

E-commerce: How tertiary education must change to meet needs of industry

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In an industry that is evolving so rapidly, tertiary institutions need to keep up with the pace of change in e-commerce and ensure their graduates are equipped with the right skills when they enter the working world. Cheryl Ingram, founder and head of The Digital Media Collective, outlines changes she would like to see implemented in South African universities and colleges and how her award-winning digital agency is addressing these shortfalls.



The e-commerce boom shows no signs of slowing down, with FNB Merchant Services expecting more than one billion online transactions in South Africa during 2025. As more brands take their offerings online and consumers increase their online purchasing activity, there is a growing need for graduates with relevant e-commerce knowledge in the digital marketing and brand management space – a need that is not being adequately met by local tertiary institutions, says Cheryl.

Identifying and addressing shortfalls

“As an active employer of BCom digital marketing and brand management graduates I am acutely aware that there are serious shortfalls in the curriculum and the skillset of graduates,” says Cheryl. “These graduates come out with little to no real world knowledge of the e-commerce journey and the same can be said for the levels of knowledge on all things digital marketing too. While they might have some of the theory in their heads, they don’t have any practical insights into all the different elements that make up digital marketing or e-commerce.”

Cheryl says it takes eight months to a year to get graduates up to speed so that they can begin to add true value to the team. As a former teacher, Cheryl understands that adapting and changing curriculums is no easy feat – especially when it applies to an industry that is evolving at such a rapid pace. That said, she believes there are changes that can be made to better equip graduates to insure they are industry-ready.

Focus on practical

First off, Cheryl says practical work experience and internships should form part of degree programmes – and not just for a few weeks in their final year. TDMC takes interns from their first year right through to final year – and has ended up offering every one of these interns a fulltime role once they have obtained their degree. “It is all about seeing the practical application of what they learn. In their first year these interns do all those little jobs that take the pressure off the main team while getting to experience a real-world e-commerce work environment. They are given accountability from day one and we build on these responsibilities over their tenure with us until they are capable of managing an account on their own,” says Cheryl.

While she would like to see more agencies offering these kinds of learnerships, the challenge is that many of them have moved to remote working or hybrid office setups which makes valuable internships impossible. “You simply can’t have internships running remotely – it is all about being in the environment, learning from conversations happening around you and getting first-hand experience of problem solving in action,” says Cheryl, whose agency is “proudly onsite”. Cheryl says a lot of degree programmes overseas include a work experience year mid-degree and that this should also be considered by local universities and colleges.

Connect with experts

The other change Cheryl would like to see is the incorporation of relevant accreditations from Google, Meta, Shopify and the likes into the curriculums. “We see graduates coming out with marketing degrees who have never seen Google Search Console or Meta Business Suite. And there really is no excuse - all of these platforms have learning academies that have been expertly developed by educators so there is no need for universities to develop their own programmes,” says Cheryl. “These courses are free, and they are credible. While some of the exams do have a cost attached to them, the accreditation students receive is invaluable and at least gives them an add on that any true digital agency would require.”

Educating a new generation

While learning institutions play catchup, Cheryl says students looking for a future career in the e-commerce space should reach out to agencies and seek an internship from their first year of study. “They need to keep trying until they find an agency or business to take them on so that they can learn in-house and be work ready,” says Cheryl. “Equally, if your college is not offering a more thorough digital marketing or e-commerce segment, students should consider going direct to source and gaining accreditations from Google and Meta themselves – there is no need to pay an academy to do these courses as they are all based off the same material that these platforms provide for free.” The good thing about these accreditations is that they can be easily verified online, which is excellent when students are looking for employment or freelance opportunities.

“E-commerce is an exciting career, but for us to ensure that the talent pool is deep enough to meet the industry’s needs we need to see universities and colleges taking stock of how they can ensure their graduates are employment ready. As an agency that prides itself on meeting challenges with innovative solutions, we believe that the industry has an important role to play too by providing intern opportunities to help polish talent and give them real-world experience,” says Cheryl.

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