The Use of Online Marketing and Social Media in Higher Education Institutions in Romania

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Abstract

For a very long period of time, universities were institutions that offered education to those who could meet their prescribed entry criteria and were operating in a supply-side market, which meant that their marketing efforts were limited to a few actions, and the communication efforts were unidirectional.

The diverse changes in the global environment had a direct impact over higher education institutions and forced them to rethink their general strategy and to tailor their marketing efforts in order to better suit the student-customer information and communication needs. The changed approach was mandatory for universities survival in a demand-side market.

This change implied that universities undertook organizational changes meant to transform them in more market oriented institutions and that communication with target groups became a priority. Online environment offers universities various marketing instruments designed to fulfill their needs to provide accurate and up-to-date information and to have a two-way communication with their target groups, whether they are current or prospective students. Social media proves to be an unlimited resource of instruments for higher education institutions to get closer to their public.

This article aims to analyze the use of online marketing and social media strategies applied by universities in Romania, both public and private. The survey was conducted on 56 public universities and 55 private universities and aimed to examine the universities websites and social media involvement.

Keywords: Marketing, higher education institutions, communication, online marketing, social media.

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Introduction

Higher education reform has been an important debate in the past years the need to re-adjust the entire system both to the general society needs and to the students' requirements and expectations being the central issue.

Higher competition and changing social environment are two important aspects that forced higher education institutions both public and private, to become more proactive and more market-oriented.

Nowadays, institutions face a plethora of issues and challenges in the current era of higher education endeavors. In this respect, institutions are "being urged to provide high quality education, exist as a well-reputed university, achieve enrolment success, improve competitive positioning, provide

contemporary and well-designed academic programs, and maintain financial strength" (Cetin, 2003). This has forced administrators at institutions of higher education to begin to recognize that they need to function more like a business and market their offerings utilizing sound strategies (Hancock and McCormick, 1996).

In this context, it appears rather ironic that many institutions may preach the virtues of marketing to their business management students, yet fail to realize the implications this has for their own institution and so they use it very poorly in their day to day activities.

The specifics of Marketing Approach in higher Education Institutions

Marketing plays a major role in any organizations, and so in order for universities to survive and to succeed in the changing environment, it must become a key aspect in their general strategy.

If in the case of products the basic of marketing is condensed in the 4 Ps: product, price, place, promotion, when talking about services there have been identified 7 Ps: service product, price, place, promotion, people, process and physical evidence; so in order to better market themselves universities need to take in account a larger number of factors. According to Shoemaker (1999), marketing is the proactive management of the relationship between a higher education institution and its various markets by using the tools of marketing: service product, price, place, promotion, people, process and physical evidence.
According to Ivy (2008), the concept of marketing in higher education is certainly not new. Kotler and Fox (1995, p. 6) probably offer the best description of marketing in this particular sector. They describe the practice as the "analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of value with target markets to achieve institutional objectives.

Marketing involves designing the organization's offerings to meet the target market's needs and desires, using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate and service the markets."

Effective marketing requires higher education institutions to identify their target audience, understand and communicate with them as directly and interactively as possible. (Laurer, 2006)

There are various consumers of the higher education institutions: students, their parents, financial supporters, donors, employers and the general community that is in one way or another influenced by the universities activity. Naturally, universities primary consumers and target group are students. At the same time, students, as a target group, must be segmented and targeted differentially as there can be: mature students, high-school graduates and international students, and each group has different needs and expectations.

The internet and social media offer universities valuable instruments in order to better communicate with their target groups. The main advantage comes from the possibility to obtain feedback, the disadvantage being the impossibility to control every aspect of the two-way conversation.

According to Kotler and Fox, "marketing exists when people decide to satisfy their needs and wants through exchange" (Kotler, Fox, 2002).

In higher education institutions case, the exchange is obtaining the necessary product or advantage while offering something in return. Universities offer their programs, academic disciplines and a diploma, in exchange for which students offer their time, commitment and sometimes money in the form of tuition fees.

One of the most important aspects that universities need to give more attention is

the positioning strategy, as they need to differentiate it from their competition. This is one of the most difficult things to achieve as educational products are considered to be rather similar, and until now the main argument for choosing one university over another has been the location and not the academic offer.

The way universities exploit the communication opportunities offered by the Internet is another method to differentiate from the competition, as students are interested in the online profile and visibility of the university.

The Importance of Online Marketing in Higher Education Institutions

Throughout the past decade, offices of marketing, public relations and communication belonging to higher education institutions also have begun to change their approach toward their public, through becoming more proactive. The reasons for this are generated by the decreased number of students, higher competition, fewer governmental funding and increased expectations from current and potential students.

The importance of online presence for higher education institutions is stated by the existence of 4 International Colleges & Universities which is an international higher education search engine and directory reviewing accredited Universities and Colleges in the world and includes 10.000 Colleges and Universities, ranked by web popularity, in 200 countries. The aim of the website is to provide an approximate popularity ranking of world Universities and Colleges based upon the popularity of their websites. (http://www.4icu.org)

The ranking is based on an algorithm including three unbiased and independent web metrics extracted from three different search engines:

- Google Page Rank

- Yahoo Inbound Links

- Alexa Traffic Rank

According to this ranking, the most active Romanian universities online are "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Iasi, "Babeş-Bolyai" University Cluj-Napoca and "Gheorghe Asachi" Technical University Iasi, but neither of them is in the first 200. The first ten universities ranked in the top are all located in the United States, proving the importance given to technology and opportunities offered by them in this area.

Regarding the students perspective, a study conducted in 2010 by E-Expectations research group which surveyed more than 1,000 college-bound high school students from United States, polling them on their online behaviors and expectations as well as other key enrollment-related topics revealed that online communication is a key aspect when evaluating universities. (Noel-Levitz et al. 2010).

Highlights of the study included:

- 1 in 4 students reported removing a school from their prospective list because of a bad experience on that school Web site.

- 92 percent said that they would be disappointed with a school or remove it entirely from their lists if they didn't find the information needed on the school Web site.

- 76 percent of students said they use Facebook, while 33 percent reported using MySpace.

- 76 percent of students supported schools creating their own private social networks for prospective students.

- 52 percent of students said they have viewed videos about colleges, while only 10 percent reported watching them on YouTube.

- 46 percent claimed that the current economic crisis had caused them to reconsider the schools they would apply to or attend—an increase from 34 percent just last year.

- 23 percent of respondents reported searching college sites from their smart phones.

The research applies widely to Romanian prospective students who rely more and more on the Internet for information.

In Romania, internet is mainly used for information, e-mail, reading books, networking and watching movies. According to a study conducted by The Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, 96% of the individual use of the internet in order to obtain information, 80% use it for communicating through e-mail, while 70% declared that they are more interested in socializing through social networks. (IRES 2011)

Methodology of the Study

The research was conducted on the websites of 56 public universities and 55 private universities activating in Romania.
The online marketing features that were analyzed in the research consisted of:

- The web page of the university – general layout and the year it was designed.

- Interactive features offered by the website.

- Social media usage – if the higher education institution has an account on a social network and which one.

Web-Sites

The presentation website is a vital communication instrument for a higher education institution, because it is designed to offer a vast amount of information which can be easily brought to day. At the same time, the cost of dissemination is clearly lower than the one imposed by printed materials and it can be distributed virtually to an unlimited number of persons.

The interactive features of the website allow students to have a glimpse not only to the academic program, but also to the location, facilities and resources of the university, as the site can have pictures, movies, virtual tours of the institution and information about the academic staff.

Romanian universities began to understand the importance of online presence and so, all 56 public universities have a presentation website. At the same time, only 78% of the private universities have an active website where they present their academic offer. 5% of the private universities have a website that is not active.

27% of the public universities redesigned and developed their website in between 2010-2011 and their websites are now more interactive and have more features, benefiting from the latest improvements in technology and online communication. 20 % have presentation sites which were created between 1993 and 2004, while the rest of 53% were either designed before 2009 or didn't offer information so they could be included in the statistic.

In the private universities case, 25% of them redesigned and developed their website in between 2010-2011, while 38% have websites which were created between 2006 and 2009. 8% of the private universities had their websites created in 1991 and in 1992. For the rest of 29% there weren't enough data to be analyzed.

The fact that universities target international students is underlined by the fact that 75% of all public universities have their websites in English, 20% added French and 5 % also added German and another 4 % presented their university in Italian and Magyar. The Magyar language is specific to the

universities located in the regions that have important communities of Hungarians.

Private universities also target international students; this is highlighted by the fact that

48% of all universities have their websites in English, 15% in French and 8 % in German and in Hungarian and another 3 % presented their university in Italian.
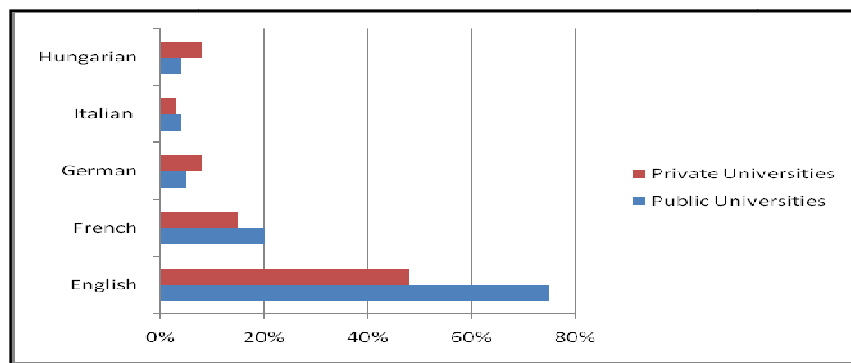
Fig. 1 – Comparative View of the Language of theWebsites

Among other features offered by the universities websites are: virtual tours, presentation films, different videos and links to their alumni community.

Only 7% of the public universities websites offer a virtual tour of the university, 4% have a presentation film and only one university has upgraded its website for mobile.

The private universities websites offer less interactive features than the public ones: only 3% of the websites offer a virtual tour of the university, 10% have a presentation film and one university offers personalized wallpaper for students to download.

20% of the public universities have a communication department under different names: Information and Public relations department, Media Department, Public Relations and Communications. 10 % of the private universities have a communication department under different names: Public relations department, Media Department, Public Relations, Press and Advertising Department. Neither of these institutions has a separate entity within the department that manages solely digital communication.

An aspect more popular with private universities is the polls addressed to students: many websites had on their front-page a public poll requiring prospective students to answer which faculty they would be inclined to enroll in in the forthcoming year. This proves that private institutions are in a way more aware of the importance of two-way communication.

Social Media Usage

Social media comprises of activities that involve socializing and networking online through words, pictures and videos. Social media is redefining how we relate to each other as humans and how we as humans relate to the organizations that serve us. It is about dialogue – two-way discussions bringing people together to discover and share information (Solis 2008).

The various forms of social media have been divided into ten categories: publication tools, sharing tools, discussion tools, social networks, micropublication tools, social aggregation tools, livecast, virtual worlds, social gaming and massively multiplayer online gaming (MMO) (Cavazza, 2008).
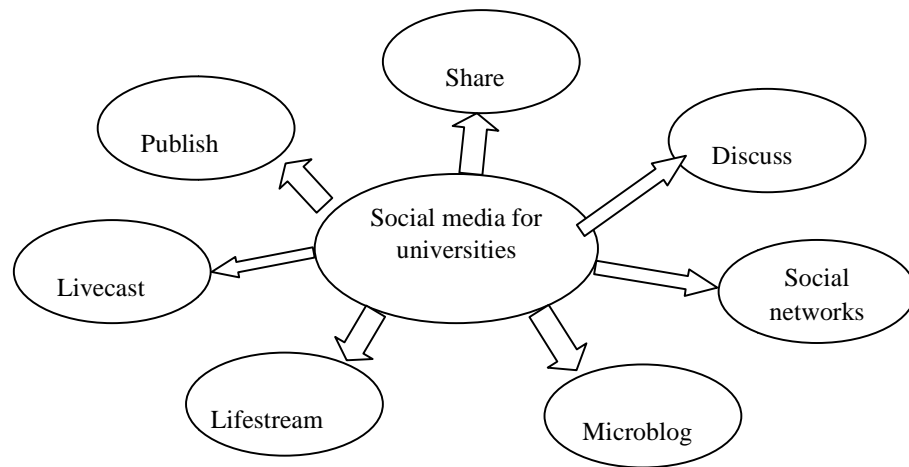
Fig. 2 – Social Media Usage for Universities (Adjusted after Cavazza)

The most used social media instruments within higher education institutions are: publication tools such as blogs and wikis, sharing tools for videos and slideshows, discussion tools like forums, social networks and micropublication tools such as twitter.

In 2011, Romania had 7.3 million Internet users; the online communication means began to develop in the last years in order to better reach the target groups information needs. Out of this number, 3.617.200 were Facebook users which means that 49.57% of all Internet users have a Facebook account,

making this social network the most popular among Romanian internet users (facebrands.ro).

The demographic data show that 33% of Facebook users are between 18-24 years old, 30.8% are between 25-34 years old, and the third age group, representing 16.6% is people between 13-17 years old. These statistics show that an important part of universities publics are members of this social network, making Facebook a valuable communication instrument.
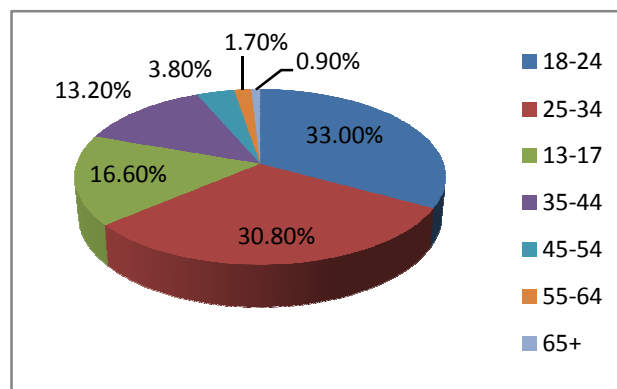
Fig. 3 - Age Groups Using Facebook

Social media offers universities the possibility to provide the information prospective students need in order to make a decision, to allow people contact with students that are already enrolled and to offer a friendlier and more open image of the institution. A university or a faculty profile within such a network could benefit from the advantage of informal language and support an image of an institution that is close to the students, that understands their needs and expectations and is interested in knowing their opinions. An account on a social network is also useful to maintain relations with former students and to create an Alumni community which is also an important promotional instrument, since prospective students often search for information inside the Alumni communities.

Universities are using social media for different activities, the most common being: gathering and sharing information, showcasing student and faculty work, broadcasting special events, emergency notifications and creating a dialogue in addition to communicating with their students or prospective students.

The most important aspect of this instrument is that the accent is put on the idea of the two-way communication. Unlike the website, the social media instruments offer universities the possibility to engage the public and to receive feedback, because in the end it is all about the conversation.

The research reveals that few Romanian universities use social networks actively and mainly in the recruitment periods: 18% of the public universities have a Facebook account, 18% have a YouTube channel, 16% have a Twitter account, 11% have a LinkedIn account and 2% have a Flickr account. Most of them have account on one or more social networks, the most popular being Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The rest of the public universities do not use social networks as communication instruments.

Private universities use even less social networks to communicate: 16% have a Facebook account, 7% have a Youtube account and only 2% have a Twitter account. None of the private universities use LinkedIn. This trend is opposite to the one registered among private universities and colleges from the United States where they have proved to be faster in adopting social media communication than public institutions.
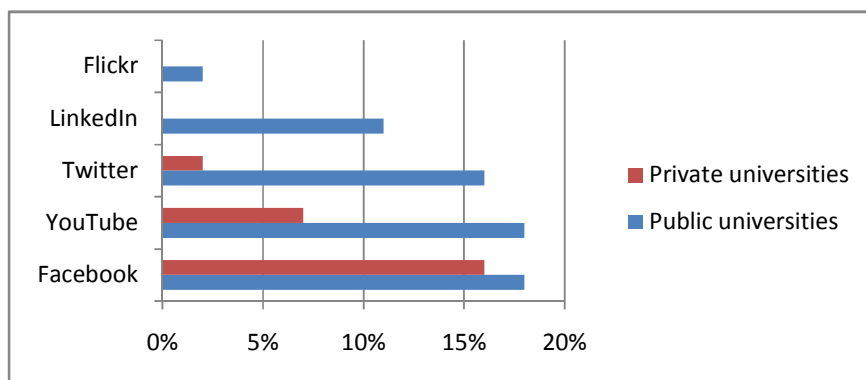
Fig. 4 - Comparative Use of Social Media Instruments between Public and Private Universities

The average number of fans per university page was 1790, and the public universities had a higher number of fans. The most popular among higher education institutions is Bucharest University with 11311 fans. An important aspect here is the type of page

universities have on social networks such as Facebook: some of them have an institutional fan page while others have a regular account where they add friends on their list.

The social networks accounts are more active in admission periods when prospective students are asking for information regarding the admission process, the results and accommodation options.

The universities virtual walls are used in the admission period and in the first two months of the semester mainly by students in order to find courses and seminars materials, accommodation facilities and roommates, or to get in touch with colleagues if they are first year students with an average of 10 messages a day.

For the rest of the school year it seems that universities still have a problem in involving students to be more active on their social networks. But at the same time, it is true that most Romanian universities have online student's communities, forums and other internal communication instruments that ensure enrolled students need to communicate with their teachers and colleagues.

Conclusions

The higher penetration rate of Internet provides numerous opportunities for universities to better present their academic offer and to improve communication with their target groups. The social media instruments prove useful for universities that want to be closer to their current and prospective students and show a more open and flexible image.

The research aims at analyzing the online communication instruments used by universities; and in order to do that, the survey was applied to all the public and private universities active in Romania: 56 public universities and 55 private ones.

The research reveals that public institutions invest more in their online marketing communication instruments this is evidenced by the fact that all universities have an active website and 15 of them redesigned their website in the last two years. The unexpected outcome of this research reveals that 12 private higher education institutions have no website and that 3 of them have websites that are not working.

The use of social media instruments is also more popular with public education institutions, as 18 % of public universities have Facebook and Twitter accounts. The most used social media channel for private universities is also Facebook as 16 % have an account. Most of these accounts are used more in the recruitment period.

The numbers revealed by the survey show a limited usage of the social media communication opportunities and an apparent lack of understanding of the importance of marketing and online communication for higher education institutions. There is an important gap between Romanian higher education institutions and the ones from abroad which seem to have a better understanding of the utility of social media instruments and prove to be more flexible in their communication approach.

Even when universities began to understand the importance of communication through the instruments provided by the internet, most of them still don't have a comprehensive plan for engagement in social media, creating the appearance that they engage in social media for the sake of engaging in social media.

One of the considerations that hinders universities to be more active in the social media is the apparent lack of control over the communication instruments, as the two-way communications involves not only important advantages but also risks when not conducted correctly.

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