as outlined in the ethics application (2012/CEMS/006) change in any way.

The Ethics Committee wishes you all the best with this research undertaking.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. RG Visagie

Chair person: College of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee

[Ref# 2012_CEMS_006(2)]



University of South Africa
Preller Street, Muckleneuk Ridge, City of Tshwane
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www.unisa.ac.za

Appendix E: Ethics Clearance Certificate (SENRIC)



PROF L LABUSCHAGNE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
Tel: +27 12 429 6368 / 2446 Fax: +27 12 429 6960
Email: llabus@unisa.ac.za
Address: Theo van Wijk Building, 10th Floor, Office no. 50 (TvW 10-50)

14 March 2013

Ms Mpho-Entle Modise
Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies

Dear Ms Modise

PERMISSION TO DO RESEARCH INVOLVING UNISA STAFF, STUDENTS OR DATA

A study into Perceptions of the effectiveness of internet marketing strategies for new students in an ODL institution

Your application regarding permission to conduct research involving Unisa staff, students or data in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by the Unisa Senate Research and Innovation Committee (SENRIC) on 14 February 2013.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted for this study as set out in your application.

We would like to wish you well in your research undertaking.

Kind regards

PROF L LABUSCHAGNE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: RESEARCH



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Virginia Montecino

Web Design Principles Checklist

Primary audience

- needs
- interests
- technology level of audience
- computer equipment (special software requirements, available memory, speed/mhz)

Purpose for the site

Location of the site

Types of content

Information provided on the "home" page

- a "who we are" or "who I am" message
- a mission or purpose statement
- contact information *
- update notice
- copyright notice
- disclaimer (for ex: Though we try to keep the information up-to-date, some information may not be the most current. OR "This list does not constitute an endorsement of any one or more of the products.")

* If the site is for a business or organization, it is important to include an address, phone number and email contact.

If the site is a personal site, disclosing an address or phone number is not advised because of privacy issues.

Content (the key to a good site):

- should match the purpose
- should be well organized
- should be spellchecked
- should observe correct english (or the appropriate language). Some sites have information in more than one language, depending upon the possible audiences.
- should be current information
- should be appropriate for the audience

Level of Web technology to best suit the purpose:

- Minimal style - mostly text, little or no graphics (quick loading, does not require lots of memory or a high end graphic card)
- Middle of the road style - some graphics to add an element of design or style, which compliments the information, but does not detract from the main purpose (still easy to load, may be more appealing than minimalism)
- High tech style - Lots of graphics, animation, java applets, "art" text, video clips, etc. (could be suitable for an audience of tekkies with high-end equipment, but could lose the average audience)

waiting for the images to load or trying to navigate links not clearly identified as such).

Style to best suit the purpose

- professional
- scholarly
- casual
- child friendly
- teen oriented
- artistic

Page design - consistency, clarity, user friendliness:

- Include a "back to home" link
- Use a consistent template on each page
- Create a uniform color scheme (with limited color palate)
- Be sure there is sufficient contrast between background and text
- Avoid a **too large** font that **SHOUTS***
- Avoid a too small font that is hard to read*
- Place important information near the top
- Avoid long lists of links if possible.
- Categorize lists in smaller chunks and provide internal tags
- Provide a table of contents (with links to find information in a long list)
- Organize your material to too much scrolling to find content

* The user can override your fonts by setting her/his browser font size and style.

Resolution:

- Standard for screen resolution is **800** (width) **by 600** (height). If you design for a higher resolution the user may have to scroll back and forth or up and down to view your full content.

Graphics:

- .jpg image format (compressed file format for high quality images - photographs). While working on photographs, save in .tiff format, or program default, until the final quality and size is achieved, then save in .jpg. This saves the image quality.
- .gif image format (for graphics files, buttons, clip art not photographic quality). The quality does not degrade when working with .gif files.
- animated .gif files (Use sparingly. Is animation appropriate to the theme or a distraction from your main purpose?)
- flash animation (Provide a "turn off" option for flash). Too many "bells and whistles" can be overpowering. Does the flash compliment the site? Or is it there to say "See what I can do?"

[Include HEIGHT and WIDTH tags to reduce loading time for graphics. Don't resize images by just changing the size tags. This increases loading time.]

Background and text colors:

- Patterned backgrounds produce "noise" that interferes with reading the text.
- Provide sufficient contrast between background and text
- Limit your font colors - "Hot" colors (like bright pink and orange) are, in general less professional for business sites. (If the business is "hot" graphics, however, that caution would probably not apply.) Primary colors (red, blue, green) might be best suited for sites that appeal to children. Black

backgrounds can give a "hard edge" to a site or make it seem "gloomy" or counterculture.

Use of frames (out of favor):

- Hard to bookmark
- Hard to navigate
- Hard to figure out which frame you are in to print content.
- Search engines can't always index their contents.

Observe accessibility for the disabled guidelines:

- Alliance for Technology Access: [Web Accessibility](http://www.ataccess.org/rresources/webaccess.html)
<http://www.ataccess.org/rresources/webaccess.html>
- Accessibility on the Internet - Leo Valdes: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/disacc00.htm>

Try out your site on different browsers and different versions of browsers. Netscape and Internet Explorer, for example, display the same page differently.

What is protected by copyright rules on the WWW

Everything -

The unique underlying design of a Web page and its contents, including:

- links
- original text
- graphics
- audio
- video
- html and other unique markup language sequences
- List of Web sites compiled by an individual or organization and all other unique elements that make up the original nature of the material.

When creating a Web page, you CAN:

- Link to other Web sites. [However, some individuals and organizations have specific requirements when you link to their Web material. Check a site carefully to find such restrictions. It is wise to ask permission. You need to cite source, as you are required to do in a research paper, when quoting or paraphrasing material from other sources. How much you quote is limited.]

Use free graphics on your Web page. If the graphics are not advertised as "free" they should not be copied without permission.

When creating a Web page, you may be liable if you:

- Put the contents of another person's or organizations web site on your Web page
- Copy and paste information together from various Internet sources to create "your own" document. [You CAN quote or paraphrase limited amounts, if you give credit to the original source and the location of the source. This same principle applies to print sources, of course.]
- Copy and paste others' lists of resources on your own Web page
- Copy and paste logos, icons, and other graphics from other web sites to your web page unless it is clearly advertised as "free" and you follow the original source's guidelines for posting material.

Some organizations are happy to let you use their logos, with permission - it is free advertising. But they want to know who is using it. It is best to notify a source to which you want to link. The source might not approve of

all sites who want to use their logo.

Protect your privacy and reputation online:

- Don't disclose private information about yourself or others.
- Don't give out home phone numbers or home addresses.
- What you link to helps define who you are and what your organization represents.
- Avoid exaggerated claims if promoting a product or organization.
- Cite sources of information.
- Observe copyright rules.
- Use original graphics or free graphics or clipart.



Appendix G: ICT Notification: LimeSurvey Upgrade

Sent: 11 April 2013 08:48 PM

Subject: ICT Notification: LimeSurvey Upgrade

Dear Colleagues

Please note that ICT is planning the upgrade of the survey web service as per request initially from Corporate Communications and Marketing. We intend to upgrade to LimeSurvey 2.00+ and we will commission a new database platform. That means that old surveys will be archived.

The last active survey had expired on 10 April 2013. Administrators have an opportunity until 19 April 2013 to export the survey results before we archive the old site.

We request that you do not create new surveys until we have completed the upgrade. The target completion date is 19 April 2013. We will inform you upon completion. If you have any questions regarding this upgrade, please feel free to contact me.

Please note that historically we have conducted surveys under two domains - previously survey.unisa.ac.za and more recently surveys.unisa.ac.za. Please indicate your preferred domain name as we are to consolidate to only one of those by way of democratic vote.

Kind regards

Unisa ICT - Academic Systems
Directorate: Systems Integration

Appendix H: Research results

Items/Questions	Scoring																
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't Know		Missing (System error)		Total		
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	
Category 1: items evaluating content, organisation and readability																	
This website contains most of the information that I'm looking for as a student.	19.8	44	52.5	117	18	40	6.8	15	1.8	4	0.9	2	.4	1	100	223 (222)	
This website is up to date	18.9	42	45	100	23.9	53	8.6	19	1.4	3	2.3	5	.4	1	100	223 (222)	
I can easily find what I want on this website	18.5	41	41.9	93	23	51	11.7	26	4.1	9	0.9	2	.4	1	100	223 (222)	
The content of this website is well organized	21.2	47	43.2	96	27	60	5.9	13	1.8	4	0.9	2	.4	1	100	223 (222)	

Items/Questions	Scoring															
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't Know		Missing (System error)		Total	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
Category 2: items evaluating navigation and links																
It is easy to know where I am on this website	20.6	46	55.6	124	17.9	40	4	9	0.4	1	1.3	3	0	0	100	223
This website provides useful cues and links for me to get the desired information	16.6	37	48.9	109	19.3	43	11.7	26	2.7	6	0.9	2	0	0	100	223
It is easy to move around on this website by using the links or back button of the	21.1	47	53.4	119	17.9	40	4.9	11	2.2	5	0.4	1	0	0	100	223
The links on this website are well maintained	15.8	35	43.2	96	29.3	65	7.6	17	1.8	4	2.3	5	.4	1	100	223 (222)
The website does not open too many new browser windows when I am moving around	17	38	49.8	111	24.2	54	4.9	11	1.3	3	2.7	6	0	0	100	223
Placement of links or menus is standard throughout the website and I can easily recognize them	20.3	45	50.5	112	24.8	55	3.2	7	0.5	1	0.9	2	.4	1	100	223 (222)

Items/Questions	Scoring															
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't Know		Missing (System error)		Total	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
Category 3: items evaluating user interface design																
This website's interface design is attractive	23.3	52	50.7	113	20.2	45	3.6	8	1.3	3	0.9	2	0	0	100	223
I am comfortable with the colours used on this website	31.4	70	53.4	119	10.3	23	3.6	8	0.4	1	0.9	2	0	0	100	223
This website contains no feature that irritates me, for example scrolling or blinking text and looping animations	32.7	73	47.5	106	9.4	21	7.6	17	1.3	3	1.3	3	0	0	100	223
This website has a consistent feel and look	26.9	60	55.6	124	15.2	34	1.8	4	0	0	0.4	1	0	0	100	223
This website does not contain too many web advertisements	36.8	82	49.3	110	8.5	19	2.7	6	0.4	1	2.2	5	0	0	100	223
The design of the website makes sense and it is easy to learn how to use it	31.8	71	48.9	109	13.9	31	4	9	0.9	2	0.4	1	0	0	100	223

Items/Questions	Scoring															
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't Know		Missing (System error)		Total	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
Category 4: items evaluating performance and effectiveness																
I need not wait too long to download a file or open a page	17.9	40	39.5	88	26	58	11.2	25	4.9	11	0.4	1	0	0	100	223
I can easily distinguish between visited and not-visited links	10.8	24	32.3	72	35.4	79	12.1	27	3.6	8	5.8	13	0	0	100	223
I can access this website most of the time	11.8	26	40.8	91	24.4	54	16.1	36	5.9	13	0.5	1	0.9	2	100	223 (221)
This website responds to my actions as expected	13.1	29	48	106	29.4	65	7.2	16	1.8	4	0.5	1	0.9	2	100	223 (221)
It is efficient to use this website	21.3	47	46.2	102	26.7	59	4.1	9	0.9	2	0.9	2	0.9	2	100	223 (221)
This website always provides clear and useful messages when I don't know how to proceed	15.8	35	36.7	81	27.1	60	15.8	35	3.6	8	0.9	2	0.9	2	100	223 (221)

Items/Questions	Scoring															
	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		Don't Know		Missing (System error)		Total	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
Category 5: items evaluating education information																
I can easily access the registration page	22.3	49	46.4	102	14.5	32	11.8	26	2.7	6	2.3	5	1.3	3	100	223 (221)
When I need to register, the website provides adequate information about what courses are offered	17.6	36	38.9	86	21.7	48	13.6	30	4.5	10	3.6	8	0.9	2	100	223 (221)
This website is regularly updated in terms of current personnel and course information.	17.2	38	46.2	103	19.5	43	9.5	21	3.2	7	4.1	9	0.9	2	100	223 (221)
I can easily contact my lecturers because this website provides information about their office location, hours and e-mail addresses	17.3	38	40	88	22.9	51	9.4	21	9	20	0.9	2	1.3	3	100	223 (220)
This website sometimes hangs or times out during the registration process for students	22.3	49	46.4	102	14.5	32	11.8	26	2.7	6	2.3	5	2.2	5	100	223 (218)
This website tells me whom I can contact for more information about studying at Unisa	17.6	39	38.6	86	21.5	48	13.5	30	4.5	10	3.6	8	1.3	3	100	223 (220)

10 USABILITY HEURISTICS FOR USER INTERFACE DESIGN

By JAKOB NIELSEN (1995)

Topics:

- Heuristic Evaluation
- Human Computer Interaction
- Standards
- Web Usability

Summary: The 10 most general principles for interaction design. They are called "heuristics" because they are more in the nature of rules of thumb than specific usability guidelines.

Visibility of system status

The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time.

Match between system and the real world

The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order.

User control and freedom

Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted state without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo.

Consistency and standards

Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.

Error prevention

Even better than good error messages is a careful design which prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.

Recognition rather than recall

Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.

Flexibility and efficiency of use

Accelerators -- unseen by the novice user -- may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions.

Aesthetic and minimalist design

Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility.

Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors

Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.

Help and documentation

Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.