

## **Ann Kirschner on Marketing and Distribution of Online Learning**

*Outside of business schools, the very word "marketing" makes most universities uncomfortable, as does the idea of students as customers. But the world of higher education is becoming increasingly competitive. Fathom, named for the double idea of comprehension and depth, was a milestone in the evolution of online learning and a prototype of where things are headed.*

Ann Kirschner has been a media and marketing pioneer in broadcast television, cable, satellite and interactive media. Her start-ups include the first full-channel cable teletext service; the first home satellite broadcast networks; the first sports league on satellite television and the Internet (NFL Sunday Ticket and NFL.com); and Fathom, the first interactive knowledge network associated with leading universities, libraries, museums and research institutions. She received her PhD in English literature from Princeton University.

**UBIQUITY:** Let's start with Fathom. What was its rationale and how did it get started?

**KIRSCHNER:** At a strategic planning retreat in 1998, one of the Columbia University trustees reported to his colleagues a nightmare he'd had in which Microsoft had essentially bought Columbia. I don't know whether or not his dream was apocryphal, but it certainly started the conversation about what a university could do to prepare itself for a new environment in which the Internet would be more and more central to every kind of organization and activity. So a group was formed to answer that question. Michael Crow, then Columbia's Executive Vice Provost went about looking for someone to lead the thinking and the planning around this area. Unbeknownst to him, I was sitting about 70 blocks south of Columbia at the National Football League, where I'd spent five years successfully applying technology to the transformation of professional sports. And now I was wondering how education, my first love, could be transformed by digital media in the same way. So I came to Columbia to head up that planning group, and out of that came the idea for Fathom.

**UBIQUITY:** Why was it called Fathom?

**KIRSCHNER:** An interesting question. To this day David Stern, who is Chairman of the Columbia Board of Trustees and the NBA Commissioner, chastises me for not calling it "Columbia." But the thinking at the time was that to be successful on the Internet you needed to get big fast, and that no single school had sufficient intellectual property or brand to do what we wanted to do -- which was create a portal for adult learning. We also felt that, from a competitive point of view, once we'd signed up some of the best knowledge leaders in the world, we would have raised an immense barrier to the entry of those who might come afterwards. So there were lots of good reasons why we elected not to call it Columbia, one of which being that it was conceptualized from the very beginning as a multi-institutional consortium. The name itself, Fathom, came, of course, from the double idea of comprehension and depth. We envisioned Fathom as a place where you could begin with a relatively superficial interest in a subject and then be able to pursue deeper and deeper layers of learning.

**UBIQUITY:** The name was found right away?

**KIRSCHNER:** Yes, after we did a little bit of research to confirm that it didn't mean anything naughty in any other language. You've got to be careful about that kind of thing nowadays. But you can talk to focus groups from now until next year and the truth is that until you actually begin to use a name you won't know whether you've got a good one or not. It turned out to be a popular name, one that also excited the other institutions that we began to recruit.

**UBIQUITY:** What year was this?

**KIRSCHNER:** This was 1999.

**UBIQUITY:** How long did it take you to get going, from the time of that first idea?

**KIRSCHNER:** Let's see. I joined the day after the Super Bowl in 1999, and we were up and running in October of that year.

**UBIQUITY:** Before we talk about what Fathom was all about, let's briefly leap ahead a few years, to its sad demise in 2003. Why did it end?

**KIRSCHNER:** Because the capital requirements of keeping it running were serious, and Columbia had been carrying the load by itself. Then it became clear that Fathom was not going to be a signature project for a new administration at Columbia, so it made sense to allow the institutions to recapture the content that had been created, and then to pursue their own individual plans.

I think the last 18 months have proven to a validation of Fathom's basic premise: the objectives, the need, and the plan. However, there were a couple of decisions that were taken that suggest to me that, as a business proposition, we would have continued to face major challenges, the first of which being the decision to create Fathom as a for profit company. It's absolutely clear today -- in a way that it wasn't clear in 1998 and 1999 -- that people will pay handsomely for Internet education, but only if it leads to degrees, or credentials, or certificates that have professional standing. The success of the University of Phoenix and the other for-profit companies make it totally clear that online learning is an important and growing component for adult learning, and for continuing education that has a credential attached to it. But the elite institutions that were part of Fathom are not going to be the first ones to put their degree programs online, but the last.

**UBIQUITY:** Because ... ?

**KIRSCHNER:** Because they remain concerned about reaction by the academic community, reaction by alums, protection of the brand, and pedagogical quality. It's my personal opinion that once one of them leads the way, they'll all be there, and I am totally sure that they'll all be there eventually. But whether "eventually" is 2010 or 2020 I can't tell you yet.

**UBIQUITY:** Tell us about the content of Fathom as it was developed and as it was going to develop.

**KIRSCHNER:** The concept for the content was that we would harness the extraordinary intellectual property of these institutions. Whether you were looking for a short course or a degree program, Fathom would be the knowledge brand that you would trust; in fact, the tag line for Fathom was "The Source for Online Learning." The thought we had going into the project was that every day on the Columbia campus and those of our other partners you had professors giving lectures, you had panels, you had colloquia, you had wonderful guest speakers, and yet all of that wonderful content was not being kept in a smart database or made available to others: it was totally ephemeral. And we thought, isn't that foolish? Couldn't it be harnessed in some way? And so we set about to try and gather that material systematically, to build what would be the free front door through which a learner could then search for more extended learning opportunities.

**UBIQUITY:** Then the starting point was the formal lectures?

**KIRSCHNER:** Yes, that was the starting point, but it was more than just formal lectures. It could be someone coming to campus to give an invited talk; it could be a professor who wanted his or her class presentation taped; it could be a monograph prepared by a faculty member. It could be any of those things that were being captured on campus and could then become the free content of Fathom. All of that would in essence be the showcase, the shop windows through which people would sample the offerings, and be so turned on that they would actually stay and buy something. However, the truth is that while universities are in fact teeming with that kind of content, it's not being gathered today in any usable way. And so while we thought we could just gather these diamonds, we had to face the reality that they are diamonds very much in the rough, and require a great deal of costly production in order to make them usable and appealing to the general public.

**UBIQUITY:** Are they not also ephemeral in the sense of "you really had to be there"?

**KIRSCHNER:** Well, yes and no. It's always going to be better to be there in person, always. You know, live theater is one thing, television and other recorded formats are another. If, let's say, I know that James MacPherson is lecturing at the campus, and I have a burning interest in what he has to say, I can get on the subway and be

on the Columbia campus in literally five minutes, but a person living in Oklahoma or Alaska or Singapore can't do that. So is it better to be there? Yes, but if you can't be there, this will work.

**UBIQUITY:** But doesn't the idea that "you just had to be there" address the notion that, for example, things like witty conversations be difficult to capture in print. A witty conversationalist, or a comedian, can sometimes look very dull in print.

**KIRSCHNER:** Right. Of course where video made sense, we were using video, so that at least the liveliness of someone's delivery could be captured. In other cases, we would take the material and create a very simple online course out of it. Again, free but structured in such a way that you had the sense of learning objectives, and you could actually move through the content in a way that would make it feel as though you had acquired learning as opposed to simply reading something. But you're absolutely right in that this was not Masterpiece Theatre. You've got to be really interested in a subject to learn it this way. Not only that, but people's interests tend to be pretty narrow. I mean I personally could read and listen to lectures about George Eliot all day long, but I'm really not that interested in string theory. I might want to know the basics, but nothing beyond that. So you have to stock your learning shelves with the comprehensive breadth that makes a great bookstore interesting, or makes a cable TV channel lineup seem diverse. You need a great deal of content.

**UBIQUITY:** Were the faculty of Columbia and these institutions willingly producing content for you?

**KIRSCHNER:** Some, yes, some, no. Some faculty just couldn't wait to get started and loved the experimenting. Others made the sign of the cross and wished we would go away. But there were many more in the first camp than in the second, and we never, ever lacked for faculty participants, and some of them were the most distinguished, interesting faculty, including giants like Simon Schama, who did one of our first courses. Faculty would work on content that would vary from a video lecture or a program that would be available for free to courses that could cost thousands and thousands of dollars. In the range of courses of any type there were some 2,000

or so that were available. In terms of the free content there were tens of thousands of content in one form or another.

**UBIQUITY:** Give us a rough breakdown of the kinds of offerings.

**KIRSCHNER:** It could be a video tape; it could be what we would call a free seminar, it could be a monograph; it could be a chapter from a book that we extended with multimedia and made much more appealing than simply a text chapter for a book. One example is a free seminar that's called, "Votes for Women and Chastity for Men," that's about gender, health, medicine and sexuality in Victorian England. It's part of a four-part seminar that was created by the Victoria and Albert Museum, and it's more than a lecture because it's been broken down into component parts and you move through it as if it's a very simple course. Of course, no one was pretending that this was the sort of thing you'd get credit for, but what we were doing was introducing prospective students to what the idea of online learning was all about.

**UBIQUITY:** Did the business model focus on getting money from organizations that bought the content for their members?

**KIRSCHNER:** No, it was that you as an individual would be so interested in the lecture from the Victoria and Albert Museum that you would actually want to buy a course that you would pay for yourself. So this free sample might lead you to an interest in studying public health from the London School of Economics. If the course cost, say, \$1,000, a small slice would go to Fathom, as a commission for having sold you the course. You would register through Fathom but we would pass the information along to whatever school was actually doing the course. So in essence we were a marketing partner for the London School of Economics.

**UBIQUITY:** What about credits?

**KIRSCHNER:** In this example, the credit would come directly from LSE -- Fathom was merely the facilitator and marketer. Instead, each school would issue its own credit. One important piece of what Fathom was aiming at was to improve the marketing and distribution of online learning. This is a piece that's critically missing

even today from the way traditional universities are offering online learning. You have traditional universities spending lots and lots of money to create online learning programs -- yet spending almost nothing to market them.

**UBIQUITY:** Why is that?

**KIRSCHNER:** It's because universities are by-and-large not brilliant or effective marketers. Outside of business schools, the very word "marketing" makes most universities uncomfortable, as does the idea of students as customers. But the world of higher education is becoming increasingly competitive. You cannot rely on the brands to sell themselves. To have every school out there doing its own mediocre marketing is intrinsically inefficient in an emerging marketplace such as the one for online learning. Our goal was to serve as an umbrella marketing organization so that Columbia, the London School of Economics, Penn State, the University of Michigan and the University of Florida and the other schools we served would all benefit from the marketing engine that we created and the deals we had with places like AOL and MSN and the AARP and the BBC. In that way we would bring them much broader exposure in traffic than any one of them could generate on their own. That was really the concept.

**UBIQUITY:** What do you think about your experience with Fathom, now that it's been a year and a half since you decided to close the project down?

**KIRSCHNER:** I think that the basic premises of it have been fully validated. Certainly, the need for marketing and distribution for online learning has been validated. There's a reason why the University of Phoenix has 217,000 students when no one else does, and that reason is not simply that their programs are pretty good and their customer service is excellent. The reason for its success is marketing, marketing, marketing! I think that marketing and customer service are extremely important pieces of the puzzle, not more important than pedagogy, certainly, but still extremely important, especially if you are looking for sustainability. In our own case, we didn't anticipate that the same institutions that lent their august brands to Fathom would be so reluctant to turn more and more of their own content to credentialed programs on the Web. I thought that would happen faster, and also that broadband would become mainstream a little faster than it did. For the kind of

enrichment programming we were offering, particularly from our partner institutions, broadband is indispensable, because if you're talking about enrichment learning (not to get a credential and get a raise from your employer), then broadband is essential so that the learning material can be attractive, interactive, immersive. Of course, broadband wasn't as available four years ago, when we were developing Fathom, but it's becoming more and more commonplace.

**UBIQUITY:** The bottom line?

**KIRSCHNER:** The bottom line is that Fathom's essential strategy was sound. It was a milestone in the evolution of online learning, a prototype of where things are headed. Networked, distributed, interactive learning is the future. While the moment at which the future becomes the present is lamentably hard to predict, I'm very proud to have been one of the pioneers.

*Dr. Ann Kirschner is president and chief executive officer of Comma International, a consultancy serving knowledge institutions and companies. Her e-mail address is <ann@comma-international.com>.*

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