

Online communication channels from the point of view of higher education's target audience

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to describe the specific aspects of online communication channels in terms of higher education environment. On the one hand, there are higher educational institutions, and on the other hand there is the target audience of these institutions - students and prospective students. With regard to this issue the article summarizes the theoretical basis regarding Internet marketing, marketing of educational institutions and public relations in the online environment of the Internet. Based on the analysis the article describes the current state of communications preferences of applicants for higher education and the students themselves on the global level. Another objective of the article is to evaluate the opportunities that the online environment of the Internet and new tools of marketing communication bring to higher education institutions in terms of marketing.

Keywords: Communication, E-marketing, Faculty, Higher Education Institution, Public Relations

JEL Classification: M30; M31

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1. Introduction

The main advantage of the Internet as a communication medium is that it can target information on the specified audience. This issue is now of a high importance among authors dealing with marketing. Online environment offers a wide range of promotion tools for those interested in marketing activities, thus providing them with an undeniable advantage that strengthens the position of this communication channel. Another advantage of e-marketing is the fact that the funds invested in online marketing activities are in comparison with other forms of advertising relatively negligible.

In our opinion, an important feature as well as an undeniable advantage of online marketing communication in general is its ability to focus at selected target groups that a business entity intends to reach. Moreover, online marketing is far more direct than conventional methods. Positive aspects of online marketing communication, which are briefly described above, appear to be significant in terms of their applicability to marketing activities of entities operating in the academic environment.

2. Theoretical basis

In a broader sense, it is possible to see e-marketing as the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies to achieve marketing objectives of a business entity. Other views see the issue of Internet marketing from the point of view of its position in the so-called Internet age where e-marketing went from the point of excessive vitality and investments to a failure and then it achieved the state of stable maturity. This is evidenced by the fact that customers are now more comfortable in searching for products, services and prices online (Kotler, 2007).

Příkrylová – Jahodová (2010) understand Internet marketing as a form of communication that is based on the estimation of behavior and perceptions of the target group. On the basis of these facts Internet marketing tries to find the most efficient methods and ways to bring the target group to the website as well as persuade them to buy a product/ service or perform other desired action. The authors add that marketing communication in the online world is becoming more direct as it gives the user immediate feedback (Příkrylová – Jahodová, 2010).

Sedláček (2006) has a more pragmatic approach towards the definition of Internet marketing. He sees Internet marketing as the use of the Internet to achieve one's marketing goals. In general, it should be noted that apart from the term Internet marketing there exist several synonyms like e-marketing or online marketing.

The issue of Internet marketing does not involve only the implementation of marketing activities in the Internet environment or other digital media. These are the activities related to the knowledge of the target groups that were adjusted to be used in the Internet environment. The essence of Internet marketing lies in the process of improving and enhancing the effectiveness of advertising and marketing activities (Madleňák et al., 2007).

Světlík (2006) states that only those educational institutions that use marketing at all levels and which staff is in contact with the customer, thus influencing their relationship with the educational institution, can succeed on the educational institutions market. This approach is based on the assumption that all actors are happy with services provided by the educational institution in the long term. Satisfaction of customers creates a good image, resulting in a higher loyalty of students and employees of the educational institution. As a result, loyalty and satisfaction contribute to improving the climate inside the institution and lower costs of acquiring new staff and students. On top of that, satisfaction helps with building a network of relationships with parents and the public.

According to Světlík (2009), variables of public relations like reputation or image of an educational institution are easily influenced by objective and subjective characteristics of the institution. Objective characteristics are difficult to change and sometimes the process requires a substantial amount of finances. How the institution is being perceived by individual groups of respondents is described as subjective characteristics. The current image of the institution is mostly based on previous reputation and is mostly stable. It follows that change is achieved only through long-term and patient work.

Some authors (Eger et al., 2010) state that marketing has no place in educational institutions since treating educational institutions like profit-oriented organizations is at least unethical. On the other hand, there are authors who support such an idea. Changes in society and the development of management and marketing of educational institutions show that nowadays not only private but also public educational institutions are aware of the need of marketing.

3. The current state of the problem

Internet environment and online world are currently becoming more and more popular and there is no doubt that this trend and the sheer importance of this medium will increase, alongside the development of communication technologies. These claims rely on the results of the analysis of WeAreSocial (Kemp 2016) which came with some important findings. Based on published data the analysis shows that 46 % of the total population uses the Internet and 31 % of the total population uses social networks. The analysis also focused its attention on the use of mobile devices among the global population. Based on the results it can be stated that 51 % of the global population can be identified as unique users of mobile communication devices. 27 % of mobile devices users access social networks through their devices.

As indicated by the above described analysis, the current importance of the online environment cannot be denied. Moreover, it is impossible to ignore its impact on the marketing activities of market-oriented organizations. The company WeAreSocial (Kemp 2016) has also addressed the annual on-year comparison of years 2015 and 2016 with a focus on the number of active Internet users. On-year comparison revealed an increase in the number of users of more than 332 million users (increase by 10 %). As for the number of active users of social media, numbers have increased as well (by 10 %, which accounts for more than 219 million users). It is also necessary to point out the growing number of mobile device users who use these devices to access the Internet and social media (Figure 1). Specifically, the analysis claim 4 % (more than 141 million users) increase of users accessing the Internet via mobile devices. The number of active users accessing social networks via mobile devices rose by 17 % (more than 283 million users).

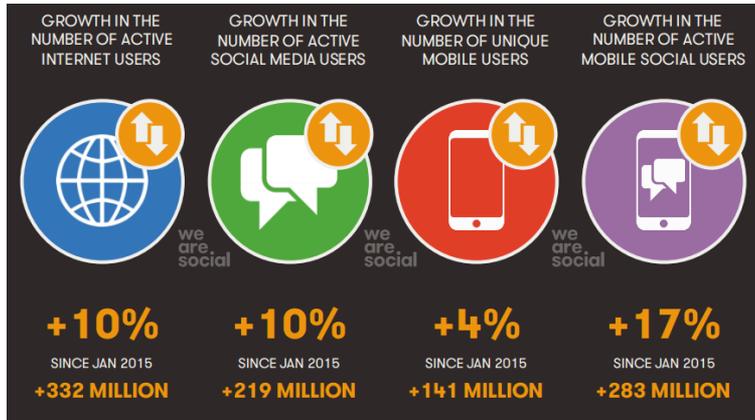


Figure 1. Global digital snapshot

The general importance of mobile devices from the point of view of college students was proven by the analysis carried out by the company eMarketer (2013). In its forecast focused on the US market the analysis predicts that in 2016 up to 91.40 % of college students will use a smartphone. When comparing years 2010 and 2016, the increase in the number of smartphone users amounts to 8.86 million students (an increase of 108.85 %). In our opinion, the above-mentioned prediction is not far from the reality that lies ahead. Also, the popularity of mobile devices as the primary device to access the Internet is expected to grow.

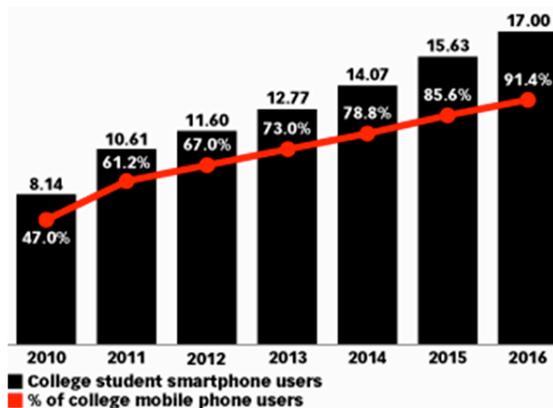


Figure 2. US college student smartphone users, 2010 - 2016 (in millions)

The analysis of the company Top Universities (2013) shows how important the online environment is for the college students. With regard to the monitored field of study, on average (Figure 3) 27 % of the students spent more than five hours online. The highest share of students who are online for 5 + hours was identified among those who studied Engineering and Technology (43 %). The lowest proportion of students who spend 5 + hours a day online was identified among those who study Arts and Humanities.

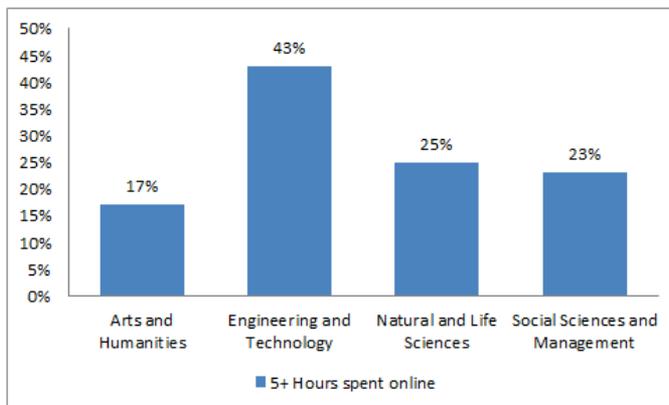


Figure 3. 5+ Hours spent online - College students

A more detailed look at the use of Internet marketing tools is offered by the analysis of Top Universities (2015). The analysis focused its attention on the ways prospective college students use digital resources available online during their study. The analysis was carried out in 2015 on a sample of 5,400 respondents from 33 countries (Europe (43%), Asia (29%), North America (10%), Latin America (14%) and Africa (4%)). In terms of gender, 51% of the respondents were men and 49% were women. The highest number of respondents fell into the group of 22-25 years olds – 40%, the second highest share of 28% was recorded for the age group of 26-29 years olds, the age category of students up to 17 years of age represented the share of 9%, the age category of 18-20 years olds represented the share of 11%, the same share of 11% was recorded for the age group 30 years and older.

The results of the above described analysis (Top Universities 2015) examining the importance of information channels (online and offline information sources) through which respondents get information for their decision making process regarding educational institutions indicate that online resources as well as traditional offline resources are in all monitored age groups of respondents considered equally important (Figure 3).

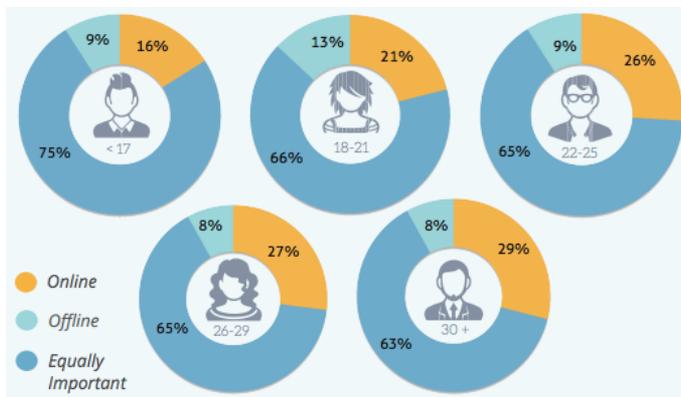


Figure 3. The importance of the source of information that is affecting the decision making process

The results of the analysis also show that respondents of all surveyed age groups prefer online information sources. Online communication channels were marked as the most important among the age group 30 years and older (29%).

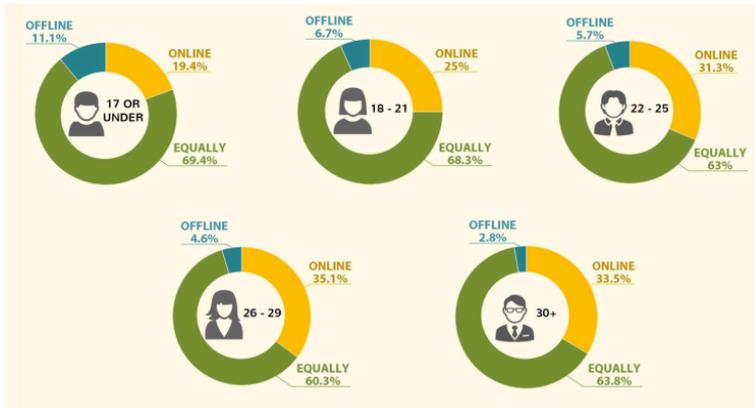


Figure 4. Online vs. offline sources

Interestingly enough, the perceived importance of each communication channel is almost proportionally consistent among all age categories. For the on-year comparison of the years 2014 and 2015 (Top Universities 2014) Figure 4 shows that in 2015 offline communication resources have strengthen their share across all age categories of respondents. Exceptions are respondents aged 17 years and below where the opposite trend was identified.

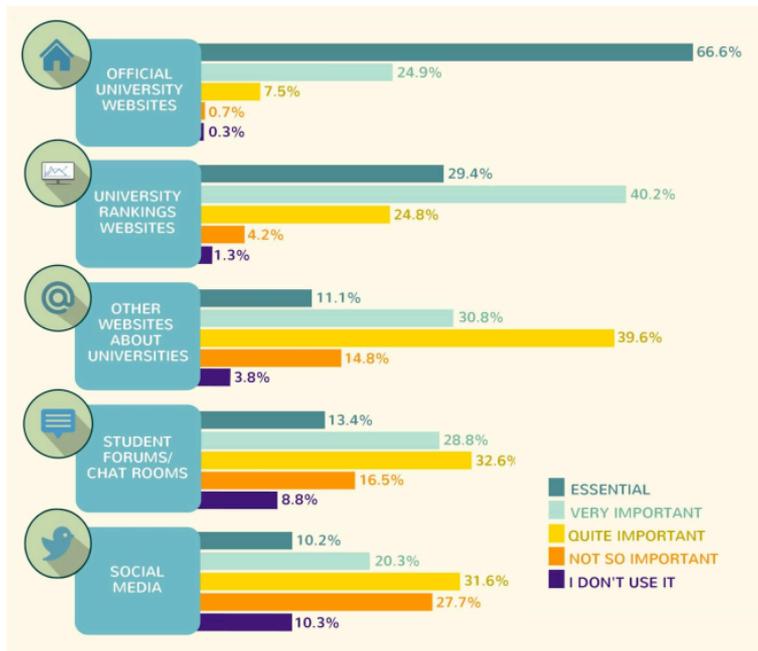


Figure 5. The importance of individual online sources of information

The analysis of the organization Top Universities (2014) conducted in 2014 focused its attention on analyzing the perceived importance of each online resource providing information about education institutions. Official websites of the universities were seen as an essential source of information linked to the institution itself or offered

study fields. Another major online source of information is higher education ranking portals. In this case, the majority of respondents stated that this source is "very important" - 40.20 %. Interestingly enough, social media were seen by 27 % of respondents as "not important", 10.30 % of respondents does not use social media at all. A detailed overview of the importance of individual communication sources can be found in Figure 5.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays, almost all parts of organizations offering their goods and services on the market use online technologies in their online marketing activities. The market of higher education institutions is no exception. As these trends are being successfully applied in classic business, they can be effectively used for the purposes of marketing activities of higher education institutions as well, particularly in terms of their faculties. Communication in the online environment has several positive features, like the possibility of precise targeting, personalization, interactivity, usability of multimedia content, easy measurability and efficiency at relatively low costs. In our opinion the opportunities provided by Internet marketing in terms of higher educational institutions are highly relevant. Internet marketing tools (online marketing mix) can be described as cost-effective. Moreover, these tools have features like immediate monitoring of progress and its management in real time. The analysis of user preferences of the target audience, knowledge of current trends, the formulation and subsequent implementation of marketing programs and their optimization are in our view important steps on the way to succeed in the competitive market environment.

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