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COMMUNICATIONS – USING THE APPROPRIATE COMMUNICATIONS MEDIUM FOR YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is crucial to the wellbeing of any company. The selection of a communications medium can determine the success of the relationship between an enterprise and its customers. But what if an enterprise has a diverse customer base and wishes to use an emerging technology for communication purposes? This case study will examine how the decision to use the World Wide Web has helped Bus Éireann to interact more efficiently with its customers.

ABOUT BUS ÉIREANN

Bus Éireann was formed in 1987 as a subsidiary of CIE (Córas Iompair Éireann). Its function is to provide bus services throughout Ireland with the exception of Dublin City. The company is committed to providing high standards through continuous developments that keep pace with changing needs. A diverse range of services are offered catering for different needs, including:

◗ Expressway long distance coach services linking cities and towns in Ireland
◗ Bus Éireann/Eurolines coach services to Britain and Europe
◗ Local and rural bus services throughout the country
◗ City bus services in Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford
◗ Commuter Services radiating form Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford
◗ Town services in Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Navan and Sligo
◗ School bus services on behalf of the Department of Education & Science
◗ Additional services include coach and bus hire, vehicle testing, contract maintenance and parcel delivery

Bus Éireann directly employs almost 2,500 people with another 1,700 sub-contractors in the School Transport Scheme. It has a fleet of nearly 1,300 coaches and buses. The safety and comfort of passengers is a priority.

EFFECTIVE CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is achieved when all customers receive and understand a company's message. Traditional means of communication such as newspapers and radio do not always enable effective differentiated targeting of niche customer groups. These media, although widespread and cheap, are mainly suitable for **mass communication**. Mass communication is when the same message is given to a large or mass audience and makes the assumption that everyone has the same basic needs. A market segment consists of a group of customers who share a similar set of needs or wants.

In recent times, thanks to progress in telecommunications technology, new media such as the Internet and mobile phones allow marketing efforts to be directed at specific market segments or niches. There are a number of ways to segment a market:

◗ **Geographic Segmentation** – The division of the market into different geographical units such as nations, regions, counties, cities or neighbourhoods.

◗ **Demographic Segmentation** – The division of the market into groups on the basis of variables such as age, family size, family life cycle, gender, income, occupation, education, religion, race, nationality, and social class. Demographic variables are very popular for distinguishing customer groups. One reason for this is that demographic variables are easy to measure. For example, demographic information from the government census figures is available to anyone.

◗ **Psychographic Segmentation** – The division of the market into different groups on the basis of lifestyle, personality or values. Lifestyle variations mean that people within the same demographic group can exhibit very different preferences. For example, you might differ from your classmate because you are interested in music and she is interested in sport.

◗ **Behavioural Segmentation** – The division of the market into groups on the basis of their knowledge of, attitude toward, use of or response to a product. Many marketers believe that behaviour can be the best starting point for building market segments.

Once a company understands the market segments, it can choose the appropriate medium to reach the different segments. As mentioned, Bus Éireann has a diverse customer base, so a medium that facilitates communication with many groups is required. The Internet is an ideal solution in this regard because it offers the ability to target particular website features at specific market segments.

THE BUS ÉIREANN WEBSITE
www.buseireann.ie

The objective of the Bus Éireann website is effective communication with customers. As shown in the table below, this is achieved by creating content for individual market segments. This content, such as general information, public relations material and e-commerce facilities, is tailored to meet the requirements of each customer group. E-commerce means transacting or selling products and services online, for example bus tickets. The main features of the website are:
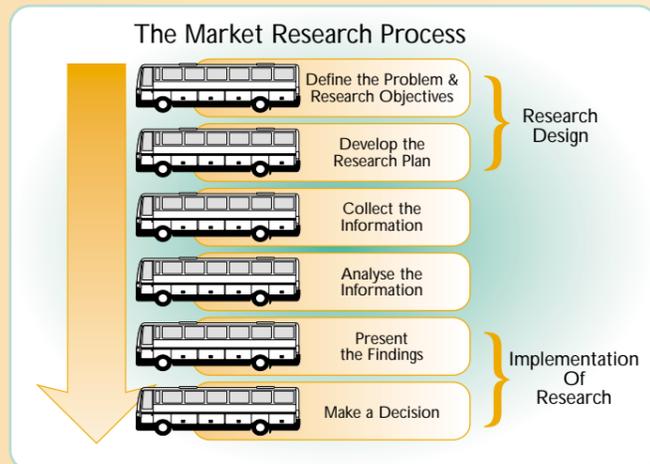
Feature	Resource	Market Segment
News Centre	Information & PR	All users
Your Journey	Information & E-Commerce	All commuters
Services	Information & PR	All users
Projects	PR	All users
Opportunities	Information	All users
About Us	Information	All users
Customer Service	PR	All users
Purchase Tickets	E-Commerce	Commuters & tourists
Search Timetable	Information	Commuters & tourists
Day Tour	E-Commerce	Tourists
Travel Reports	Information	Commuters & tourists
Special Offers	Information	Commuters & tourists
International	Information	Tourists
Eurolines	Information	International tourists

One example of how the website communicates with different market segments is the 'international' feature. This allows French, German and Italian users to read information in their own language prior to visiting Ireland.

HOW RESEARCH PROVIDES DATA FOR WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT

In order for Bus Éireann to understand its customers' expectations of the website, it conducted market research. **Market research** is defined as the systematic design, collection, analysis, and reporting of data and findings relevant to a specific situation facing a company.

The Market Research Process

- Define the Problem & Research Objectives
- Develop the Research Plan
- Collect the Information
- Analyse the Information
- Present the Findings
- Make a Decision

Research Design

Implementation Of Research

The market research process led to the inclusion of a number of specific features in the final website. These are:

Customer Charter: Bus Éireann learned that customers want to keep track of the level of service that it offers. With an increasing number of car owners it is essential for Bus Éireann to convince the public of the benefits of taking the bus. The Customer Charter is a set of promises made by Bus Éireann to reassure customers that the company will do everything possible to achieve high standards of customer care. It includes promises covering punctuality of buses, complaints procedures, cleanliness and safety. Bus Éireann has now completed three independent audits of its performance regarding the commitments set out in the Customer Charter. The results of these audits are presented online.

The two primary measures used to conduct the Customer Charter audits are *Independent Researcher Observation and Customer Evaluation.*

Independent Researcher Observation is a method by which Bus Éireann hires people to evaluate its travel services. These people are trained to act as ordinary customers and do not reveal to staff who they are. This is a very powerful method of obtaining insight into real levels of performance, because these people experience Bus Éireann services in exactly the same way as a normal customer. This method is also used in many other industries, for example in Retailing where it is called *'Mystery Shopping'.*

Customer Evaluation surveys ordinary members of the public to learn if they think Bus Éireann is fulfilling the promises set out in the Customer Charter. Surveys can be a very useful way of collecting information, however a correct sample of the public must be selected. A **sample** is a portion or section of a population that is representative of the whole. If a poor sample is chosen certain customers may be over represented in the survey, while others are not represented at all.

Online Timetable: The Bus Éireann Customer Charter promises that at least 95% of all buses will leave within 10 minutes of the scheduled departure time from their original departure point. But what if the scheduled departure time changes and a customer misses the announcements made through other media such as the radio or newspaper? How can the busy professional be sure of having the up-to-date timetable?

Bus Éireann has addressed this concern by always posting the most up-to-date timetable for every route on its website. The website features a travel reports section on its homepage which shows the most up-to-date changes to schedules such as expected delays on certain routes.

Buying Tickets Online: These days it isn't always easy to find the time to purchase tickets in advance of a journey. That is why Bus Éireann has included an e-commerce facility on its website whereby customers can purchase tickets online. The customer's payment is validated via the Internet and the customer can then use the ticket without delay. The bus driver validates the Internet tickets using the innovative Wayfarer Ticket machine.

MARKET RESEARCH AND CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT

Market research can prompt a business to take the initiative on matters affecting particular market segments. This can lead to **continuous improvement** of service. Through market research, Bus Éireann understands what is required to cater for customers with special needs, such as those with physical disabilities. It is now company policy to procure more accessible vehicles as part of the continuing programme of fleet replacement. Improvements such as high-visibility nosing on steps, hand rails, high-quality internal lighting and public address systems are all designed to make coaches more accessible and user friendly.

The Bus Éireann website itself is also designed to be accessible to people with disabilities, such as the visually impaired. A special section has been created to allow people with poor vision who are using assistive technologies to read the website. An assistive technology is a device that maintains, increases or improves the PC so that individuals with disabilities can use it with greater ease. The issue of web accessibility is a fast growing area of Internet design. This is because the web is now emerging as the primary means by which people with disabilities can access news, information and other services.

BUS ÉIREANN BRAND DEVELOPMENT

With the liberalisation of the transport market in Ireland it is vital that Bus Éireann distinguishes itself from the competition. This differentiation can be assisted through effective branding. A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors. A brand can convey up to six levels of meaning:

- Attributes: A brand brings to mind certain attributes. Bus Éireann suggests punctual, comfortable and safe travel.
- Benefits: Attributes must be translated into functional and emotional benefits. "I will arrive on time, in a good mood, and in one piece."
- Values: The brand also says something about the producer's values. Bus Éireann stands for safety and efficiency.
- Culture: The brand may represent a certain culture. Bus Éireann represents a caring, quality of service culture.
- Personality: The brand may represent a certain personality. Bus Éireann is well represented by its logo, the Irish red setter – friendly, reliable and fast.
- User: The brand suggests the kind of consumer who buys or uses the product. The Bus Éireann brand should appeal to all travellers.

Marketers must decide at which level to anchor the brand's identity. In general a brand is best positioned by associating its name with a desirable benefit. Some examples of successful brand positioning are Volvo (safety), Nike (performance) and Lexus (quality). However, promoting a brand on one benefit only can be risky. Suppose Bus Éireann positions its main benefit as "reliability". What happens when other brands emerge with equal or better reliability? The strongest brands present more than a rational/economic appeal - they have an emotional appeal also. That is why the personality of the Bus Éireann brand as represented by the Irish Red Setter is so important. It can help people build an emotional attachment and encourages passengers to associate reliability with Bus Éireann.

It is important to remember that a brand is more than just a logo. It is also the company's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services on a consistent basis to the customer. Thus it follows that brand experience is more important than brand advertising. The experience of Bus Éireann customers on a daily basis are what will define and perpetuate its brand of quality.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Bus Éireann required a communications medium through which it could communicate effectively with a diverse customer base. The Bus Éireann website successfully fulfils this need and enables the marketing of a wide range of services across many market segments. This case shows that market research can affect a company on several different levels, from the features on its website to policy on accessibility. The importance of branding to the customer was also explained and demonstrated.

TASKS & ACTIVITIES

1) Explain the following terms:
   a. Mass Communication
   b. Mass Audience
   c. Market Segment
   d. Demographic Segmentation
2) Define market research and explain its importance when trying to understand different market segments.
3) The market research process is important prior to making decisions. Outline the steps in the market research process and discuss the importance of implementing research findings.
4) Assess the Bus Éireann website by identifying the content that is directed at different segments or stakeholders of the marketplace. How important does the site rank these different stakeholders?
5) In your opinion what is the importance of branding?
   a. As a class exercise outline the importance of the Bus Éireann brand.
   b. What is the importance of 'symbolism' in the brand logo?
   c. How do the combination of design features, name and brand symbols help Bus Éireann distinguish its brand from its competitors?

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