

PROMOTING ELECTRONIC COMMERCE IN NIGERIA THROUGH ELECTRONIC LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Issues relating to electronic commerce (e-commerce) growth in the Nations academic communities are such that adequate attention should be given to it. For Nigerians resident in Europe and America, especially, and other nationals interested in buying tangible goods from Nigeria, and for students and lecturers in the academic community wanting to procure learning materials online, the introduction of e-commerce into the country could not have come at a more auspicious time. This new method of transacting business depends on telecommunications and computers to facilitate the trade in goods and services using credit cards and the like to effect payment. It is noteworthy therefore, that developing nations (like Nigeria) must actively participate in the information age to remain competitive as part of the international economic order. It is appalling, however, that the nation's academic communities have not been able to benefit much from the said information revolution. Besides technology and funds as major inhibiting factors, the awareness does seem to be absent in our academic communities. This paper explores issues and initiatives that are catalysts to e-commerce growth in Nigeria and how the Nigerian Academic Communities can promote them.

Keywords: Academics, Nigeria, E-commerce, E-learning, Technology, Universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

A broad-based electronic commerce has been a dream of the IT industry for many years but until recently, this dream remained unfulfilled. The basic concept of facilitating business to business commerce was simple enough but the practicality of linking divergent computer hardware using different operating systems and located in different structural environments proved overly complex and expensive for many businesses to implement. Electronic-Commerce is the use of computer networks to conduct business-basically the buying and selling of goods and services -electronically with one's suppliers, customers, and for competitors. Osuagwu and Okafor (2001) opined that E-Commerce is essentially the use of currently available messaging systems, information superhighway, local and wide area computer networks (links) to promote commerce. Today, E-Commerce is a term used to describe marketing on the Internet. It is the sharing of business information, maintaining business relations and conducting business transaction by means of telecommunication networks. In today's business environment where the operational boundaries between firms have become fluid, it is often both pragmatically and analytically unfruitful to separate the inter-organizational business processes from the intra organizational ones. Therefore, E-Commerce could include relationships and transactions between companies, as well as the corporate processes that support the commerce within individual firms.

In the context of developing countries, e-commerce is a technological revolution whose utilization and production has been somewhat limited but whose potential for diffusion holds good promise in accelerating their socio-economic development. Despite the widely acknowledged significance of e-commerce for economic growth and social developing Countries, few developing Countries have succeeded in exploiting this developmental potential. There is some evidence in literature that successful e-commerce applications are the exceptions rather than the rule. It is fast becoming a key concern for most developing Countries about how it finds ways and means to efficiently utilize and sustain e-commerce for their development (Amosa, et al, 2001).

The Internet is a versatile phenomenon, which has created and met demands and satisfied human and corporate needs, a veritable medium for commerce. The Internet has transformed and redefined the meaning of the market place and the forms of conducting and concluding transactions. The use of the Internet to deliver financial services has become very crucial though the required infrastructure is a far cry in Nigeria. However, the planned complete deregulation of the telecommunication industry, the introduction of the global system of mobile communication (GSM), as well as the development of stable power supply through the use of independent power procedures (IPP), will provide Nigerian economy with the quantum that is required for a stable internet infrastructure.

1.1 E-Learning & E-Commerce

The potential for using the Internet and the multimedia capabilities of technology for learning is great. Benefits may include provision for disadvantaged students as well as cost savings through economies of scale or automation of the teaching processes. Embracing video, audio and animation may help the learning process (Amstrong, 2013). E-learning is a term applied to systems for distance learning, software to support students taking a campus-based course, or simply online documentation for teaching (O'Hagan, 1998). One such way is improving the effectiveness of searching (Ferneley & Berney, 1999). It will not be an understatement to state that the prime mover behind e-learning and e-commerce is the Internet.

More and more persons in organizations, businesses and in government will depend on the products from our institution for the benefits accruable through the Internet. Unfortunately, much has not been done in the provision of an enabling e-learning facilities in or institutions. There remains a sharp negative differences between employer's expectation and the actual "on the job" performance of graduates from Nigerian higher institutions as a result of the fact that they cannot keep pace with developments in information technology applications concepts rolled out at short intervals. Staff retraining was one of the measures adopted by organizations in times past to make up for any inadequacy among graduate employees (Heiat, and Spicer1995). Universities, polytechnics and other tertiary institutions are expected to (at least) be able to lay a proper foundation on which organizations can build on. The problem has, however, become acute, partly due to the "computerization" taking place in all lines of career pursuits and for the fact that an average graduate today lacks some basic background on which industry can infuse current knowledge.

2. PRINCIPAL ACTIVITIES OF E-COMMERCE IN NIGERIA

What follows are identified as principal activities contributing to the growth of global e-commerce:

- Government service and information
- Business-to-business wholesale and retail services
- Business-to-consumer (and consumer-to-business) retail transaction
- Financial services
- Banking
- Usage baser telephony, online and Internet access services
- Advertising and marketing services.

The level of development recorded for any of these transactions in an economy is hinged primarily on the level of technology available. The most notable obviously is communication technology. Thus developed countries with advanced economies and infrastructure are the pacesetters in electronic commerce. An effective development of e-commerce requires a participating process of natural policy making and implementation involving all stakeholders in both the public and private sectors. This is especially applicable in the academic community, which serves as the grinding stone for the nation's manpower. This participating process will not only help in building trust on the system as a low-risk made of transacting business but greatly amplifies investments towards e-commerce growth (Hedström, 1998). Also, technology and infrastructure are major players in the growth of e-commerce. Nigeria scores low in this department, for e-commerce is built on reliable and equitably distributed telecommunication network, which is also the backbone of the Internet.

In Nigeria, some companies and businesses (especially the banking and oil sectors) are steadily embracing e-commerce, while the Academic community makes little or no attempts. This is appalling and not encouraging for a developing economy. Osofisan (2000) once warned that 'the future looks bleak for companies and **individuals** who do not embrace e-commerce. She submitted that IT development in Nigerian tertiary institutions is at the lowest ebb. The growth of Internet (of which E- Commerce is built on) in the Nigerian Academic Communities is hindered in a number of ways.

2.1 Benefits of E-Commerce

E-Commerce facilitates "one-to-one" marketing based on the understanding of the individual customer. Digital information goods such as news, articles, digital images, music, allow perfect copies to be created and distributed almost without cost via the internet. The Internet is thus precipitating a dramatic reduction in the marginal cost of production and distribution of these goods. All of these schemes can be thought of as aggregating information goods along some dimension. For example, aggregation can take place across products, such as a collection of contemporary goods and services, airline tickets; hostel room, a rental car, meals and amusement park admission ticket can be handled as a packaged leisure product.

Products combined in this manner are often personalized and constitute a distinct product or service that takes on an enhanced value from the sum of its components. Aggregation can also take place across consumers as with the provision of a site license to multiple users for a fixed fee, or overtime, as with subscriptions.

In the electronic market, it is much more easily to match buyers directly with sellers and as such the role of traditional intermediaries may be reduced or even eliminated leading to dis-intermediation. The extinction of intermediaries by the electronic market will more than be compensated for by the promotion of the growth of new types of electronic intermediaries. These intermediaries will perform functions like matching buyers with sellers, providing product information to buyers and marketing information to sellers, aggregating information goods, integrating the components of consumer processes, managing physical deliveries and payments, providing trust relationships and ensuring the integrity of the market.

2.2 Hindrances To The Growth of E-Commerce

Identified as the major constraints on the diffusion of the Internet especially in developing countries include shortages of infrastructure, price of Internet access, education and lack of content in the appropriate language.

- * Lack of sufficient awareness about IT.
- * Negative attitudes of governmental agencies through adequate funding
- * Inadequate sustainability of manpower
- * Insecurity of sensitive information transmitted on computer digital networks
- * Low-income level
- * The impediments also include unreliable power supply, lack of secured and stable political environment and appropriate pricing.
- * Piracy
- * Unreliable Telecommunication facilities.

3. THE CHALLENGES FOR NIGERIAN ACADEMIC COMMUNITIES FOR USING E-COMMERCE

To make any meaningful impact on for the successful implementation of e-commerce in the Nigerian academic communities, the following pre-requisites must be met:

- A basic supply of expertise and skills.
- The selection of technology niches – How relevant is the academic communities in IT policies formulation
- Control over technology import to avoid dumping and ensure appropriate technology acquisition.
- Commitment of scarce resources to implementation of e-commerce technology in our schools.
- Cooperation between supplier and consumer in terms of hardware and software (which is the major product of most schools).
- More research by the academic communities to close the gap occurring between existing and new plants.

Considering the level of connectivity of Nigerian higher institutions to the Internet, the following alarming results were obtained.

Table 1: Internet Connectivity for Tertiary Institutions

Institutions	Number Investigated so far	Number Connected To the Internet
Universities	100	63
Polytechnics	41	32
Colleges of Education	57	41
Private Institutions	30	26

This reflects that higher institutions in Nigeria are upcoming in the area of computer literacy and evolution rate. However, stability of web access and its use for learning is still a far cry from the global standard.

4. SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF E-COMMERCE GROWTH IN NIGERIA

- i) The academic community must by way of urgency restructure all curriculums to international standard by inculcating e-learning features.
- ii) Students should be introduced to activities learning that will keep them in touch with developments in information technology such as designing facilities for submitting assignments and tests online, procuring books, magazines and journals electronically
- iii) The academic community must strive to continuously update themselves with current trends in the application of e-learning to their profession.
- iv) The Federal Government of Nigeria should implement its E-commerce policy judiciously without delay.
- v) Introduction of IT education at all levels in Nigeria and mass awareness through jingles on mass media by the Government.
- vi) iii) The FGN should implement recommendations of the African Internet Summit (AFRINET '99) without further delay.
- vii) Information and Communication Technology facilities should be provided especially in public schools where they are obviously lacking.

5. CONCLUSION

E-Commerce is neither hype nor a fab. It is a hi-tech breakthrough which provides both buyer and seller facilities to transact business in the comfort of their homes or offices and at competitive prices. Meaningful studies and research findings have shown that the Internet and E-commerce will transform traditional business, the global market and consumer life. For business, the benefits of E-commerce using the Internet are undoubtedly very compelling. The Internet has therefore become the ultimate platform and lifeline for business continuity, Academic growth, socio-economic development, sustainable growth and global competitiveness. For, the Nigerian academic community, the onus of keeping our nation abreast in order to take advantage of the benefits of these golden egg rest on us. We cannot afford to fail.

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