

The Impact of Social Media as a Marketing Communications tool towards potential students for the University of Nicosia

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Abstract

Educational Institutions have been using traditional media to promote their services, which can be categorized as a one-way communication. On the other hand, with the recent technological advancements universities can not only communicate effectively with their target market, but they can still use social media to disseminate information and receive feedback. Social media can assist them to establish a two-way flow of information.

A vital issue of this research paper is to uncover the process by which potential students use social media and more specifically what the media's role is in the decision making process of choosing a University. This research paper attempts to evaluate the use of Social Media as a promotional tool for the University of Nicosia through extensive literature review and qualitative research. Focus groups have been utilized that demonstrated that social media is a major communication tool among university students at various levels. It affects their social life, education, and most important of all selection of university.

Key words: Social media, promotion, education, communication

1. Introduction

“A social network is a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means such as friendship, common interests, or ideas” (Coyle & Vaughn, 2008). Even though the general public has associated social networking with the age of the internet, Coyle and Vaughn (2008) have stressed that social networks existed as long as humans have walked on earth, as they are societal and require relationships with other to survive.

The importance of social media as platforms of social interaction, communication and marketing is growing. Increasing numbers of educational institutions have already integrated or plan to integrate social media applications into their marketing programs as supported by Whitehead (2012). Research demonstrates that Higher education institutions show increased interest in the potential of social media as a marketing tool. It is evident from the literature review that most of the research on social media was done by profit organizations and relatively limited research was done for non profit organizations; more specifically for educational institutions in Tertiary Education. University of Nicosia has a university website, and is using social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and a blogs in order to attract potential students.

In an effort to understand the use of social media in Tertiary Education the author has done an extensive literature review and primary data analysis. Key findings extracted by the literature review led to an inductive research approach. Four focus group took place in an effort to explore the students’ feeling, beliefs and use of social networks. Interpretation of the data allowed comparison between the extent of the use of social media by Unic students and the effective use of social media as a communication tool by the university towards potential students.

The main aim of this paper is to analyze and identify the use of Social Media among Unic students in an effort to examine the impact of the social media on the choice of a higher education program and institution.

More specifically though this research paper the author will conduct a literature review and quality research in an effort to answer the following research objectives; identifying how and if institutions in Higher Education use social media as a marketing/communication tool, investigate theoretical framework on the students' use and habits in terms of social media networks such as Facebook/twitter/MSN etc., analyze the actual social media use of Unic students, analyze the credibility of social media networks among the student community and of course evaluate the medium's ability to motivate potential students to prefer/register in a particular university

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Marketing

Digital marketing according to Pride and Ferrell (2012, p.236) “uses all digital media, including the Internet and mobile and interactive channels, to develop communication and exchanges with customers.” In the recent past many companies have been making use of digital marketing as a recruitment tool as they seek to further enhance their recruitment efforts. Universities have not been left behind as the competition for students becomes fiercer. In basic terms, to ensure that its recruitment strategy succeeds, an institution must think about the individual to whom it is directing the message (Whitehead, 2012). Universities have come to the realization that today's potential student is technologically astute. This is the generation that continues to access the internet via a wide range of electronic devices including but not limited to smartphones, tablets, game consoles, etc.

There are many reasons as to why universities have turned to digital marketing in their student recruitment efforts. To begin with, digital marketing knows no geographical boundaries. Data from Unesco's institute for statistics according to Caughlan (2011) indicates that international student numbers have been on an upward trend with the U.S. being the biggest destination. To benefit from this trend, many universities are turning to digital marketing. It is also important to note that unlike traditional approaches to marketing, digital marketing is much cheaper. For various reasons, universities according to Thurm (2012) continue to face increasing administrative and other costs and it is only reasonable that they adopt a more cost effective approach to marketing - hence digital marketing.

As an indicator of how seriously universities are taking digital marketing, University Business (2011) points out that in a survey conducted by AdReady/Stamats, "ninety-five percent of respondents said they're using social media outlets as part of their marketing efforts." Out of the four main social media outlets, a vast majority of respondents (ninety-two percent) admitted that they were making use of Facebook as their platform of choice for display advertising. Asked why they were heavily relying on Facebook as opposed to YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter, educational institutions answered that Facebook was where most prospective students spent their time (University Business, 2011). This is an indicator that traditional marketing approaches are fast losing their clout.

2.2 Social Media Credibility among Potential University Students

In the words of Whitehead (2012) “web and social media are not only crucial tools in student recruitment, they have forcibly sharpened the accuracy of university branding.” Any attempt to present erroneous info according to the author is likely to be promptly exposed by scores of both potential and existing students out there. For this reason, universities making use of digital marketing in their recruitment efforts are likely to be more careful with the kind of info they post. Given the level of caution universities exercise when posting material on the social media, the latter continues to be regarded a fairly credible source of information especially in regard to university admissions.

Most of today’s students cannot imagine of a world without the internet. Indeed, a vast majority of students are active users of the internet and have a strong presence in the social media. As Nayar (2010) points out, to the youth, social networking has become “a mode of self-representation and display.” In so many ways, the participation of most of today’s students in the social media has been further enhanced by the availability of portable electronic devices that continue to make internet access even more convenient and enjoyable (Michaluk, 2008). Indeed, results of a recent study clearly “show that the vast majority of college-bound high school students use social media” (Levitz, 2012). According to the study, only 5% of students on their way to college do not use social media (Levitz, 2012). In that regard, it would be safe to assume that given the popularity of the social media amongst college-bound students, any information posted via the said platform is seen as being fairly credible and/or accurate. The popularity of social media amongst college-bound students could also mean that any information posted on the platform is regarded as being more credible than info posted via traditional media including but not limited to magazines and newspapers. This is particularly the case given that online platform

such as “twitter have turned into powerful channels of information and outstrip the official mass media...in the quality and reliability of the information (Henseler, 2012, p.260).

It should also be noted that it is in this virtual environment that students constantly interact and indeed spend a significant amount of time. A study conducted by Marketing Charts (2010) three years ago showed that the time individuals spend on social networking sites was on the increase. Assuming that this is indeed the case to date, a significant proportion of a college-bound student’s time is likely to be spent on social networking sites. In so many ways, it is this level of interaction between potential university students and the said communication platform that makes the latter a credible and reliable source of info. As Metzger and Fianagin (2008) point out, adult and youth information seekers differ on several fronts. This is more so the case when it comes to their information-seeking goals. As the authors in this case further point out, having grown up in an environment where the popularity of social media was significant, the “youth tend to be relatively heavily immersed in digital media” (Metzger and Fianagin, 2008, p.15). In comparison to adults therefore, the authors are of the opinion that the youth regard the social media as a more natural information seeking tool. When it comes to selecting a university, it would only be natural for potential students to rely on a source of information they are well acquainted with. For this reason, any information acquired from the said source is deemed largely credible. It is perhaps with this in mind that universities have stepped up their utilization of social media in their student recruitment efforts. In addition to recruiting students, universities according to McAllister and West (2013) are also utilizing social media tools to build their reputation.

2.3 Social Networks in Higher Education

The importance of social media as platforms of social interaction, communication and marketing is growing. The rapid ascent of social media across society is a very clear signal that individuals, groups and institutions are rapidly changing their preferences of how they learn, communicate, collaborate and participate in society. The immediacy of interaction, from the simplest response to a Tweet on Twitter to a very thoroughly researched and presented blog post, underscore how pervasive the foundational elements of Web 2.0 design precepts and principles are influencing daily life worldwide today (O'Reilly, 2006).

For educational institutions this shift in communication channels, patterns and preferences have an immediate effect on a given college or universities' level of credibility with prospective students, and has a direct effect on how trusted they are over the long-term, (Chauhan, Pillai, 2013). Increasing numbers of educational institutions have already integrated or plan to integrate social media applications into their marketing programs as a result of how pervasive this change in communications channels, patterns and preferences is. Research demonstrates that higher education institutions show increased interest in the potential of social media as a marketing tool. Not only are social networks integral to the brand of any college or university today (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, Savani, 2009), they have become essential for accurately and clearly communicating the unique value proposition a given college or university can offer students across the spectrum of academic disciplines it provides instruction within (Sotiriadis, Van Zyl, 2013). Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have attracted many subscribers from all over the world and many organizations are slowly turning towards this particular media with a goal to reach as many people as possible (Bradford & Florin 2003). This shift to social

media channels is essential for any college or university to stay relevant and within the contextual frame of reference of students over the long-term as well (Sotiriadis, Van Zyl, 2013). It is particularly important to evaluate the potential of these tools to reach and attract future students and align with how they perceive the most and less trustworthy sources of information. According to Constantinides & Stagno (2011) universities can benefit from identifying the students communication preferred social media channels and habits in an effort to design an effective communication plan for student recruitment purposes.

2.4 Social Media and two way communication

Kaplan & Haelein (2010) note that while the term "social media" is imprecise, it can be applied to a wide range of web applications, ranging from social networking sites to blogs, to collaborative content sites, virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds. For marketers, the differences in the way that social media allows them to interact with consumers marks a clear delineation between social media marketing and more traditional marketing forms. Key to understanding this difference is the recognition that social media marketing is a two-way information flow, versus the one-way information flow that is more traditional with media like television, radio or print.

Social media allows students to use media outlets on the Internet as a means of communicating with others, defining social media at least a two-way information flow. Students use social media to interact not just with each other, but with the broader world around them. An example of this could be in the use of social media to champion causes or even organize people for in-person meetings, protests or even marketing events (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009).

Marketers have had to change their relationship with college students entirely as the result of the proliferation of social media. They can still use social media to disseminate information in a one-way flow, but must also engage in two-way flow of information. They have the opportunity to gather more information from students, something that can help with targeting efforts. Indeed, social media's hands-on nature demands that strong targeting is utilized so that the company continues to derive value for its marketing budget.

One of the key challenges for marketers has been learning how to integrate social media with the offline world (Smith & Zook, 2011). Traditionally, marketers seek to create desire in the consumers and then make it as easy as possible for consumers to purchase the product. The higher level of interaction allows for direct communication with consumers via social media, but the offline functions that deliver products directly to the consumer still need to exist. In that respect, there is little distinct about social media marketing, but at the same time it can be difficult for marketers accustomed to keeping customers at arm's length to foster strong, direct relationships via social media while maintaining traditional marketing relationships in other settings.

All told, the biggest change that social media has brought is that marketers must engage in two-way information exchanges with the customers. According to Gibbs (2009) Learning more about customers allows for finer segmentation, with college students emerging as a more specific demographic as distinct from other adults of the same age who are not in college. Marketers are in a better position to fine-tune their offerings to students, and they are learning how to reach a generation of students accustomed to interacting with the world primarily through social media. In the case of educational institutions we do not refer to students as customers, but the communication needs are identical.

Foundational to these shifts in marketing is the advent of Web 2.0 design objectives and strategies. The nature of Web 2.0 design strategies concentrates on having a very high level of communication and collaboration enabled by the design of a given software application or networking system. Web 2.0 is also predicated on a very egalitarian approach to sharing data and knowledge throughout a network. Implicit in the design of this framework is the continual infusion of authenticity and transparency as it relates to the sharing of information and expertise. The Web 2.0 Meme Map or model then defines the working construct of what social networks are modeled on today (O'Reilly, 2006). As the Meme Map is based on a very high level of information sharing and an implied velocity of data sharing across broad geographic distances, authenticity and transparency are its most powerful catalysts of continual cycles of information sharing.

The Web 2.0 Meme Model shows why it is so critically important that the social media strategies strive for authenticity, transparency and trust (Rosen, Phillips, 2011). The powerful aspect of story-telling in marketing is that it underscores the experiential aspects of a brand and serves to reinforce branding values and images while providing trusted references (Schlesinger, 2010). In addition to all of these factors it has also been shown that the human brain learns fastest through the use of stories. This is the most important aspect of any social media campaign: the prospective student doesn't want to hear about buildings and features of the campus, they want to hear about how their life will be so much more interesting, fascinating and they will have the freedom to pursue challenging intellectual goals. One of the most powerful aspects of social media in marketing higher education is the selling of the experience first and how the

prospective student will have the opportunity to grow intellectually far more than they had imagined in the past.

The most effective social media campaigns are based on personas that accurately reflect the diversity of students and their needs. When the Web 2.0 framework is applied to these personas to define marketing strategies, it becomes clear that each type or segment of student will approach communication and collaboration completely differently (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, 2013). As social media is by nature permeable and easily customized for specific audience and even individual needs, it is incumbent on Leeds Metropolitan University to create digital content in both video and textual form for each of the personas it creates to guide its social media strategies.

These personas are ideally defined by their demographic, socioeconomic and educational aspirations. Social media marketing teams need to further define content of relevance to each of them. This needs to include both video and digital content, including for many the inclusion of smartphone applications as well (Natale, Doran, 2012). As the majority of students today choose to use their smartphone as the primary device they rely on to stay connected with family, friends and news through the Apple iOS and Google Android operating systems.

Each of these personas will also have significantly different approaches to how they use social media to learn about potential colleges and universities of interest. While the information needs across each of these personas will be significantly different requiring varying video and digital downloadable content, all are galvanized around the need for trust as supported by Natale & Doran (2012). The frequency, amount, context and value of digital video and downloadable content may vary yet all must resonate with trust to succeed. That is the ultimate goal of using

social media in the context of academic recruiting. One of the more effective strategies institutions of higher education are relying on is the use of testimonials by and about professors (Moosmayer, 2011). This is one of the most effective approaches for generating word of mouth in a given social media campaign as well (Palmer, Koenig-Lewis, 2011).

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative research is used to explore and understand people's beliefs, experiences, attitudes, behavior and interactions (Bandolier, 2007). Therefore, four unstructured focus groups have been used in order to seek an understanding and develop a language of the students' understanding of communication, social networks and the promotional /communication tools used in attracting potential students. Each focus group consisted of eight **undergraduate** students that were studying between Januarys to March 2014 at the University of Nicosia. They have been selected randomly after posting a message through Facebook requesting from students to participate in the focus groups. As stated by Zikmund (2010) a focus group is an unstructured, free flowing interview with a small group of people usually between six and ten. Even though a focus group can be done very quickly it can gain multiple perspectives and allow the respondents to piggyback off each other's ideas. The results of the focus groups will be used as a basis for developing and applying structured interviews for further research.

Each group consisted of eight Unic students coming from various countries. They were all however undergraduate students. The students were recruited through a Facebook announcement and they were all volunteers. All of the students participating in the focus groups had some common characteristics concerning their personality traits. They were all outgoing individuals,

very sociable and were all involved in other activities additional to studying at the University such as work and sports.

4. Analysis of results

4.1 Promotional tools that the students have seen used by the University of Nicosia

The students participating in the focus groups were quite quick to answer that question and one of the participants stated that “*there are so many of them!*” (Alicia,21). There were plenty of straight forward answers. They referred to events planned by the universities such as open days, the website, conferences and seminars on various subjects or even, the Facebook page of the various universities.

The student’s opinions were asked on the possible promotional tools (they had previously being given by the moderator) in order to get a deeper understanding and success of these tools. Open days, according to the group, is a good approach in order to attract people and can serve its useful purpose of getting a better perspective of the facilities and services provided by the universities; one of the participants stated that “*I think open days are great because you get to meet other students and interact with them*” (Josh, 22).

Every single student felt that digital marketing is the most effective promotional tool for a university which is exactly what has been discussed by Nayar (2010). They were quite thrilled about any promotional tool concerning the Internet such as emails, Facebook accounts and websites since they already expressed their devotion to the Internet and I quote, “*its mind-*

opening quality” (Sultan, 23). They referred to social networking as “an amazing innovation” (Naser,20) which is what a survey by University Business(2011) has published as well. They all stressed that social media tools published by universities are credible sources of information since present and potential students can comment on the information given which has been also identified by McAllister and West (2013). A student stated, *“I used to visit the university’s Facebook page on a daily before joining the university. I was really interested to see what the rest of the students had to say”* (Alicia, 21). All the students commented that they visited various university websites and Facebook pages before joining University of Nicosia. They also commented that they follow the activities posted on Facebook in order to see if there was quality social life at the campus. *“Coming from Middle East I wanted to see how students in Cyprus spend their time and in what type of activities they are engaged”* (Naser, 20). As non-Cypriot students mentioned, the Facebook offered them the opportunity to study the university culture before joining.

4.2 Promotional tools that have affected the student’s selection of a university

Concerning this issue, the answers were unanimous; all participants quickly responded that none of the traditional promotional tools used by the numerous universities affected their final choice. One of the participants expressed the following, *“I didn’t even pay a bit of attention to the booklets sent from the universities, I only went through their websites and joined their Facebook page”* Mary, 24). A point that was stressed by all participants was that they paid a lot of attention to recommendations made by friends which supports the view of Budden (2007) on the importance of reference on product selection. Most of the students received information through friends and three non-Cypriot students commented that they were influenced by direct communication with the staff of the university; for example the admissions office. The

infrastructure of the university itself was a determining factor of choice as stated by one of the participants, *“I visited University of Nicosia and I was surprised by how nice everybody was, that really helped me make up my mind”* (Christy, 24).

4.3 The student’s use of social media

All participants expressed their daily use of social media, however some more than others as seen when one of the participants stated: *“I cannot live without social media! I am an addict!”* (Andria,19). All of them have a Facebook account; use Youtube on a regular basis, and other social media such as Twitter, what’s up, emails, Msn and blogs which again supports Soteriades (2013) findings on the growth of social media use among university students.

Some of the students are actually more involved in the use of social media due to their work which requires a good understanding on the matter. Five students admitted being completely addicted to social media and refer to it as *“a must have thing to have”*. The advantages of social media they expressed were that it allowed them to keep in touch with friends or family abroad which Henseler, (2012) supports by stating that Social Media turned into powerful channels of information and outstrip the official mass media. Only one student stated that he was opposed to social media in the past, considering it as *“such a waste of my time”* (Andreas, 23) and preferred to focus on printed sources of information. All that changed when the student acquired a new Smartphone which opened a door to unlimited possibilities and from there on the student became a regular user of social media. This student stated: *“As soon as I bought a smart phone... It was over! I completely loved it and actually could not stop using the social media on my phone!”* (Andreas,23). Natale (2012) supports this notion and stresses the relationship between social media and smartphone use.

4.4 The student's beliefs and suggestions of social media as a communication tool by the university

All members of the focus groups believed that social media was indeed a great way to reach actual and potential students. They were all aware of the Facebook account of the university, visited it before and after joining the university. Twelve of them also knew about the Youtube channel the university had but only three of them knew that the university had a blog and as one of the student stated: *"I have been at this university for more than three years but I don't even know if they have a blog"* (George, 23). All the students agreed that the Universities Facebook was relatively boring. They stated that there are so many events going on at the university but you cannot find them on Facebook. *"When I first visited the university's Facebook page I could not receive a lot of information. I actually had to talk to my friends and personally visit the university to realize that this is where I wanted to study"* (Antria, 19). They recommended that the university has more videos on Youtube concerning the students, their experiences at the university and the general character and lifestyle associated with the University. One of the participants said: *"We need something that brings the students together"* (Alicia, 21). Overall they all agreed that even though they were conscious of the effort that the university is trying to put into the use of social media, that still they felt that digital communication promoted by Unic lacks creativity and interactivity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The significance of social media as a platform for social interaction and business communication is growing. The findings of the four focus groups indicated that penetration of social media is extremely high among students. The participants however were not really impressed by the digital marketing tools utilized by University of Nicosia. Interesting enough they all had quite a few suggestions on this matter. The impact of social media in the recruitment process is extremely high compared to more traditional forms of university marketing.

Even though Social Media is a relatively new phenomenon, it has a history of an impressive growth in a fast changing environmental and technological environment. It is advisable for the communication/recruiting officers of Unic to closely monitor the behaviour of present and potential students regarding their social media use. Here below are some recommendations that the author has derived based on the information received from the research:

- Recruitment/Communication officers must approach social media in a proactive way. They should actively and continuously engage with social media in their promotional mix. It is absolutely necessary to understand the online behaviour of potential students, and realise that the students are their partners in the social relationship
- It is advisable for the university to accomplish this challenging goal by concentrating on the stories of its students, including explanations of how they have overcome challenges to attend the university in addition to defining how they attained challenging goals.
- University of Nicosia must create a highly responsive social media strategy that aligns not just with the needs of students to gain a valuable education, but more importantly, to

live the kind of life they always wanted to while attending an institution of higher education.

- As the majority of students today choose to use their smartphone as the primary device they rely on to stay connected with family, friends and news, it is critically important for the university to stay aligned with these expectations and also create a smartphone application on the Apple iOS and Google Android operating systems.

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