

Market Trends

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Key Lessons From the Homeschool Market That Matter Now More Than Ever

As the Coronavirus Shuts Down Districts, Companies Need New Approaches That Resonate With Parents

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Most education companies have built their products, and their business models, around working primarily with districts and teachers.

Now, in a matter of weeks, all that has changed.

As the coronavirus takes hold across the country, and districts are scrambling to arrange remote learning for students and families, many education businesses are moving to something much closer to a homeschooling model.

Parents are playing the role of learning coaches, and teachers are being asked to provide remote support to parents and students. Companies that have longstanding experience working in virtual education and those that sell in the homeschool market have important lessons to offer.

For many companies unfamiliar with operating at-scale virtually in a home-based setting, the new environment will require a rapid rethinking of how they serve customers, how they market products, and how they use technology.

“It’s about how you pivot from an institutional-support model to a consumer-support model,” said Tom ap Simon, managing director for Pearson’s online and blended learning K-12 division, which includes the Connections Academy virtual school program.

The focus is now on helping parents, he said, who “are being asked to do roles they’ve never done before, all while juggling work and many other things.”

Digital education companies that have either not been offering parent-facing products, or have been offering them only as a small slice of their businesses, are suddenly being asked to deliver to a new audience and meet their needs. That shift requires something different from vendors.

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Here are five pieces of business advice shared by executives from virtual school and homeschooling companies about how providers that have been working primarily with traditional district clients should be prepared to adapt to the new, remote-learning environment.

1. Beef Up Tech Support—or Face the Consequences

Companies that now find themselves serving families who are delivering lessons at home are almost certain to hear from parents who are confused by various products and features. And they demand a different level of support than do classroom teachers.

Typically, teachers having technical issues can ask colleagues for advice or can seek help from IT staff. Parents are not in the same boat.

“Parents are very needy,” said John Edelson founder and president of homeschool curriculum company Time4Learning.

That neediness is something that companies who’ve dealt primarily with teachers to date may not anticipate because the dynamics are different. When teachers struggle to make sense of products, they often won’t bother with waiting for technical support, said Edelson: “If they can’t get it working, they just don’t use it.”



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*Kevin Chavous
K12 Inc.*

Parents, by contrast, are willing to sit on the phone for hours or reach out to the company in public on social media, calling attention to their challenges, added

Edelson.

Since the coronavirus outbreak, Edelson said he's seeing five times the normal demand for Time4Learning's products.

"We have a lot of families that are struggling at first," said Ap Simon, of Pearson, which has seen a 150 percent increase in applications for Connections Academy schools compared with this time last year. "There's a huge ramp-up curve."

Companies need to make sure their customer support—via email, online chat, and telephone—is working at full or extra capacity. Parents, and many teachers now working from home, won't be willing to wait long for a response and will make their displeasure known.

For example, in mid-March Age of Learning offered its early-learning curriculum ABCmouse, as well as other products, free to parents with students in schools shut down by the coronavirus. The company typically offers the product free to schools, but parents buy subscriptions and use it at home with their children. Now parents can get access at no cost if they go through their schools, said communications director Kathryn Green, who said the company is currently serving over 1 million students for free right now through partnerships with 60,000 schools.

But after offering free access, the popular site was overwhelmed by users. Customers complained frequently—and visibly on social media—that the site was crashing and they couldn't access customer support. Green acknowledged that parents were "running into blips along the way."

"We have all these accidental homeschoolers in the country right now," she said. "Our team has been working around the clock to scale our systems...to support this unprecedented increase in usage."

Companies should also be aware of the huge range of technology skills (or lack thereof) that parents—and teachers working from home—might have.

So when possible, simplify and streamline, said Jonathan Blank, CEO of online K-3 program Reading Kingdom. Forty percent of Reading Kingdom's users are homeschooling families, he said.

“Make everything as seamless as possible, and even easier than you think is needed. Ultra simple,” he said.

For parents, that will mean they don’t have to be actively involved in the process every minute and can multitask as they try to juggle supporting students’ learning and jobs or other responsibilities.

And companies should remember that learning is in chaos right now, and that both teachers and parents are stressed and unsettled. So the support needed is not just around technology, said Mickey Revenaugh, the co-founder of Connections Academy.

“We need to reassure people they will be able to do what they need to with the tools we’re giving them,” she said.

2. Revamp Learning Supports and PD, With a Focus on Video

Companies now need to give parents the skills to support their students’ learning at home.

“Everything that has happened right now is forcing many parents to become homeschoolers,” said Nick Grandy, the co-founder and head of customer experience for four-year-old Outschool, a platform that allows teachers to host their own live classes.

The company currently offers 1,000 classes, but with new demand because of COVID-19, it is seeking to add 5,000 teachers to its ranks.

Outschool created a series of webinars to help teachers take their instruction online and more than 6,000 teachers have visited those forums. It’s something that companies that primarily worked with teachers using their digital products in classrooms should consider, Grandy said. Different versions may be needed for parents and teachers.

The company is also putting out a daily newsletter to help share tips from more experienced parents and teachers. “Every day it’s just a short snippet or a piece of advice from our existing community,” he said.

At K12 Inc., which operates virtual schools across the country, the company has created a “Learning Coach University” to train parents on what to do in their new roles in at-home education. It’s something companies with a new influx of parents working directly with their products might want to consider, said Kevin Chavous, president of academics, policy, and schools for K12.

As part of that program, the company connects more experienced and technologically savvy parents with those who need more support. And the company also has robust training for teachers. “As much training and PD as possible is a good thing,” he said.

At Sonlight, a primarily print-based Christian homeschool curriculum provider, the company employs homeschooling moms to provide telephone support and reassurance.

“This is insanely stressful for parents,” said Luke Holzmann, Sonlight marketing lead, whose company is now creating packages for families that just need the last eight weeks of schooling in the academic year.

Strong relationships are the bedrock of remote learning. Use technology to allow students, parents, and teachers to build those strong connections.

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He recommends companies take a second look at all existing learning guides to make them more user-friendly and digestible. Avoid even the most basic educational jargon that teachers understand but make parents’ eyes glaze over.

“It’s a barrier to just going forward,” Holzmann said, adding that his company is focusing on producing new video guides for parents and teachers to support students.

But those videos are likely to be significantly different depending on whether they’re aimed at parents or teachers and the content should reflect that, said Nadim El-Rahi, marketing manager for CTC Math, an Australian company that works in the U.S. homeschool market.

Parents need a lot more guidance on how to implement programs. They want to know how many lessons to do per day, and how much time should be spent on practice problems, diagnostics or video lessons. Teachers may want to know more about the reasoning behind those lessons and the pedagogy.

3. Don't Forget About Relationship-Building

An important part of remote learning has nothing to do with technology. A key building block is creating and maintaining relationships, said Revenaugh, and that's not something that ed-tech companies have had to do in many cases, as they're often used in a supplemental fashion in face-to-face classrooms.

"What makes online school work really well is the relationships between teachers and students, and students to each other," she said.

So additional training for parents, students, and teachers could be essential on features that allow comments, video interaction or other types of communication tools and techniques that teachers and students might not have used much. Developing or enhancing those types of tools are a good idea too.

Companies should find ways to help teachers, parents, and students to view the technology as a way to help bolster or increase connections. There's a misconception that homeschooling or remote learning is a lonely activity, said Grandy of Outschool.

"Companies should consider how their learning can be social and not just learning alone," he said.

4. Focus Marketing on Solving Parents' Problems, Not Product Pushes

A lot of vendors are avoiding any significant sales outreach for the moment, and instead presenting themselves as trusted sources of guidance for parents (and educators) in this new environment. Positioning your company as a thought leader through some of the support and training, through webinars and videos for students, parents, and teachers is likely to bring greater rewards than pushing hard for new sales.

“The true genius of marketing is showing how we can solve their problems for them,” said Sonlight’s Holzmann, of marketing directly to parents. The company, which often relied on conventions and conferences to build new business, has had to change and enhance its marketing focus because of event cancellations due to the coronavirus. That pivot includes producing more video content, and more efforts to connect with customers and potential customers online.

This new approach should be much more consumer-driven, said Chavous of K12.

“For us, parents have to take the first step and call those enrollment centers,” he said. “We don’t sit in a building and wait for them to come to us.”

K12 is making all of their marketing efforts increasingly student-focused, he said. Ads show students in action and emphasize student stories to showcase the way virtual school has helped them and their families.

“The new end-user is the parent—it’s not the school district,” Chavous said. “Anything you normally do to make yourself attractive to school districts needs to be turned around for parents.”

Like in the world of K-12 education where recommendations from district leaders and teachers are key, word-of-mouth among parents is critical. It’s important for companies to be aware of and be connected to the places where parents and teachers are now seeking out advice, support, and recommendations.

Homeschoolers are intensely active on various Facebook groups and other social media groups and forums, and they’re eager to share when they find a tool or product that works. They’re often very generous in supporting those who are new to homeschooling or remote learning with their children. But they’re also not shy about pointing out flaws.

“They really reward companies that look after them,” El-Rahi said. “The flip side is they will let you know if they’re not happy.”

5. Communicate and Then Communicate More

Students and parents are very sensitive to changes in everything from product design to service, whether those are technical, operational or administrative changes, Chavous said.

Negative reactions to changes “tend to blow up more in the virtual world, in odd ways,” he said.

Grandy, of Outschool, notes that homeschoolers are “highly networked” so making effective communication with parents should be a high priority.

“Word will spread whatever the experience they have. So make sure to provide a good experience,” Grandy said.

There’s a tendency in the virtual world to send a form email out to 200 users and expect that everyone is aware of any changes. But that’s often not effective, Chavous said.

So be proactive about communicating any type of product change—and not just in a generic email. That might mean phone calls from a teacher or support personnel to parents and students. Find different ways to communicate the same message to users “and not in a telemarketer way,” he said.

“It has to feel real.”

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