

A Preliminary Study on the Survival Strategies of Reading-related Internet Products: A Case Study of Panda Academy (Postprint)

Authors: Xu Wenjing, Wu Liduan

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Panda Academy, as an internet-based reading product, captured users' willingness for learning and self-improvement during its initial design phase. In subsequent operations, it adopted the approach of creating a campus scenario to reshape users' online student identity, employing supervision and incentive mechanisms to ensure user retention, supplemented by online and offline activities to stimulate user engagement. This paper takes Panda Academy as a case study to explore the design and operational characteristics of internet-based reading products.

Full Text

Preamble

Taking "Panda Academy" as an Example: A Preliminary Exploration of the Survival Strategies of Reading-Oriented Internet Products

Abstract: Panda Academy, as a reading-oriented internet product, identified users' desire for self-improvement during its initial design phase. In its later operations, it created a campus-like scenario that reshaped users' online student identities, employing supervision and incentive mechanisms to ensure user retention while supplementing these with online and offline activities to stimulate user engagement. This paper uses Panda Academy as a case study to explore the design and operational characteristics of internet-based reading products.

Keywords: online learning; WeChat public account; Panda Academy

Authors: Xu Wenjing, Wu Liduan (Hebei Institute of Communications)

1. “WeChat + Reading”—The Formation of the Panda Academy Product

Panda Academy is an online fragmented education project under Xiamen Fengbian Technology Co., Ltd., promoting a self-study plan of “improving yourself in ten months.” It has already attracted hundreds of thousands of participants. The platform identified a key pain point among contemporary internet users: while knowledge resources are unlimited, the act of reading remains difficult to sustain. In response, it specifically proposed spending just 15 minutes daily to systematically learn the essential content from recommended booklists through online professional courses.

The motivation for learning is what drives Panda Academy’s establishment. However, individuals with learning aspirations do not limit themselves to internet channels alone. Another crucial factor that channels them to this platform is that while they possess the motivation to learn, they lack the time, energy, focus, or self-discipline for long-form deep reading. The contradiction between these two realities constitutes the user pain point that Panda Academy has captured.

2.1 Capturing Reading Pain Points in an Impetuous Era

In the new media era, various manufactured stimuli continuously trigger audience excitement to gain attention, while entertaining and superficial information constantly occupies people’s vision. Yet this does not mean there is no market for in-depth content. WeChat’s ability to manufacture trending topics may be inferior to Weibo, but this has instead fostered the growth of deep content on the WeChat platform. After being bombarded with too much shallow information, audiences actually hope to obtain more content that contributes to personal growth through new media channels. This is the prerequisite for the knowledge economy to develop on WeChat.

Panda Academy seeks commonality across different user groups. Perhaps the greatest shared characteristic among Panda Academy’s user base is that these individuals prioritize acquiring valuable, personally enriching content on the internet. This learning motivation is the driving force behind Panda Academy’s creation. However, people with learning aspirations do not confine themselves to internet channels alone. Another critical factor that gathers them on this platform is that while they possess the motivation to learn, they lack the time, energy, concentration, or self-discipline for extended deep reading. The contradiction between these two elements is precisely the user pain point that Panda Academy has identified.

2.2 Seeking Commonality in Booklist Design

Although users share the same pain points, how does Panda Academy ensure it provides appropriate content for users with different educational and aca-

demic backgrounds? Clues can be found in Panda Academy's booklist design. The booklist is divided into nine major sections, including self-management and communication collaboration, with each section containing approximately four books. Most sources are translated foreign editions, and Chinese authors selected are generally established scholars like Li Zhongqiu, Fei Xiaotong, and Li Zehou.

From the booklist design perspective, these contents avoid extremely specialized advanced works while also excluding overly simplistic entertainment books. Topics such as self-management and artistic literacy are inevitably involved in individual growth and development. This approach maximizes the blurring of different educational and professional backgrounds to address common needs, representing a clever and practical general education booklist design.

2.3 Content Decomposition and Recommendation Mechanism

Since the booklist is publicly available, why would users pay to join the Panda Academy community? This question touches precisely on value transformation in the era of fragmented reading. Based on the user pain points analyzed above, users' payment to Panda Academy is not actually for the books' content itself but for the customized booklist curation, content decomposition, and push mechanism.

Panda Academy's booklist is customized by a content team composed of nearly a hundred top graduates and professors from Harvard, Oxford, Tsinghua, Peking University, and other prestigious institutions worldwide. Professional content analysts extract key points from books, break down valuable content, and streamline it into portions suitable for WeChat reading, ensuring authority while improving reading efficiency. This is the true value point for which audiences are willing to pay.

2.4 Making Supervision Mechanisms a Guarantee for Value Realization

The new media era particularly emphasizes user autonomy, making user experience comfort an inevitable orientation. However, online learning products like Panda Academy do exactly the opposite, incorporating compulsory elements such as supervision during user experience to remind users to focus on obtaining self-improvement value.

Panda Academy has established a credit assessment system, attendance system, and discipline system. According to the teaching plan, detailed daily learning tasks are set for students, and each enrolled student can view their learning progress and academic schedule on their exclusive page. When unable to complete learning tasks, students must click to request leave, and behaviors that

do not comply with teaching arrangements are recorded in personal penalty records.

The establishment of such a supervision system is actually also a form of motivation and encouragement. In a gamified progression system, it can further stimulate users' motivation during product usage. This restrictive approach 反而 provides users, accustomed to coming and going freely in internet information, with a novel experience.

3.1 Using Invitation Mechanisms for User Acquisition

During user guidance, Panda Academy offers two channels: the first is direct purchase of admission for 199 RMB, and the second is becoming a volunteer to assist in promotional work—inviting three friends to join grants free admission.

For users, there is a clear preference for the second channel, as inviting three friends is not a difficult task. Given the nature of learning products, users are also willing to share this need with friends, which becomes a promotional channel for Panda Academy's brand establishment.

Would it affect Panda Academy's economic interests if all users chose the second channel? Currently, Panda Academy's first batch of beta qualifications was issued in March 2016, and it has already achieved profitability and financing. Therefore, Panda Academy is still in its early development stage, where word-of-mouth promotion and user acquisition value are actually higher than direct economic profit, which can be regarded as a relatively gentle and high-quality user screening and reservation stage.

3.2 Using Scene Construction to Grant Users a “Student” Identity

How to balance deep reading with the new media platform? Panda Academy chose to reconstruct the traditional campus model within the new media platform. Users of different age groups, educational backgrounds, and professions are re-granted a “student” identity in Panda Academy.

Panda Academy is structured with an administrative office, archives room, teaching research center, teaching affairs office, classes, and publicity department, reflecting traditional campus roles in the product. It features anthropomorphized characters such as the stern and mighty Director Tiger, the steady and senior Master Turtle, the wise and meticulous Professor Crane, and the flexible and clever Secretary Mantis.

When discussing internet products, we often mention scene construction to indicate the temporal and spatial conditions suitable for product usage. Panda Academy invested significant effort in expansion based on the original WeChat platform to create a learning scenario that embodies the product's core value.

3.3 Using Incentive Mechanisms Like Check-ins and Tests to Enhance User Stickiness

Panda Academy designed a calendar-style check-in record page. Check-ins are a common feature in learning-oriented internet products. The check-in process itself implies self-challenge, persistence, and growth. Moreover, the check-in mechanism directly induces daily product usage. The establishment of the check-in system can achieve user activity during product usage and enhance product engagement.

Testing mechanisms are uncommon in internet products. Panda Academy designed weekly test sessions during product usage, extracting questions from recommended content to reward users with scores upon completion. The testing component is Panda Academy's attempt to demonstrate professionalism, constantly reminding users that the product's primary purpose is to help users achieve self-growth, thereby highlighting product value. Additionally, the testing component itself is a gamified incentive mechanism. Although users have different foundations, a key prerequisite for joining Panda Academy is their recognition of a positive and upward lifestyle, making test sessions aligned with user mentality and product selection intentions.

3.4 Integrating Online and Offline for User Activation

User acquisition, retention, and activation are key focuses in internet product operations, and the WeChat platform inherently possesses social function advantages. Panda Academy sets up an admission survey during user screening, covering interests, lifestyle habits, self-assessment, and optionally filled location data. This pre-admission survey is the prerequisite for Panda Academy's event operations.

Panda Academy enrolls a limited number of students each period and conducts intelligent class allocation based on submitted content. Students can not only participate in WeChat group discussions online but also organize offline city-based reading exchange meetings. With economic development, today's highly educated groups have already integrated learning behaviors into daily life. The ability to break through geographical boundaries online to study with students nationwide and even overseas, while communicating offline with city-based students based on shared interests, represents an important form of user activation for Panda Academy.

4. Conclusion

In an era where the dividend period for content-based WeChat public accounts is declining, Panda Academy's ability to complete product construction and achieve profitability within a year has its inevitable factors. From the analysis above, we can see that in the early design phase, Panda Academy accurately captured users' need for deep learning and launched an internet product positioned

for fragmented yet efficient learning. From an operational perspective, Panda Academy —反 the common practice of internet products that infinitely cater to user demands. Instead, it constructs a learning scenario that grants users an online student identity and strengthens supervision and incentive mechanisms within the product to achieve user retention and realize core product value.

The design and operation of Panda Academy present emerging elements of the knowledge economy's development in the internet era. Paying for knowledge and knowledge processing itself is subverting audiences' accustomed information acquisition methods. Learning behaviors on mobile terminals are also continuously enriching their forms, becoming an important self-improvement pathway beyond traditional education.

Funding: This paper is a result of the 2016 Hebei Province Innovation Capacity Enhancement Plan Self-funded Project (Hebei Soft Science Research Project) “Research on the Training Model of Science Popularization Talents in Hebei Province Universities under the Background of Big Data, Intelligence, Mobile Internet, and Cloud Computing” (164576490), and the Hebei Institute of Communications 2016-2017 Teaching Reform Research Project “Research on the Training Model of Innovation and Entrepreneurship Talents under the Background of Transformation and Development of Universities in Hebei Province—A Case Study of Interdisciplinary Science Popularization Talent Training Exploration at Hebei Institute of Communications” (jw2016002).

References:

- [1] Wang Ping. Analysis of Support Functions and Design Principles of WeChat Mobile Learning[J]. Distance Education, 2015(5): 34.
- [2] Hao Lianke, Tang Jiping. Research on the Construction of WeChat Learning Platform under the Background of “Internet + Education”—A Case Study of Photoshop Image Processing Course[J]. China Educational Technology, 2016(8): 56.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.