OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES – A MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Open Educational Resources (OER) have the potential to achieve huge cost savings in the education sector. However, the creation of OER also costs time as well as other resources. But once they have been set up, they can be used by students and teachers for an unlimited number of times free of charge. Nevertheless, it is observed that despite this huge advantage on the market OER are only establishing themselves in an extremely gradual manner. Is free of charge still too expensive? In this article we discuss OER from a marketing perspective and advocate a customer-oriented approach. Do OER actually address the needs of customers and do noticeable comparative customer benefits arise from the core attributes of open licences and being free of charge? In order to answer these questions, we will take the conventional 4P approach and view OER under the aspects of price, product, place and promotion.

Keywords: OER, marketing, customer-orientation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Open Educational Resources are considered to be an important component for the realisation of education which is of high-quality, inclusive and offers equal opportunities [1], [2]. But above all, they are a highly-promising approach in order to sustainably reduce costs in the education sector, without having to compromise in the quality of teaching [3], [4]. Despite a broad academic discussion and extensive financial support the consolidation of OER in international education systems up until now has been much less effective than originally hoped [5]. One of the most important areas of activity to address this problem is viewed in the localisation of OER, which a large number of projects are already addressing - usually in the form of repositories and research tools available online [6]. Furthermore, Ebner and Schön discuss the need for education marketing in the context of OER [7]. They recommend not limiting the budgeting of public OER projects to their creation, but rather to also allocate money in order to raise awareness about OER. Education marketing, according to Ebner and Schön, is absolutely essential in order to not only create OER – but also to make them known to as many people as possible who can use it [7, p. 2]. The application of marketing insights for OER appears logical, but marketing deals essentially with the efficient and needs-oriented creation of exchange processes [8, p. 3]. However, in our view an examination reduced to the advertisement of OER is insufficient. Marketing is not simply advertising, but rather a principle of consistent orientation to market and customer benefit [9]. In the process promotion is just one possible area of activity and alongside the traditional systematisation of marketing instruments it is also important to take into account price, product and place.

The focus on promotion also observed time and again in other contexts is based on the implicit assumption that the free learning resources available on the ‘market’ are already sufficiently appropriate in order to satisfy ‘customer needs' and perhaps even better than competing offers. It is said that all that is standing in the way of this is the insufficient awareness of the OER offers. However, there is currently a large number of teaching and learning resources available on the market to the two essential customer segments of OER, teachers and learners. This ranges from the conventional textbook to YouTube videos and interactive smartphone apps. Competition exists between these offers. It remains unclear, whether a comparative net use benefit arises from the specific attributes of OER from a customer perspective, compared with alternative offers, which ultimately lead to intention of use.
2 CUSTOMER-ORIENTATION IN OER PROJECTS

The close correlation between customer-orientation and business success is widely accepted [10] and is reflected in the concept of customer centricity [11]–[13]. Particularly in product development customer participation, which is the involvement and the close orientation to customer needs, is regarded as a key factor to product success [14]. Applied to OER projects we understand, in accordance with [9], customer-orientation as the fundamental orientation of all development activities to the needs of learners and teachers with the objective of the long-term integration of open educational resources in teaching and learning processes. Therefore, we could also speak of learner or teacher-centred product development. However, we want to consciously retain the term customer-orientation in order to emphasise the perception of these two target groups as customers. Customer-orientation requires extensive knowledge with regard to customer needs and behaviour. What is important to customers? How do they generate a benefit from the product? What are their quality expectations? What price are they willing to pay? For practical implementation in the OER context the same methods are recommended which are also used in qualitative market research. This includes, among other aspects, various interview forms, expert ratings, moderated discussions and also observed procedures. A systematic application of such techniques does not yet currently take place to our knowledge in the development of OER. Correspondingly, the customer-oriented perspective proposed here is also not yet sufficiently considered in the current discussion about the quality dimensions of OER [5], [15]. Instead a deductive approach dominates which embodies the opposite and, on the basis of pedagogic, technological and organisational considerations, attempts to derive quality criteria. This approach involves risks. This is because not every attribute, which from an academic perspective, speaks in favour of a successful learning process or is now otherwise pedagogically en vogue, is also perceived as beneficial and relevant to decision-making by the customer. Therefore, the ecologically valid identification of the characteristics which the open learning resources must possess appears important so that teachers and learners recognise benefits of use for themselves and consequently integrate OER in teaching and learning processes. In the process, the evident customer benefits of being free of charge and the extensive user rights of OER do not apply without restriction, as we will subsequently demonstrate.

3 OER AND THE 4Ps OF MARKETING

In order to successfully market a product or service, there are various instruments available in marketing management. Equally popular and recognised is the systemisation of McCarthy based on what are known as the 4 Ps: product, price, place and promotion [16]. We choose this systematisation as a point of departure and shall subsequently discuss OER under each of these four aspects.

3.1 Price

By definition OER are in the public domain or released under a free licence [1]. They are therefore free of monetary cost for all users. However, monetary charges only form one part of the perceived costs to the customer, which result from the utilisation of a service [17]. The customer incurs transaction, integration and opportunity costs from the time spent and cognitive effort required for searching and adaptation. Each minute spent on researching and adapting OER, is no longer available to teachers and learners for other activities. We can demonstrate this through an example: A lecturer who teaches at a university for 40$ an hour would be better off buying the textbook for 30$, instead of spending an hour looking for suitable OER on the internet. In addition, if we understand the selection of learning resources as a facet of behaviour, it is undoubtedly the case that it is shaped to a very considerable extent through previous learning processes. A simple explanatory model which is also used in consumer behaviour research [18] is operant conditioning [19]. If the use of a learning resource leads to subjectively satisfying learning and work outcomes, it is more likely in the future that in comparable situations this learning resource will be used again. In this way habits form over the course of time which in turn determine subsequent behaviour to a quite considerable degree. Therefore, behaviour (e.g. the selection of a learning resource) is not always based on a reflective decision. Recurrent behaviour often takes place in a routine or stereotyped manner. In this way the cognitive effort of reflective decisions is avoided [20]. Therefore, we cannot only conclude that the lack of monetary costs in the use of OER is opposed by temporal and cognitive efforts which are also from theoretical deduction difficult to calculate and consequently involve a high degree of uncertainty. At the same time the monetary cost benefit of OER disappears if the alternative and well-known teaching and learning resources are also available free of charge via public funding. This is the case for example when textbooks are made available via schools. Furthermore, costs usually do not apply when borrowing
books from public libraries. Universities often acquire campus-wide licences for specialist portals and publishers from which specialist literature can be obtained in electronic form free of charge. The freedom from monetary costs may at first glance speak in favour of OER. However, in well-equipped education systems, which are predominantly found in many western industrialised nations despite all complaints to the contrary, it does not necessarily lead to a perceptible customer benefit – neither for teachers nor learners.

In a similar manner this also applies to the second core attribute of OER, open licencing. OER can be extensively used, altered and even passed on to others. Legal restrictions do not usually exist or only apply to certain forms of use. The latter could apply to the copyright notice in Creative Commons licences or exclusive non-commercial use. On the one hand, copyright uncertainties represent perceived obstacles to the implementation of digital learning offers [21]. They can be removed for example through a model such as Extended Collective Licensing. On the other hand, many countries, particularly in Europe, permit the creation of private copies [22]. In addition, countries such as Germany still offer wider-reaching possibilities for the use of works protected by copyright for teaching purposes [23]. Therefore, in this case a customer benefit does not necessarily arise.

3.2 Product
The aim of the product policy in marketing is the coordination of the service programme to the generation of customer benefit [8]. As the entirety of open learning resources on offer are not determined by a central administrative location, but rather based on the principle of distributed production and free exchange, quality assurance plays a prominent role. It appears scarcely possible that unsuitable learning resources can be excluded from the market in this way. This could only be achieved in repositories which are maintained in a strict editorial manner. However, explicit quality criteria could support design processes by not having an evaluative, but rather a generative application. The introduction of quality assurance instruments [5] in OER projects is therefore an important approach for more customer-orientation. However, an empirical examination of its predictive validity for the prediction of acceptance behaviour is essential. Independent of this, the established quality attributes for each customer segment and user scenario will vary considerably in their importance. This must be reflected in a quality framework for OER which is still to be created. The general principle is that quality is defined by the customer, not the service provider.

3.3 Place
The development of dedicated research tools for OER is difficult due to the current demands of users for access via general search engines [24]. However, successful placement in particular is viewed as a hygiene factor in marketing [8] and for this reason must occupy a key position in the discussion about OER. Experience of marketing demonstrates an increasing convenience-orientation of the consumer [25], [26]. The term convenience defines to what extent the use of a distribution channel is perceived as convenient and simple by the customers. In particular, it is also the findings of technology acceptance research [27], [28] which call attention to the high relevance of convenience for the users of online-based services. In view of the huge popularity of search engines and their dominant guiding effect on user behaviour, an increased consideration for the placement of OER appears advisable. This is because at the same time it would also result in the potential to markedly reduce transaction costs for OER customers if the research can take place with the aid of well-known tools. For OER providers this means that the OER available online must be described textually and linked in a way that they can be indexed by search engines.

3.4 Promotion
Finally, we turn to the question raised at the beginning about whether OER project budgets should actually be maintained for the advertising of the created resources. As long as unrealised potential exists in the areas of product and place quality, it would be best to begin here. On the other hand, it must be considered which opportunity costs arise through non-usage. What is the cost to society if OER remain unused? Such costs arise for example due to teachers constantly re-developing comparable learning resources independently of each other. Also, lower or absent learning success creates costs in the education system, at the individual level, and for the economy as a whole [29], [30]. In this respect it is conceivable that a moderate use of financial resources for promotion measures can also be useful from an economic perspective. However, first of all it must be ensured that the advertised resources also actually meet customer expectations. Otherwise there is the risk of throwing good money after bad. It also requires a well thought-out promotion strategy, which is
formulated in accordance with the target group-specific customer benefits of OER. The reason for this is that simply making potential customers aware of OER appears insufficient from a marketing perspective in order to overcome learned behavioural structures and to alter customer behaviour in the long-term.

4 CONCLUSIONS

OER are without doubt a useful approach in order to reduce costs in the education sector. However, their potential only develops, if, from the customer perspective integration, transaction and opportunity costs are also reduced. If OER must first of all be gathered from different repositories, various offers compared with each other and combined in a time-consuming manner, a decision against OER can even be economically more advantageous. This applies in particular, if the commercial offers are also available free of charge through public funding. At the same time, open licence formats only constitute a customer benefit, if national limitations on copyright perceptibly run counter to the personal intentions of use. Quality is another important aspect with regard to the integration of OER in teaching and learning processes. A close orientation towards customer needs, their work and learning habits and also towards competing offers form useful points of departure in this regard. Quality frameworks and models could support design processes generatively and evaluatively if they make customer needs their point of departure. We currently view the placement of OER as a highly-promising lever in order to further intensify market penetration. Due to the huge popularity and the associated guiding effect of search engines, OER providers must seek a way into the search result lists of Google, Bing and Yahoo in a manner which is much more intense than has hitherto been the case. Repositories could be a useful addition by bringing together dispersed OER to a single point and, for example, make customer experiences with OER transparent. Similar to the customer comments on sales platforms, they could also help in the context of OER to find the offer which suits their own needs much quicker. With regard to the advertisement of OER, restraint appears appropriate at least until the offer portfolio is tailored to actual customer needs. To put it in a nutshell: You can build the best stagecoach in the world, but even with the best advertising campaign in the world, you would not sell any of them.

REFERENCES


