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Open Source for Education

The Open Source Playbook: School District Marketing Strategies for Failure...

Open Source Solutions present great opportunities for teachers and students. Open Source benefits include teaching and learning tools, measurable teacher and student progress accelerators and strategies that focus upon instructional improvement targets. But, Open Source advocates most often market "backwards," and that is the reason that, compared to the potential for "close to universal impact" in our school districts, the implementation of Open Source trails and our Open Source marketing proves a "dismal failure." Do the Math Here is the math...

The percentage of school districts that could benefit from an Open Source initiative: Let's agree on a conservative number, say 80%. (Note: of course we all know that the number is probably way over 90%, but let's accept a lower number for the sake of this illustration.)

The percentage of school districts with a functioning and vital Open Source initiative: Let's agree on an extra generous 10%. (Note: of course we know that the number is probably lower, but let's accept this higher number for the sake of easy math.)

The difference, i.e., 80% - 10% or 70% equals the market share that Open Source is missing. This is a "market gap," and demonstrates a marketing flop.

But, let's consider the numbers for the sake of the folks that think that Open Source is making headway in our schools. If we could raise the estimate of the number of schools that are benefiting from current Open Source initiatives to 20%, we would still have a market gap of 60%.

But, we can't lower the 80% estimate of school districts that would benefit from Open Source Solutions because that would be saying that many more school districts don't need Open Source Solutions. Accepting such a premise, although in the realm of logical possibilities, is a marketing "No No." Accepting such a premise is also marketing suicide. Open Source Marketing Faux Pas So, what is the marketing faux pas rampant in Open Source circles?

Open Source markets backwards by developing a product first, then setting out to find customers.

Worse, some advocates take products that were built for other industries, and try to get customers to change to fit the product. (Note: If this approach were a horse, it would not even rise to the level of a "long shot;" but, it would be shot because it is lame, with no hope of recovery.)

The correct marketing approach, and the only one that works, is to discover what customers want and deliver that solution to them with an overwhelming offer of benefits. Divining what Customers Need A second marketing faux pas is to build a product that customers "need."

How can this be bad?

The reason that building a product that customers need fails is that customers may not agree with your assessment of their needs. The only results-producing solution is to build what customers "want."

For example, an Open Source advocate believes that teachers need Open Office; instead of Microsoft Office. Or, maybe teachers need FreeMind; instead of Kidspiration; or Inspiration;. Or, maybe the Webmastering teacher needs nVu; instead of DreamWeaver;.

Let's listen in to the self-talk of teachers who hear this kind of marketing campaign.

"Hmm. Open Office has minor compatibility issues, we have Microsoft Office at home, and my significant other needs Microsoft Office for bring-home, after-hours work. Why deal with the hassle of a second program that introduces complexity into my life...especially when Microsoft sells the product to schools at one-tenth of the real price.

And, why would anyone propose Freemind; instead of Kidspiration; or Inspiration;? Don't they know that the object of the software is for students to think and for students to visualize relationships? Having to create from scratch what is built into Kidspiration; and Inspiration; wouldn't be worth the hassle, even if the FreeMind; program was just as easy to use. Then again, FreeMind; lacks all the instruction-specific templates that drive instruction and student thinking.

And, who in their right mind would teach students Webmastering with nVu;? Nobody who wants their graduates to be competitive in the job market, anyway. Any company that hires our graduates expects their new employees to know DreamWeaver; , even if the company uses a content management system. Our graduates would be laughed out of the company's waiting room, even before they reached the interview, which if their resume lacks mention of familiarity with DreamWeaver; would never produce the invitation call."

It is a "costly and fatal" marketing mistake to assume that we have a product that customers "need." What's in it for Me? Instead, marketers must build a product that customers "want."

The final Open Source marketing faux pas is that the "What's in it for me?" question goes unanswered?

What is in it for teachers who adopt Open Source Solutions?

What is in it for students who adopt Open Source Solutions?

We have to spell out these benefits as "irrefutable evidence" for our marketing to be effective.

Where is our "irrefutable evidence?" Where are our success stories? Where are our testimonials? Where are real, "in the trenches" people saying how Open Source products improved their lives, saved their marriages, got them a promotion, kept them from getting fired, made them campus heroes? Real-World Open Source Needs This means that the Open Source products must be something that teachers and students want. Something that provides tangible, countable, measurable, feel-good-about-it benefits.

An Open Source Solution cannot be just a download (or a CD full) of Open Source software.

The solution must overflow with "real-world, solve our most pressing problems with one click, today, one-of-a kind, can't get this anywhere else" customizations that make teachers' and students' jobs easier and that make the jobs of teaching and learning tremendously more effective.

The Open Source Solution must also make gathering the results of teachers' and students' improvements easy to collect, easy to display, easy to share...so that we can use those success stories in our future marketing.

Open Source advocates must become Open Source marketers instead of "techie do good. software gurus." The sooner that the focus shifts from Open Source products, to Open Source Solutions, the sooner that we quit focusing on how to convince teachers that they need Open Source solutions; the sooner that we begin to develop solutions that take Open Source Solutions to the "next level." Ground Zero Starting Point Where do we start?

First, let's pick an issue that focuses upon teachers' greatest gripes, stresses and pain.

Next, let's tailor an Open Source Solution that solves that issue in a way that does not require a lot of teacher time, effort, expertise, techie skills or commitment. Let's make sure that our product is compatible with existing solutions, interoperable, manageable and scalable. Let's also make sure that our solution contains the requisite professional development and follow-up support.

Once we have a solution that we can market, we can build a viral campaign and our product will spread world-wide in a matter of days. Measuring Marketing Success What is our "success-measures" target?

Do we want hundreds of thousands of teachers and students to clamor for and grab our product solution each week?

The answer to this question is not what we say. The answer is what others see us do.

If we focus on what teachers and students want, and deliver a solution that satisfies that want, then we mean business...and we are sailing toward safe-harbor success.

If we decide ahead of time that we know that teachers and students need our solution, and we simply repackage "off the shelf" compilations of Open Source software; then we are steaming headlong into turbulent waters, with windless sails...and our destination is a castaway desert isle.

The choice is ours.

Do we have the wherewithal and the insight to tailor our solutions for teachers' and students' wants? Or, will we "shoot ourselves in the foot" and insist that we know (better than they do) what they need?

Excuse the double entendre, but the answer to both questions seems like a "no-brainer."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Open Source at 03:00