Online communication specifics of applicants for higher education

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to describe the specific aspects of the online communication process, both from higher education institutions and on the one hand from the applicants themselves. As part of the assessment of the direction of this issue, the article summarizes the theoretical background of the issues of internet marketing and marketing of educational institutions. Based on the analyzes, the article describes the current global state of communication preferences for university applicants. Another purpose of the article is to evaluate the possibilities that the online environment of the internet and the new marketing communication tools associated with it offer marketing activities to higher education institutions, while at the same time the ambition of the article is to point out the difficulties associated with this issue.

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1. Introduction

The chance for success on the market for educational services have the institutions which apply marketing at all levels where all school staff are in touch with the customer and influence their relationship to the organization. This approach implies that all subjects will be satisfied with the services of the educational institution for a long time. Consequently, the satisfaction creates a good image, leads to a higher loyalty of the students as well as to the employees of the educational institution. Loyalty and satisfaction contributed to improve the atmosphere and lower costs for recruiting new employees and students, as well as supporting the building of a network of relationships with parents, practitioners and the public (Světlík 2009).

Marketing in the field of educational institutions is becoming an increasingly discussed issue. It is possible to meet the belief that marketing does not belong to this area, as it is at least unethical to compare educational institutions to profit-oriented organizations. On the other hand, there is an opinion which expresses the positive attitude and the need for marketing management of the organization. The development of the company, as well as the development of the management and marketing of the educational organizations, has meant that recently not only private but also public educational institutions are aware of the need for marketing. The online environment with its undeniable advantages at the level of marketing communication appears to be an important tool for the marketing activities of subjects in the academic environment (Eger et al. 2010).

The advantage of the internet as a communication medium is also that it allows us to target broadcast information to a precisely specified audience segment (Phillips 2003). A more pragmatic approach to the definition of internet marketing is given by Sedláček (2006), who defines it as using the internet to achieve marketing goals. In
In general, it should be mentioned that in practice it is possible to meet concepts such as e-marketing, online marketing, which are used as other synonyms for the term internet marketing. In the case of this broader concept, e-marketing is for the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies to achieve the organization's marketing goals. Nondrek and Řenčová (2000) understand the issue of internet marketing and the concept itself as a process. Internet marketing defines a qualitative new form of marketing that can be characterized as managing the process of meeting human needs with information, services or goods via the internet.

Variable public relations as the reputation or image of the educational institution is influenced by the objective and subjective characteristics of the institution. In the case of objective characteristics, their change is very demanding or requires considerable financial costs (Světlík 2009). We perceive subjective perceptions as the perception of the institution by individual groups of respondents. The current image of the institution is most often based on a previous story and shows relative stability. It follows that for many factors change is achieved only by long-term and patient work. According to Medleňák and Zboranová (2007) we should apply e-marketing tools to follow principles such as customer focus, offer the highest quality, constantly and at the right time innovate the products and services.

2. The current state of the problem

The use of online technologies through online marketing tools penetrates almost all the dimensions of the functioning of organizations providing their goods and services on the consumer markets. The environment of education, particularly higher education institutions, is no exception. As these new trends are successfully applied in classical business, they can be used effectively for the marketing activities of higher education institutions, specifically under the conditions of their faculties of universities or colleges.

The online trend of internet popularity is currently growing and there is no doubt that this trend and the very importance of this media in the future with the development of communication technologies will grow. These claims can be based on the results of WeAreSocial's analysis (Camp 2017), which points to several, in our opinion, significant findings. Based on the published data of the analysis, the global share of internet users in the total population is 50%, social network usage represents 37% of the total population. The published analysis also focused on the use of mobile devices in the global population. From the results it can be stated that 66% of the global population can be identified as unique users of mobile communication devices. For mobile users accessing social networks represents 34%.

A closer look at the use of online marketing tools is provided by Top Universities (2015). The analysis of this company focused its attention on how potential high school students use available online digital resources as part of their study. This analysis was conducted in 2015 on a sample of 5400 respondents across 33 countries in Europe (43%), Asia (29%), North America (10%), Latin America (14%) and Africa (4%). In the case of the gender structure of the analysis performed, it is possible to find a composition, where 51% of respondents were men and 49% of the respondents were women. The highest number of respondents was in the age category from 22 to 25 years old, which represents 40%, the second highest 28% was in the case of age category from 26 to 29 years old. The age category up to 17 years old was 9%, the age group from 18 to 20 years old was 11%, and the same share was recorded by the respondents in the category of 30 years old and more.

The Top Universities analysis (2015) points to the fact that only a low percentage of respondents across all age groups are clearly determined to study through online tools. The highest share of the respondent opinion was expressed by respondents at the age 30 and more. On the other hand, the lowest share of consent was identified for respondents under the age of 17. Within all the age categories examined, a negative attitude to exclusive online study was dominated.
The results of the above-described analysis (Top Universities 2015), which investigate the importance of online and offline channels through which respondents draw on the information needed to make a decision about the selection of an educational institution, suggests that online resources as well as traditional ones - offline resources are all of the monitored age groups of respondents were considered to be equivalent (Figure 1).

From the results of the analysis, it is also possible to state that respondents for all age categories monitored, prefer online information sources. Online communication channels accounted for the highest share for respondents at the age of 30 and more, with a 29% share in this case. It is important to note the fact that the ratios of the meaning of the individual communication channels can be considered as relatively equal for all age categories (Top Universities 2015).

An analysis of Top Universities (2017) in 2016 also focused at the percentage of individual devices used by applicants to search for information online. As Figure 2 shows, the highest share was achieved by a laptop with a 90% share, the classic PC achieving a 35% share. The highest growth was recorded by smartphones, where we identify a share of 62% in 2016. In 2013, only 48% of the respondents used a smartphone to find information about the study.
When comparing the years 2013 and 2016, the declining share was recorded by a tablet which was used by only 25% of respondents to search for information in 2016.

As Figure 3 shows, learners perceive different online sources of information unequivocally different from their point of view. 63% of the applicants for learning as an essential source of information identified the homepage of the educational institution. Secondly, with a share of 31%, portals focusing on the evaluation of higher education subjects were placed. It is important to note that only 13% of the applicants have identified social media as a necessary online source of information. In the broader perspective, it is possible to state that other relevant training websites can also be included among the important online sources of information from the point of view of the applicants. On the other hand, the already mentioned social media and student discussion forums are perceived as not so important, rather unimportant (Top Universities 2015).

The Top Universities (2015) analysis also focused on user preferences for the search for specific information associated with an educational institution or a course. In the case of information related to the subjects taught, 33% of the respondents searched for this information on the official website of the educational institution, 18% of the respondents searched for this information on other websites related to the educational institution, 15% of the respondents looked for online portals focused on the qualitative comparison of the educational subjects 14% of the respondents searched for this information on other websites related to the educational institution, 15% of the respondents looked for online research courses, 33% of the respondents searched for this information on the official website, and only 14% of the respondents searched for this information on social media.
respondents searched them in social media and student community forums (Figure 4). We find it interesting to note that 15% of the respondents were looking for information which is related to the quality of the given subject in a social media environment. Social media also dominated in the case of respondents' efforts to get some motivation - an inspiration for the future study, it was 39%. In the case of a given variable, 37% of the share was recorded by student community forums, the lowest share recorded by channels of communication was the official website of the training body of 13% and portals for qualitative comparison of educational subjects got 12%.

The analysis of Top Universities (2015) pointed to the fact that the main thing students say when they are searching for information about a particular subject; around 70% of the surveyed participants selected this option. This suggests that students are particularly focusing on finding information about courses and offers in their desired subject area, providing an impetus for universities to ensure program information is readily accessible and optimized for relevant online searches. The second most common search topic was the information about courses (55%) and over a third of respondents identified location as something they specifically searched for (Figure 5).
As Figure 6 shows, the results of the Top Universities analysis (2017) point to the fact that Facebook's social network compared to 2013, weakened its position in 2016. In particular, its share across the spectrum of monitored social networks has dropped from 44% to 35% of those who are actively using this social network. YouTube's social networking site, primarily aimed at sharing video content, has maintained its position as the second most widely used social network with 31%. Twitter or Tumblr social network also recorded a year-on-year decline. Surprisingly, analyzing the data there is a 19% share for the Google+ social network. The subject is generally considered to be “dead” in terms of an active number of users.

![Figure 7. Ideal communication methods](image)

When communicating with institutions, it seems some prospective students still want to use a more traditional and formal medium - written letters. On the other hand almost 80% of the students said their preferred communication tool was the email. The analysis showed that women were more likely to contact universities via email than men, and more women felt this was the ideal method of contact. Surprisingly social media is used less than the other methods of communication, which correlates with students’ overall tendency to rank social media as less important than other online resources in this area of their lives (Top Universities 2017).

3. Conclusion

Online communication is an area which greatly helps address both existing and new customer target groups. It should be emphasized that it also helps to build the positive image of the organization, its reputation. Online communication is generally characterized by certain positive characteristics. In this context, it is worth to mention the possibilities of precisely targeting the advertising message, the possibility of personalization, interactivity and, last but not least, the simple measurability of the effected activities, at relatively low costs compared to the traditional promotion tools. In practice, often the quality of faculties and universities is not sufficiently demonstrated in their marketing promotion, much in our opinion, this is true for online communication. It is worth to mention the opinion of Štefko (2003), who states that a large number of researches increasingly point to the fact that a high-quality and recognized university is mainly a product of a good management which is not afraid to change the stereotypes and understands the school as a subject which should behave in a market environment in an efficient way. The opportunities offered by the online environment from the point of view of higher education institutions represent the possibilities of creative utilization of a wide range of marketing tools. These opportunities, which are represented by a wide range of online marketing tools in the conditions of higher education institutions, can be considered as significant from the point of view of competitiveness.
References


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