

Online communication preferences 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 of higher educational institutions and applicants for higher education. While evaluating the issue the article also summarizes the theoretical basis of the 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 global communications preferences of applicants for higher education. Another aim of the article is to evaluate the opportunities that the online environment of the Internet and new tools of marketing communication offers to higher education institutions and also their pitfalls.

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1. Introduction

Marketing in the Internet environment is becoming more and more important (Phillips 2003; Khan 2013) as we can see changes in the way people communicate, and also in the way people spend their leisure time. The advantage of the Internet as a communication medium lies also in the fact that it allows marketers to target the information transmitted on to the specified audience.

Online environment opens up a wide range of possibilities of promotion, dissemination of information about products, services or brand, giving such marketing activities undeniable advantages. The funds invested in marketing activities in the Internet environment are in comparison with other forms of promotion negligible, while advertising on the Internet is visible continuously. Online targeting on to selected target groups the organization intends to reach is much more direct in comparison with conventional methods. High degree of interaction helps marketers to build good relationships with the companies' target audience. The above-described facts appear to be significant in terms of their applicability to marketing activities of institutions operating in the academic environment (Janoucha 2011).

2. Literature review

A broader view of the concept of online marketing states that this form of communication is based on the estimates of behavior and perceptions of the target customer groups, where on the basis of these facts marketing tries to find the most efficient methods and ways to direct Internet users to the target website and persuade them to buy products/services or to other desired action. The authors add that in the online world marketing communication is more direct as allows for immediate feedback (Přikrylová – Jahodová 2010).

With regard to online marketing, Kotler (2007) discusses its lifecycle - from vitality and investments through its slumps and failures to stable maturity. This is evidenced by the fact that customers are increasingly searching for products, services and prices in the online environment.

Internet marketing is a specific part of the e-business (Internet business) that represents a strategic process of creation, distribution, promotion and pricing of products offered to target markets through the Internet, electronic devices or smart mobile devices - smartphones (Kurtz 2011).

The most accurate definition of Internet marketing defines Internet marketing as using the Internet to achieve marketing goals. In practice we can also encounter the concept of e-marketing, which is used as yet another synonym for Internet marketing and also involves mobile marketing. In this broader sense we can perceive e-marketing as the use of the Internet and other information and communication technologies to achieve marketing objectives of the company (Sedláček 2006).

Based on the above definitions it can be stated (Madleňák et al. 2007; Madleňák et al. 2015) that e-marketing is not only the implementation of marketing activities in the Internet environment or other digital media, but it also involves activities related to the knowledge of the target groups on the basis of which marketing activities are further adjusted. The essence of e-marketing lies in the improvement of the effectiveness of advertising and marketing activities.

Marketing in the field of educational institutions, according to Egger et al. (2010), is becoming an increasingly debated issue. There exist claims that marketing does not belong to this field, since comparing educational institutions to profit-oriented organization is at least unethical. On the other hand, there is a view that favors this attitude. Changes in society and the development of management and marketing companies have led to the situation where private as well as public educational institutions realize their need for marketing.

Reputation and image of any educational institution is influenced by objective and subjective characteristics of the institution. With respect to objective characteristics (eg. buildings and their surroundings, facilities, etc.) changes are very difficult to achieve, or changes would require a substantial financial costs. The subjective characteristics are those that lie in the eye of observers. The current image of the institution (especially in education) is mostly based on previous reputation while showing a relative stability. It follows that change can be achieved only through long-term and patient work (Svetlik 2009; Štefko et al. 2015).

Only institutions that apply marketing at all levels where each employee of the institution is in a direct contact with customers and influences their opinion and relationship with the institution can succeed in the educational services market. This approach brings along the assumption that all actors will be satisfied with the educational services in the long term. Subsequently, customer satisfaction creates a good image, resulting in a higher loyalty of students and employees of educational institutions. Loyalty and satisfaction improve the climate inside the institution and lower costs of acquiring new staff and students, and also support relationships networks with parents, practice and

the public (Světlika 2006). When using e-marketing tools institutions should follow the principles such as customer focus, offer the highest quality and always innovate its products and services (Medleňák et al. 2007).

3. The current state of the issue

It is not necessary to emphasize that the use of online technologies via online marketing tools penetrates into almost all dimensions of organizations offering their goods and services to consumer markets. The environment of higher education institutions is no exception. As these trends found their place in regular business they can also be used in marketing activities of higher education institutions, particularly with regard to university or college faculties. The analysis conducted by Top University (2015) offers us data on the use of new Internet marketing tools, which examined how potential university students use digital resources available online as part of their studies. The relevant analysis was carried out during 2015 on a sample of 5.400 respondents from 56 cities in 33 countries in Europe, Asia, North America, Latin America and Africa. The highest number of respondents came from Europe 43%, the second highest number of respondents were from Asia 29%, followed by 14% from Latin America, 10% from the US and Canada and 4% of respondents from Africa. With regard to gender 51% of the respondents were men and 49% women. With regard to age structure, the largest group of respondents were people between 22-25 years who accounted for 40%, the second highest share of 28% was recorded for the age group 26-29 years. The age group below 17 accounted for 9%, the age group 18-20 years accounted for 11% and same goes for the group 30 years and over. The analysis of the organization Top University (2015) points out that only a small percentage of respondents across all age groups is clearly committed to studying using online tools. As Figure 1 indicates, the highest proportion of respondents expressed a favorable opinion within the age group 30 years and older. On the other hand, the lowest share of favorable opinions has been identified within the age group of respondents up to 17 years. The negative attitude towards studying exclusively online was present across all ages.

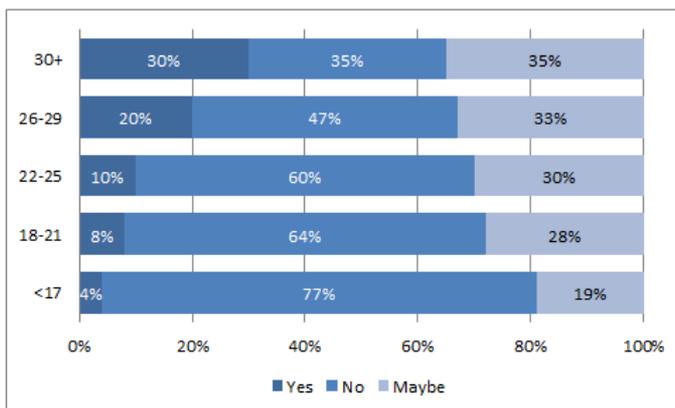


Figure 1. Have you considered studying entirely online via the Internet?

When examining the importance the respondents give to information channels that provide information necessary for subsequent decision making regarding educational institutions, it can be stated that both the online sources as well as classic offline sources are equally important in all surveyed age groups. For ages surveyed, the proportion of respondents perceiving online and offline communication channels as equivalent ranged from 63% to 75%. The results show that respondents prefer online environment when searching for information about their studies. As shown in Figure 2 online communication channels dominated with the age group of 30 years and over, specifically 29%. It follows that all age groups of respondents have comparable preferences in terms of information sources.

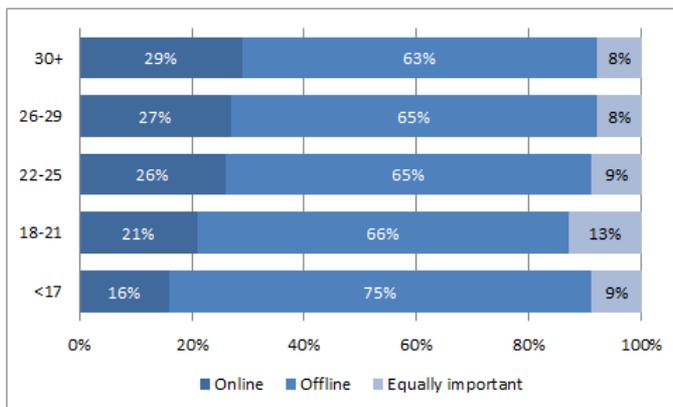


Figure 2. The importance of the information source with regard to decision making in relation to education

As can be seen in Figure 3, respondents most frequently communicate with educational institutions via e-mail (52%). The second most frequently used communication channel with a share of 22% is a contact form that can be perceived as an alternative to e-mail communication, with the difference that the sender does not specify the recipient of the message. On the other hand, telephone communication is used only by 12% of respondents. Comparable attitudes were also observed in the case of preferred communication channels used by educational institution when reaching out its respondents. 72% of respondents prefer to be contacted via e-mail, only 14% prefers to be contacted via phone, 6% by regular mail and 3% of respondents prefer social media. From the above it can be concluded that the respondents prefer traditional forms of communication such as e-mail communication. It is noteworthy that social media as the current trend are in this case in the background.

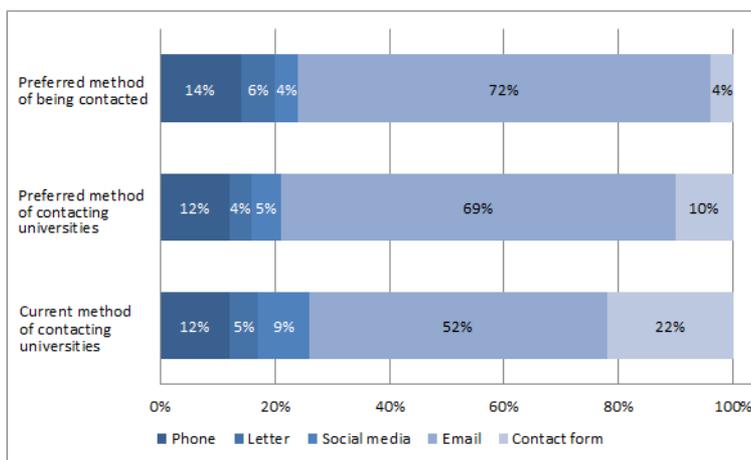


Figure 3. Preferred communication channels when communicating with educational institution

The aforementioned analysis of the organization Top University (2015) also focused its attention on user preferences of respondents regarding their method of getting information related to potential educational institutions. Regarding information related to the subjects taught 33% of respondents sought such information on the official website of the educational institution, 18% of respondents sought such information on other websites linked to the subject of their study, 15% of respondents sought information of websites aimed at the qualitative comparison of educational institutions and 14% of respondents sought information on social media and student community forums (Figure 4).

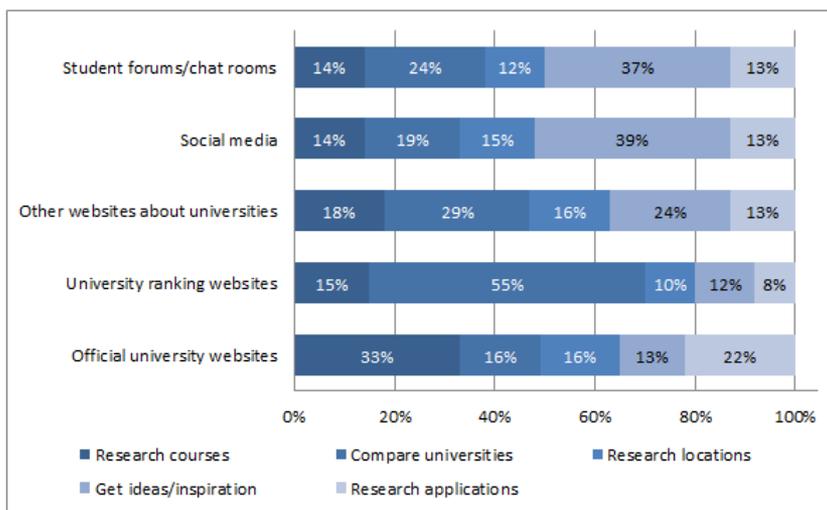


Figure 4. The use of communication channels according to different variables

In case of qualitative comparison of educational institutions 55% of respondents visited online specialized portals. Interesting finding is that 15% of respondents have searched for information related to the quality of the educational institutions on social media. Social media also dominated (39%) among respondents in their efforts to get some motivation or inspiration regarding their future study. Comparably important (37%) are student community forum, the lowest percentage was recorded for communication channels of educational institutions' official websites (13%) and websites specializing in a qualitative comparison of educational institutions (12%). In our opinion, the motivation or inspiration of the prospective students is an important area that should not be underestimated. The official websites of educational institutions should not forget to create a space dedicated to the presentation of information related to the quality of services provided – education (Figure 4).

4. Conclusions

In this context we would like to highlight the opinion of authors Karliček - Král (2011) who state that the communication and the Internet environment are areas that are closely linked, which significantly helps in the promotion of new products and services, with reaching out to new target groups of customers and with positive image building. This form of communication has certain positive features like precise targeting, personalization, interactivity, usability of multimedia content, easy measurability and efficiency at relatively low costs. We have to state that the quality of colleges and universities is not sufficiently manifested in their marketing strategy, let alone in the online environment.

We agree with Štefko et al. (2015) who states that more and more research studies increasingly point to the fact that high quality and reputable university is a product of good management that is not afraid to change established stereotypes and that perceives the school as an entity that has be effective and market-oriented. Opportunities offered by the online environment of the Internet in terms of higher educational institutions consist of wide variety of creative cost-effective marketing tools, possibility of immediate monitoring of progress and management in real time.

It should also be stressed that the issue of marketing activities of educational institutions in the Internet environment both at home and abroad is a new field of knowledge that has seen a significant rise in the last years. From the point of view of reaching new target audiences of educational institutions this discovery is deemed crucial.

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