

Internet Marketing of Universities: Opportunities and Challenges of Using Social Networks

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Abstract Increasing competition in the higher education in the global crisis produces new challenges to universities. An adequate response to these challenges depends primarily on the competent management of a university, an important task of which is to develop a promising marketing strategy. Currently, in addition to traditional ways of promoting educational services, social networks as a new channel of communication with existing and potential clients are starting to play an increasingly important role. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the options and challenges of social networking in the marketing policy of an educational sphere.

Keywords Social Networks, University, Marketing

1. Introduction

According to the forecasts of the World Bank positive changes in the world economy are not expected in the next couple of years. Financial instability will continue to have a negative impact on all sectors of the economy. The sphere of higher education is not an exception.

Nowadays higher educational institutions are experiencing similar difficulties everywhere. The situation around educational institutions can be characterized by the following key trends:

- Limited financial support of the state and therefore focus on their own financial resources (primarily due to increase of tuition fees).
- Increase of overseas number of students who are now seen as one of the main sources of university financing.
- Increased competition at the educational market. In several European countries, including the Czech Republic, the situation is being complicated by the fertility decline of the early 90's and the lack of entrants. This situation is the most difficult for commercial universities where teaching is being done only on a commercial basis and where there is a strong struggle for each entrant.
- Increased state control over the quality of educational

services. The state makes tougher the requirements towards to university accreditation.

- Opening massive on-line courses by many universities. Courses are considered as a fundamentally new concept of learning. This concept has many advantages both for universities and students. It provides an opportunity to significantly save time and money, and essentially expand university target audience.

Overcoming these negative tendencies, meeting new trends and, as a consequence, keeping a university competitiveness on the educational market depends, first of all, on the competent university management. The latter includes primarily an adequate understanding the issues and the developing an effective marketing strategy by university specialists.

An aggravation of the intercollegiate competition and competition for the students is being inevitably accompanied by growth of advertising activity in this sphere. As the traditional one-way communication channels lose their effectiveness, all universities are actively looking for other ways to promote their services into the market. One of these effective communication channels, that allow efficiently solving a wide range of marketing and advertising tasks, is social networks.

Social networks are a relatively new phenomenon, and their role in our lives has not yet been completely investigated. A huge amount of statistical information available on the Internet requires an accurate analysis. However, many marketing experts consider that companies that produce products or services aimed at the end user must be present in social networks to effectively interact with existing and potential customers.

It is already clear that the "competent" company's presence in social networks has a great number of positive points. Social networks allow quickly and effectively informing the company target audience, forming its image, getting feedback and having a valuable channel for receiving customer data for future marketing campaigns [2,5]. The secret of the new technology success is mainly its ability to maintain a constant dialogue with each customer and build

long-term relationships with them [6].

This article aims to analyze the current situation, opportunities, prospects and issues of using social networks in the university marketing policy with focus on Czech universities.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The Role of Social Networks in University Marketing Policy

Social networks today are one of the most popular services that hold attention of more than half of the Internet audience (more than a billion people around the world). For example, in the Czech Republic almost half of the population (48%) has access to the Internet, among them - about 42-44% - users of social networks [16, 17]. Nowadays total audience of social networks, for a long time being used by youth, is growing mainly due to the older age categories. Two-thirds of social networks users (70%) are people from 18 to 44 years. This fact shows that social networks are not just a way of entertainment, but also an effective channel to promote business.

The possibilities of using social networks as a marketing channel for educational services promotion have been actively discussed for the last few years only. However, it can be already stated that building online communities, uniting people by specific interests, is the most rapidly developing area of university internet marketing. Thus, according to the University of Massachusetts study, 98% of higher education institutions in the United States have their official pages on Facebook, 84% - in Twitter, 86% - in YouTube. And, more than 90% of these educational institutions believe that their experience of social network usage is successful [18].

Internet marketing in social networks provides universities with a broad range of unique opportunities to promote their products to the educational market. Let us describe in details some of them:

1. Integration between social networking and university Web sites and two-way communication between them creates an additional traffic on university Web sites. Increasing university Web site's audience creates favorable conditions for an effective promotion and sale of educational services to consumers.
2. Consultation of potential entrants and their parents on social networks can be carried out non-stop 24 hours 7 days a week. Thanks to the quick response to customers' questions, the quality of service is being improved. A new form of such interaction promotes higher education institutes and helps them to solve existing problems with an admission of entrants for educational programs. At the same time, traditional forms of university presentation and getting acquainted with them in the form of open days are gradually losing their strength and become ineffective.
3. Social networks are widely used for students' support and

provide an additional channel of communication between students and university administration. Quality of learning process is been improving due to rapid responses to the student requests.

4. Social networks provide a unique opportunity for universities to conduct market research. This is an extremely useful tool to research focus groups, targeted audiences, labor market and market of educational services.

5. Social networks are a powerful feedback channel between administration of university and students, university and employers, university and graduates. For example, investigation of the graduates' evaluation of their competitiveness at the labor market can become a platform for quality assessment of university training and subsequent modernization of syllabus.

6. Social networks help universities to expand their target audience, primarily due to foreign students.

2.2. Social Networks in the Learning Process

However, it should not be missed out that a competitiveness of universities is mainly determined by the quality of educational services. One of the ways how to increase the level of education is an introducing new non-traditional methods of teaching into educational process.

Lately the global pedagogical community has started to actively discuss possibilities and prospects of social networks usage in training process [2, 4]. A cumulative experience in this sphere allows experts to call social networking as a revolutionary method of teaching, as it develops students' creative thinking, and forms skills of self-organization and interaction [1].

This new technology is based on western theory of social learning [3]. According to this theory, people learn better when interacting with each other within a specific theme or subject. On the basis of research, students who study in groups, at least once a week, are better trained in the subject matter than students who are engaged in on their own.

Among the advantages of social networks usage in the educational process the following key points may be marked:

- (a) The well-known communication environment of social networks allows building informal communication between teacher and students and helping to organize person-centered learning.
- (b) The active interaction between teacher and students provides continuity of the learning process that goes beyond classrooms lessons.
- (c) The usage of forums and discussions in working process of virtual training groups stimulates students' active cognitive activity.
- (d) The educational process becomes flexible, variable, varied due to combination of the traditional classrooms and on-line teaching forms, as well as the usage of various media materials.
- (e) Common communication environment for all members of the educational process allows everybody to participate in a common discussion of project results and to evaluate

contribution of each member in the common affair.

The low level of teachers' respective competences, as well as a large number of man-hours needed for teachers to organize and support the learning process in this new way should be noted as problem points of social networks usage.

The new method of training significantly helps to improve the quality of education. In the professional community and among consumers it has a positive effect on the image of university as an expert in the area of innovative learning technologies. All this eventually influences the position of the university in international ranking of educational institutions.

2.3. Czech Universities in Social Networks

A powerful impulse of social networks development in the Czech Republic, no doubt, was the fact that they became available in Czech language a few years ago. At present, all world social networks are gaining confidence at the Czech market. Nowadays Facebook is the most popular social network in the country. Facebook audience here is more than 2 million people. Forecast of Facebook development, as well as of other world social networks in the Czech Republic, is very optimistic. Further increase of their number of users is expected in the next years. At the same time, earlier popular domestic social networks such as Lide.cz / Spoluzaci.cz (Seznam.cz) and Libimseti.cz are continuing to lose their positions at the Czech Internet market [19].

Czech universities are surely not out of this world trend, although they are following it with some delay. According to our research, 68% of all universities in the Czech Republic have the official page on Facebook, 17.8% - in Twitter, 16.4% - in Skype, 8.2% - in Google +, 2.7% - in LinkedIn. It is obviously that due to stronger competition private universities are much more actively being become familiar with social networks. Thus, 74% of private universities in the Czech Republic have their profiles on Facebook and only 57% of the state universities.

The presence of universities in social networks cannot be considered as the guarantee of marketing success. In order to be successful regular interacting with the audience and quality monitoring of this interaction is required. Social networks provide a number of opportunities for such monitoring. In this part of the article we will focus on assessing the effectiveness of Czech university pages on Facebook.

Anyone visiting a company (in our case – university) page on Facebook can see two metrics: the total "People Talking About This" on the left side of the page and the "Total Likes" – on the right one (Figure №1). This statistical information is luckily available to everyone and can be efficiently used for the purpose of our investigation.

"Total Likes" shows the number of unique people who have "liked" university's Facebook page, regardless of whether they are actively engaging with it or not. It is the total number of fans or followers that university's page has

managed to accumulate. It is a measure of how many people have come across a specific Facebook page and found it useful or liked it.



Figure 1. "People Talking About This" and "Total Likes" on Facebook

Unfortunately there are plenty of Facebook pages with huge follower counts but horrible engagement. Certainly nobody wants that. Everybody wants good, quality followers who interact. Facebook page must have fan engagement in order to truly succeed. How to measure fan engagement?

In addition to "Total Likes", there is one more metric - "People Talking About This". This metric shows the number of unique users who have created a "story" about a specific Facebook page in a seven-day period. Users create stories when they like the page, post on the page wall, like a post, comment on a post, answer a question, write a recommendation etc. This metric gives information of how many people are actively dealing with a Facebook page in a seven-day period. It is important to underline, that this metric tracks only unique users interacting with a page. It means if a fan leaves more than one comment or both likes and shares a post within that limited time, it adds only one point to "People Talking About This". However, the number changes daily so it is important to engage fans consistently to keep this number up.

Those two metrics are used for calculating the overall level of engagement on university's Facebook page [9]. It is the ratio of the "talking about this" number to the number of "likes". This indicator shows proportion of users actively engaged on this page. This metric has been called the Facebook Engagement Factor (F.E.F.). It is calculated by the following way: Facebook Engagement Factor (F.E.F.) = (People Talking About This / Total Likes) X 100 (because this ratio of "talking about" to "likes" is usually small, it is multiplied by 100 for more obvious comparisons).

Let's take the example of Yale University. This university had about 12.392 fans about it over the last 7 days. Divide this by its 541.632 likes on Facebook, multiply it by 100, and we get a Facebook Engagement Factor of 2.23.

3. Results

Which of Czech universities do well on the F.E.F.? The results of our monitoring are presented in the Table №1. It is important to note that "People Talking About This" is being updated daily, so Facebook Engagement Factor varies a lot from day to day. Data for this analysis were collected on May 17, 2013.

Table 1. F.E.F of Czech Universities

University	Number of Students at University (2012/13)	Total Likes	People Talking About This	F.E.F
Private Universities				
The College of Bank	4000	1474	12	0,81
European Polytechnic Institute	N/A	303	3	0,99
The Institute of Hospitality Management in Prague	2200	1394	19	1,36
The University of Finance and Administration	6000	4611	58	1,26
The College of Karlovy Vary	900	260	5	1,92
Ostrava Business School	3340	1158	11	0,95
ŠKODA AUTO University	N/A	1473	34	2,31
Josef Škvorecký Literary Academy	N/A	387	12	3,1
The Private University College of Economic Studies	437	307	4	1,3
University College of Business in Prague	3500	3303	34	1,03
Academy STING	1000	621	3	0,48
Metropolitan University Prague	6000	3529	52	1,47
The Jan Amos Komensky University Prague	10000	3654	71	1,94
The College of Karel Englis	N/A	598	33	5,52
Anglo-American University	N/A	2306	22	0,95
The Prague College of Psychosocial Studies	N/A	1023	6	0,59
The University of Economics and Management	N/A	2082	31	1,49
University of New York in Prague	800	32808	2495	7,6
College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law	530	8226	94	1,14
The University of International and Public Relations in Prague	N/A	269	5	1,86
West Moravian College Třebíč	751	169	15	8,86
The College of Physical Education and Sport PALESTRA	N/A	457	11	2,41
NEWTON College	N/A	989	128	12,94

The College of Nursing	N/A	431	13	3,02
Brno International Business School	2700	440	3	0,68
Private College of Economic Studies in Znojmo	728	354	5	1,41
Moravian University College Olomouc.	738	432	20	4,63
CEVRO Institute	N/A	2205	131	5,94
Unicorn College	325	2753	5	0,18
AKCENT College	200	192	0	0
Archip	30	2785	64	2,3
College of Applied Pshology	N/A	1383	20	1,45
State Universities				
Czech University of Life Sciences Prague	N/A	8725	122	1,4
Mendel University in Brno	10654	5562	333	5,99
University in Ostrava	N/A	5327	67	1,26
University in Opava	N/A	2266	93	4,1
Technical University in Liberec	N/A	4537	154	3,39
Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem	11000	2609	60	2,3
Palacký University Olomouc	23000	5194	57	1
University of Pardubice	11000	4026	45	1,12
Tomas Bata University in Zlín	12580	3565	68	1,91
The University of Veterinary and Pharmaceutical Sciences Brno	N/A	2983	39	1,31
The Institute of Chemical Technology, Prague	N/A	3525	98	2,78
Institute of Business and Technology in Ceske Budejovice	N/A	2395	22	0,92
Brno University of Technology	24000	1533	101	6,59
University of West Bohemia in Plzen	16000	373	219	58,71
The College of Polytechnics Jihlava	3000	2000	34	1,7
University of Defense Brno	2200	294	13	4,42

N/A – information is not available.

4. Discussion

The main question for evaluating results of our investigation is "what are good interaction rates?" Social media experts have composed a scale of engagement rates on Facebook. These average engagement rates have been calculated on the basis on analytics from more than 500.000 active Facebook pages and surely have significant weight. This scale is applicable to Facebook pages with relatively small fan count - from 0 up to 10 000 people [13]:

- Above 1% engagement rate is good
- 0,5%-0,99% is average
- below 0,5% is low

Table 2. F.E.F of the Best Universities in the World

University	People Talking About This	Total Likes	F.E.F
Harvard University (USA)	59.706	2.611.112	2.3
Princeton University (USA)	5.128	145.540	3.5
University of California, Berkeley (USA)	7.253	171.198	4.23
University of Melbourne (Australia)	1.793	50.552	3.54

For larger fan count – from 20.000 – 50.000 – average engagement rate is much smaller – 0.21%.

It can be concluded on the basis of obtained data (see Table №1) that Czech state universities have much higher average engagement rate (3.53) than private universities (1.9). Their level of engagement rate is completely comparable with F.E.F of the best universities in the world. For such comparison look at some examples in the Table №2. Data were collected on May 18, 2013.

As it can be seen from Table №1 there is no clear correlation between number of Facebook likes and universities's Facebook Engagement Factor. A university might have relatively large number of Facebook likes and low engagement factor at the same time (for example, The Prague College of Psychosocial Studies and Unicorn College in Prague). It is the good indicator that it's time to rethink university's engagement tactics on Facebook page for making it more effective.

Table 1 shows that less or about 1% of all present students (counted as a ratio of "People Talking About It" to "Number of Students at Universities") is active on Facebook universities' pages in a seven-day period.

There was not also revealed a clear correlation between fluctuations of mentioned above number of students and Engagement Factor. The same percentage of students taking part in social activities of universities may result absolutely different Engagement Factors that vary from very good up to very low values (compare, for example, Engagement Factors of The College of Bank (0.81%) and Academy STING (0.48%) for the same part of active students = 0.3%). The highest Engagement Factor (58.71) was caused by only 1.3%

of all 16000 students at University of West Bohemia in Plzen. At the same time the College of Polytechnics Jihlava demonstrates much less Engagement Factor (1.17) created by the similar part of active students (1.13%).

How to increase Facebook Engagement Factor? In 2011 it was considered that the average lifetime of a Facebook page post was around 22 hours. New research shows that the average lifetime of post now is only 3 hours [14]. It means that number of posts should be increased. And that is a great challenge for most organizations. Universities should be prepared to deliver several posts every day. Moreover, these posts must correspond to purpose, objectives and university's brand. So, the success of communication with the audience lies in activity of this communication and its content.

Specificity of university's operations and characters of its young target market (age from 18 up to 24) should be taken into account when developing Facebook content. Attractive university's Facebook page must expertly balance different types of content. The most successful on Facebook Czech universities give us appropriate examples to demonstrate effectiveness this approaching:

- The University of Finance and Administration (F.E.F. = 1.26);
- The University of Economics and Management (F.E.F. = 1.49);
- College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law (F.E.F. = 1.14);
- Technical University in Liberec (F.E.F. = 3.39).

■ **Educational content** in catching form such as video presentation of university, its departments and teachers, video lectures, on-line consultations etc. For example, The University of Finance and Administration is regularly putting video news on its Facebook page. The University of Economics and Management shows video interviews with all university's quests on its Facebook profile.

■ **Fun content**, for example, funny pictures, video spots, music video – these can be completely unrelated to page's purpose. Look, for example, at a funny post on Facebook profile of College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law that in a moment caused a large number of audience's likes (see Figures №2).



Figure 2. Post on Facebook profile of College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law

■ **Interactive content**, for example, content that would require an audience to express their opinion. It works best if it has relevance to page's content concept. See, for example, survey of students and graduates conducted on Facebook page by College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law (see Figure №3).

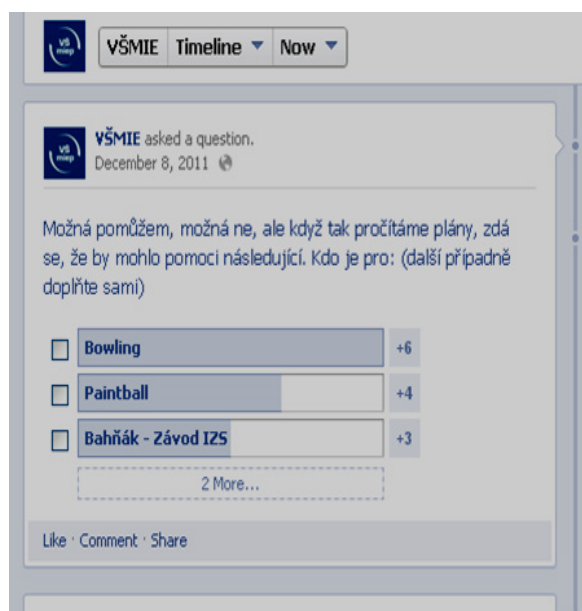


Figure 3. Surveys of students on Facebook page of College of Information Management, Business Administration and Law

■ **Incentive content**, for example, quizzes that offer prizes. See, for example, photo competition at Technical University in Liberec conducted on Facebook profile (see Figure №4).



Figure 4. Photo competition on Facebook profile of Technical University in Liberec

■ **Provocative content.** Provocative content goes viral because it is the content people are looking for and it ignites emotion. People bookmark provocative content and share it with their friends. Provocative content makes people really pay attention to what it is they are reading or watching (see Figure №5).



Figure 5. An example of provocative content on Facebook profile of university.

5. Conclusion

So, it is clear, that a competent and, as a consequence, successful presentation of the university in social networks is not an easy task. It requires a certain amount of knowledge, skills and effective collaboration between teachers, staff, various departments and management of the university. The solution to this management issue involves a number of steps:

1. The need to study successful experience of using social networks by other universities around the world.
2. Conducting market research to choose suitable social platform/platforms that meets marketing objectives of specific educational institution.
3. Presentation of all major departments of the university in chosen social networks.
4. Train staff to work in social networks.
5. Awareness of importance to support a regular contact with clients in social networks.
6. Development of social media guidelines for communication with the university target audience by using social networks.

Teachers training, their material and moral encouragement are essential for staff motivation to use social networks in learning process. University support of all teachers' initiatives concerning development and approbation of new educational methods with usage of social networks are necessary for modernization of teaching methods.

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