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Online Student Profiles: Stay-at-Home Mothers and Work-at-Home Mothers

At-home mothers represent a sizable market of potential students for online programs, totalling 11.2M in the U.S. in 2004 and growing. This paper aims to provide a profile of the at-home mother as a potential online education student, in order to better understand this market and improve the online education services to it as a result. We attempt to draw out common characteristics that many in this group share. We then suggest ways that online institutions can tailor their programs to attract this group and meet their needs more effectively.

Background

Over the past couple decades in the field of marketing, terminology has emerged trying to define and better tailor services to mothers that either work at home, the work-at-home mother (WAHM), or that spend the majority of their time at home involved with the rigors of child care, stay-at-home mothers (SAHM). For the purposes of this study, we have not distinguished between these two groups and therefore collectively refer to the group as at-home mothers. While raising children is certainly a fulltime job of its own, this does tend to be a time in the lives of this group's members that the advancement of one's education is strongly considered. It can be „a time to re-tool" as one participant explained. However, traditional face-to-face education programs pose logistical challenges for a group that has an unpredictable schedule and often needs to remain in the home the majority of their day to provide adult supervision to their children. Therefore, the concept of pursuing an online degree could be very appealing to this group and that, in turn, has made this particular demographic appealing to online education programs.

Table 1. **U.S. At-Home Mother Statistics (U.S. Census Bureau)**

	Year 2004 - (Millions)	% of total women (with children <13)
Stay-at-home (not working)	10,570,308	35.2%
Work-at-home	598,729	2.0%
Total At-Home Mothers	11,169,037	37.2%

As indicated in Table 1, at 11.2M, this is a sizable group in the U.S. As indicated in section *Research Methodology*, we were unable to find comparable statistics on a global basis, but percentage wise, these numbers are likely to be somewhat comparable in other developed countries where birthrates and lifestyles are relatively consistent with the U.S. The number of at-home mothers is anticipated to increase as this arrangement is increasing in popularity among professional women in the workforce[1].

The study utilized an online focus group of hundreds of mothers that were spread across the United States and the data that we collected from other resources was also focused on the United States. However, we intended to approach this study from a global perspective, particularly including many European countries, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, where online education has a strong presence. Unfortunately, the data for at-home mothers outside of the U.S. was difficult to locate. Anecdotally, from discussions with several University representatives outside of the U.S., many countries seem to be ahead of the U.S. in catering to at-home mothers within traditional education. It was suggested that amenities like on-campus daycares are more prominent in countries outside of the U.S. and that creates additional dynamics concerning this issue not accounted for in our study. Without the proper data though, we are not able to provide a complete global perspective and we would like to encourage more research around this issue on a global level in order to fully understand the issues facing institutions around the world.

Research Methodology

The research in this study was performed in a focus-group like manner. This group was organized through collaboration with Mom-it-Forward and Collegebound Network. Mom-it-forward organizes discussion groups on a weekly basis, setting a new topic each week, and attracting between 300-500 participants for each discussion. The discussion was held online through the Twitter social network platform. In this particular discussion, over a two-hour period, 335 participants posted over 3000 responses. The grand scale of participants combined with the ability to capture every response proved to be an effective means for holding a focus group like study. The participants were provided with links during the course of the discussion that were tracked for geographic location. Tracking indicated that this group was widely dispersed across the United States. It should also be noted that participants were not just limited to mothers currently interested in returning to schools, it was just a general group of at-home mothers.

We utilized the extensive sets of data available through the U.S. Census Bureau to research the number of at-home mothers in the U.S. We were unable to find equivalent data sets in other parts of the world, despite an exhaustive search, which limited our ability to draw conclusions on a global basis. There were some discrepancies between the data we found at the U.S. Census Bureau and the statistics generally reported in the press and elsewhere. General press sources tend to quote that there were 5.6M[2] stay-at-home mothers in 2004. However, if you go directly to the U.S. Census Bureau, this number includes only married couples, not single mothers, only with children up to 15, and does not include any women in households with both spouses in the labor force (so completely excluding work-at-home mothers). There

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[1] A. Mosisa, S. Hipple, *Trends in labor force participation in the United States*, „Monthly Labor Review". October 2006, pp. 35−57. The labor force participation rate refers to „the proportion of the working-age population either working or actively looking for work".

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, Public Information Office, November 17, 2008.

is no one source of information that provides the complete statistics we were trying to identify, so we had to cross reference several surveys. In addition, the age brackets were not congruent with the „children-under-15" filter used in the 5.6M statistics that is widely used. Instead, a 14−17 age bracket was used, preventing us from providing exact comparisons across all of the demographics we were researching. So our statistics actually include women with children 13 and under. Given this filter, we found that there were 10,570,308 women with children under 13 years old that were stay-at-home and not working in 2004. From a separate data set, also provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 598,723 women that worked at home, with children under 13 that did report working. Furthermore, the data indicated that in total, there were 30,050,164 women with children under 13 years old, which includes those that have gone back to work, and provides us with a means to determine a percent of the total women population. And last, there is no „Do you stay at home?" question in the census. This forced us to make the assumption that if the women were not employed, but fit the other criteria (mother, children<13, etc), they were a non-working stay-at-home mother. Our final reported statistics, given the issues identified above, represent mothers that are at-home mothers (married or single) with children under 13 and segmented further by work-at-home and not employed.

Market Profile

This group tends to align with the age range of the typical adult learner, 25-45 years of age, and shares many characteristics with this broader group[3]. As suggested by the group name, at-home mothers, the demographic characteristics of this group are female, have children, and they may work at home if their profession is suitable. Our discussion with this group focused on issues that are important to them concerning online education, what their drivers and motivations for pursuing an online education are, what areas of education they are interested in, and what criteria they use to select online programs over face-to-face programs.

Important Issues to Consider

The discussions revealed that these were the most important issues for this group of at-home mothers concerning online education, discussed in this order:

- flexibility of class schedule/time management;

- the online education „experience", including:

    - amount of time spent per class per week,

    - interaction levels with faculty,

    - incorporating your childcare into your learning schedule;

- pros and cons compared to face-to-face;

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[3] *Special Analysis 2002 − Nontraditional Undergraduates*, National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/analyses/nontraditional/sa01.asp, [10.09.09].

- flexibility of schedule after graduation (career time schedule) ;

- range of degree types and fields available;

- how to find information about programs;

- financial arrangements, including financial aid and scholarships;

- accreditation;

- fake degrees (due to public figures in press that were exposed).

Drivers and Motivations

When asked what the drivers and motivations were for returning to school, the group was relatively uniform in their response:

- career advancement;

- improvements in salary;

- right time of life;

- setting a good example for their children emphasizing the importance of education.

When the question was asked, these were the answers provided, followed by several responses agreeing. We summarized the response and asked for verification that these were indeed the key drivers for their motivation to pursue returning to school, which was followed by many more affirmative responses.

Education Interests

The group was also surveyed for the areas that they were interested in improving their education in. The responses varied widely, and many areas mentioned could probably be satisfied through non-credit programs. However, out of the entire realm of potential degrees to offer to reach this group, we were able to narrow it down significantly. Areas mentioned are listed below and provided in order of interest level (based on number of mentions during the online discussion):

- **Noncredit:**

  - Photography/Photoshop,

  - Web Design,

  - Graphic Design – certificate,

  - Calligraphy;

- **Associates or Bachelors:**

  - Beauty School – Natural Health, cosmetology, spa/wellness, aromatherapy,

- Social Work/Counseling field,

- Programming,

- Business/Marketing,

- Health care,

- Nursing;

- **Masters:**

    - majority of individuals interested in a masters did not indicate a specific field of preference,

    - Public Health,

    - Social Work,

    - Journalism,

    - Organizational Behavior,

    - Fine Arts,

    - Education.

Because this was a discussion, rather than a survey, the number of mentions does not necessarily represent the interest level, but there were clearly some areas that were more popular discussion topics than others. It should be noted that web design was mentioned specifically by 4 participants, but a specific level of education was not mentioned (i.e. certificate, degree, or other level of engagement).

Selection Criteria

The final discussion topic with this group focused on what they used for selection criteria when looking at online programs, beyond just degree type. Leaving the house for a face-to-face program is very difficult in many cases for this group, which makes online education appealing. This demographic is also concerned about their unreliable schedules and therefore seek the schedule flexibility of online programs. Again, these topics were brought up in a discussion format, so the level of interest in a particular topic is not necessarily related to how often it was mentioned.

Recommendations for Serving this Market

These representatives of the at-home mother market have provided fairly clear-cut education needs that online programs have a high potential to meet. Based on feedback from this group, we have provided a set of suggestions for online program design that have fit other groups with similar needs. This group has

many similarities to the overall adult learner market, but with an emphasis on flexibility and avoiding physical classroom presence.

The Messages to Use When Targeting this Group

In the marketing field, a single phrase is often used to represent the primary message you are trying to delivery through your outreach campaign[4]. This phrase often becomes the tagline used in many of the messages. Effective taglines echo the sentiment of the market and can touch your target group at an emotional level. In order to do this, marketers focus on invoking a connection with the underlying needs they are fulfilling using your service. During the course of these discussions, the participants spoke to the underlying motivations they have to improve their education. We captured direct quotes that may even serve as effective taglines of an entire campaign. Collectively, they represent the direct voice of why this particular group of women may consider going back to school:

- *[…] elearning was made for moms.*

- *It really just comes down to what I want to do and getting organized.*

- *I know it's something I really need to do. I just need to make up my mind.*

- *Being ambitious in a positive way is always a good example to see for kids, and any one else.*

- *I feel like I need to get my Master's Degree to be an example to my kids. I'm planning on starting when my youngest is 3.*

- *You have to set the example for your children.*

- *Student moms set a GREAT example about education for their kids.*

- *My mom went back to school after a 25 year hiatus. It was hard for her, but she's glad she did. She's a great example of life learning.*

- *My mom got her BA when my first baby was one. We went to her MBA graduation this past fall. Great example to us all. My kids loved it!*

Ways to Tailor Your Program

1. 100% online degrees. Completely eliminate the need to go to campus, since this poses a number of logistical challenges for at-home mothers. This may seem obvious, but there are many programs that claim to be 100% online which are only referring to the courses. To be 100% online in the context we are suggesting, you would need to do a complete audit of every point of contact with the student, including support services, financial paperwork, and even graduation, to make sure the complete student experience is online.

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[4] G.E. Belch, M.A. Belch, *Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communications Perspective*, Irwin Professional Pub, 2001, pp. 188−192.

2. Utilize asynchronous modes. Use teaching methodologies that are more conducive to unpredictable schedules, such as 100% asynchronous courses.

3. Adjust „semester" to be more flexible. Offer courses more times over the year than the traditional semesters of Fall-Winter-Summer. Some institutions offer new courses every 4 weeks, for example, providing a greater amount of flexibility to fit into a busy mother's schedule.

4. Offer variable semester lengths. Provide greater flexibility to the student in when they complete a course. Give the mother the flexibility to complete a course a week or two later, when needed, so that their coursework is more adaptive to the short-term challenges of their situation, such as a sick child.

5. Focus on the degree types that most interested this group first. Refer to the „Education Interests" list in the *Market Profile* section of this report.

6. Provide resources specific to this group on your website. For example, you could provide tips for juggling childcare with class work load.

Conclusion

We consider this study as an initial step into the understanding of the at-home mother market and how to serve it more effectively. We believe that this report is evidence that further investigation into the distinctive needs of this market is warranted. The information collected from this large focus group suggests that there are some specific ways online programs can develop their programs to better serve this particular market.

Based on the findings of this study, we suggest that online programs wishing to serve this market more effectively focus on 100% online degrees, utilize asynchronous modes, adjusting the „semester" to be more flexible, offer variable semester lengths, and provide resources specific to this group on your website. In addition, there are certain fields that are of the greatest interest that you could focus your degrees on first.

Last, beyond actually employing these types of programs, these are the characteristics to highlight when developing the marketing message to reach this market. We hope that other researchers can utilize this knowledge and build additional understanding into ways that can serve this market in the best possible way.

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