
SOCIAL MEDIA IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION PROCESS

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Abstract

Standing a fair ground in the process of education marketing used to be the only point of any marketing efforts done in the field of schooling business. Keeping the position of a market leader or an above average player in the chase for high school graduates as potential future students used to be sufficient for the universities. There was no place for ambitions, nor for gaining money. Nowadays, the situation has rapidly changed as there happen to be more and more educational institutions in place and the geographical, as well as social-status limits tend to be overcome easier than ever before. Knowledge is commodified and so are the higher educational institutions. In Slovakia, the universities enter into competition with their adversaries and the fights are harsher, day by day, the limits are overcome and the line in between public interest and business has faded. The only way how to improve one's position is to compete and there is no other option than to succeed; just like in any other business. One of the options how to become more attractive is to become interactive. Being online is no longer an option, it is a must. We live in the digital age and our needs become digitalized, too. The students, as well as the potential ones, show little interest in search for information about their (future) alma mater. Though, they expect the faculty to show off and attract them, indeed. This article offers a way how to do so.

Keywords: educational institution, internet, marketing, new media, social media

1. Competition on higher educational institutions market

“The product of educational institutions is service. Service is here understood both as education and upbringing. The consumers of the service are students, parents, companies and business whom the students will once work for.” [1] The main aim of marketing of educational institutions is no longer schooling but profit. It has become business. Universities want to attract attention, to inform about set fulfilled targets. Some targeted campaigns have even a very direct objective that is to drown some of their direct competitors. In 2011, Matúš summed up the current direct as well as indirect competitors on the higher educational market as follows: *“Competition – in regards to Slovak*

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educational market- is really very tough, as there are 39 higher educational institutions, 20 out of which are public, 3 are owned by the state, other 12 are of private ownership and the resting 4 are foreign universities. Competition on educational market will be more and harsher.” [2] Since then, the situation has slightly changed. In 2015, ARRA (Slovak Academic Ranking and Rating Agency) issued their 11th anniversary ranking chart of Slovak universities in which they compared 104 public and 8 private faculties.

With growing number of schools, the universities and furthermore their faculties may no longer ignore general worldwide trends in schooling marketing. Finally, they comprehended the importance of marketing. Universities aim at their current and potential future customers via various communication channels. Distribution of leaflets shortly before higher education applications submission is no longer sufficient. The same applies for information provided to high school counsellors. We (nearly) all live our lives on social media, too. An educational institution must be visible there as well. They have to have an active Facebook profile with current up-to-date posts, they need to be followed and hash tagged on the Instagram, Insta stories shall be suggested, Twitter short notes shall be available here and there, Snapchat videos shall be posted once in a while. Official rankings are fine for the academics, the real true-to-life students live via social networks now. They expect their universities to be there, too. They no longer chase for the information, they are sure that the information will find them. Once accepted at the university they often identify with the community and want to be proud of being a part of it. The students seem to require a faculty representative who is always ‘green’ on the (live)chat, fully available to ‘assist’ them, though, they usually expect full-equipped support, help. Available 24/7, no other option. Having visited web-pages of several world-wide popular universities and their faculties, we have observed that this trend is kept by the universities and separately by their faculty bodies, too. A schooling institution would need a marketing specialist along with a social media guru to attain all generation Z and later on generations’ expectations. As the finances for faculties functioning are limited, keeping the pace with the youth is always a challenge.

2. The Internet - a good servant but a bad master

In the world where each and every information can be easily reachable by a simple click of computer mouse or a button on the smartphone, persuading youngsters to continuous education becomes a mission impossible. Competition on the education market grows bigger and bigger each academic year on all educational levels - from nursery schools (where we can speak of higher percentage of children day care for working parents compared to inalienable educational value that comes along with it) up to the universities of the third age (present on the Slovak higher educational market as the driving force for further education of people in productive age, as an alternative to pricey distance studies). With ever present phenomena of newly invented, re-discovered or re-formulated schooling methods, the education is no longer a matter of pure

information gaining. At this point, the schooling marketers feel the need to re-discover not only the hardships that the Internet has brought along, but also the brighter side that is the education process simplification and accessibility.

According to Janouch, in terms of communication, there doesn't exist any greater invention than the Internet networking. He even compares it to the invention of Gutenberg's letter print. The aim of the Internet is to enable human communication and exchange of data (information). The communication message, the data, is then accessible fast and at any point of time [3]. Furthermore, Janouch offers a clear standpoint on what are the three top attributes that are able to drag customer's attention on the wished product or service. In our case, we speak of education, as a common service on the educational market. Here comes into use the internet marketing as a communication tool for both educating and advertising education. Its three pillars are the following: conversation, reinforcing customer's position, process of participation [3].

All three above mentioned points are utilized to the fullest in marketing online and this shall be the case with marketing education, too. To sum the digitalization trend up, as there are new threads that have come with the Internet, there also are new opportunities that it has brought along. Undoubtedly, the ratio of pros prevailing the cons of the Internet stays a discussed topic. Nevertheless, as knowledge still stays the best marketable value of a person (as the higher education with wider experiences secures better work position), the question of education is not yet lost, though, the fight for attendants for various courses, students in different studying fields needs to be scrutinized. The universities will have to re-think and re-design their marketing strategies for the upcoming young generations - IT literate more than any generation before them, restraining face-to-face communication to minimum as a loss of their precious time, yet, keeping social contacts via networks.

3. The terminology - new media vs. social media

While speaking of new social media, commonly the term '*social media age*' is mentioned. Our conviction is that the term is in general public often misunderstood or misinterpreted. As we perceive this to be an issue, we intend to clarify it shortly. Social media age (or new social media age) is describing the period of mass spread of new social media sites coming to existence functioning on various software platforms but having one thing in common – social interaction via the Internet. The word interaction is the one that differentiates social media age and its content from new media age that covers wider period of time when the Internet started to be used primarily for commerce purposes. As it is clear from the definition itself, new social media age is then just a part of new media age that covers all media functioning on the ground of digital signal. Keeping it easy, new media age comprises all media that are digital or Internet-based, not only those that came into existence in the 21st century. They do not even have to be networkable via the Internet, as it is often believed. CDs and

DVDs, along with websites or computer games are a part of this vast group, too. As explained, new media do not necessarily require the Internet connection, a simple ROM (read-only memory) computer memory carrier would be sufficient. On the other hand social media require the Internet connection existence as the interaction (given the fact that the communication here is never only one-way) may happen only based on the flow of digits in certain network at a time. Online social media are then the following:

- Discussion servers - these contain general and specific forum panels;
- Web pages for content sharing- all the webs that enable their users to share their creations – thoughts, works of art, e.g. photo sharing web sites, personal blogs, etc.;
- Online reviews web sites - an open virtual space where a person can discuss about advantages and disadvantages of certain services or products. Here a good example would be www.csfd.cz, that is the biggest acknowledged webpage for Czech and Slovak reviewers of movies with millions movie reviews from people who are not anyhow connected to the web page itself (they are neither the employees, nor the admins) or the movie business;
- Social networks web sites - sites that came into existence for the very purpose of creating communication groups and channels for human-beings communication [4].

As we all know, one aspect of the Internet usage comes along with human ability to communicate, to share, to discuss and in a way to make one's inner world to grow. Just like an old Tibetan proverb states '*A child without education, is like a bird without wings*'. And to believe so, the former president of India (one of the most disperse countries in the world in terms of education) A.P.J. Abdul Kalam has recently reformulated it to even a clearer and more personal statement that '*Education gives You wings to fly*'. Having wings stands for having the opportunity to grow, to surpass the obstacles and to reach over the set limits. As the Internet has got pretty much the same potential (because it erases the geographical limits of information availability and sharing), we believe the combination of education by means of Internet, namely new social media, to be of high potential. A good idea how to link new social media such as blogs, vlogs or computer games to educational process may be a great success. Shannon Snow, Google's Head of Industry and Education proposes an interesting point of view on the issue. Based on Google's recent research, "*86 per cent of prospective students said digital resources played an important role in their education research process*" [A. Levato, *How to Win Hearts, Minds, and Enrollments with Digital*, <http://blog.educationdynamics.com/higher-education-digital-marketing/>]. If this is the case, and more than three quarters of potential students prioritize on hand online information to brochures and posters, why shouldn't it be the case of the actual students in the educational process, too?! This choice is rather behavioural than intentional. As it seems the answer may be new social media as a link functioning the best among youngsters.

4. Trend of 'several' realities in education business

While speaking of creating several realities, first of all, we would like to clarify our limits of understanding the notion *reality*. According to various dictionaries, the general term *reality* comprises of having existence or/ and substance. It is also understood as a notion describing the opposition of real to fictional in regards to one's understanding of a fact, situation, matter or thing. [*Definition of Reality*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reality>]. As a matter of fact, the expression 'virtual reality' may result in an oxymoron. Though, the term exists and describes the state of alternating one's understanding of space in the actual time thanks to technical devices. For example NASA defines one the term as follows: "*Virtual reality is the use of computer technology to create the effect of an interactive three-dimensional world in which the objects have a sense of spatial presence*" [S. Bryson, *Virtual Reality: Definition and Requirements*, <https://www.nas.nasa.gov/Software/VWT/vr.html>]. Few people misinterpret the term with '*alternate reality*' which is incorrect as alternate reality is used to describe alternate viewpoints on generally accepted facts on world's existence and functioning. Alternate reality is partially synonymous with parallel universe used by popular fiction authors. As suggested above, the term reality used in connection with other terms may result in ambiguous connotation. Our understanding of the term reality for the purposes of our research on online marketing techniques of education will be limited to simple state of existence (with or without having the quality of substance), the state of perception. For better marketing effects, the inclusion of the person, their immersion is a wished experience.

The technical support and equipment needed for creating virtual reality showrooms to attract future students is quite expensive, though, for example FMK UCM in Trnava is already working with several virtual reality devices available to students and visitors on several occasions throughout the year. There are many projects, events and meetings where everybody may experience alternate space in real time. Still, the concept is quite young and taking into consideration low set financial limits of Central European public institutions, we do not take the usage of virtual reality devices for granted. On the other hand, while speaking of social media in education recruitment, for example, there is a need to create discussion and ideally to overwhelm the students and potential ones with ideas and facts we propose them at the university. A good example how to profit from online marketing project through means of an interactive computer game is online gaming. We aim to introduce a concept of an online game created by our faculty where the actual students will function as admins of the project and the potential students will have possibility to experience faculty life in virtual space through the lives of their avatars in the game. There are several options how to include faculty related information in the game, e.g. faculty premises, workshops, faculty events, etc. The experience of the player will be nearly as good as if it was real because they will have the possibility to discuss it with other players (some of them will be faculty students, too) in real

time and as such find as much information as needed. The experience of gaining new information will be joyful and quite effortless.

On one hand, schooling shall teach, educate, spread knowledge and on the other, it is a business just like any other that has to face the challenges of competition and be one step ahead in all spheres. Both, the educational function and financial aspect must be well-combined in the marketing educational and advertising strategy. As Shannon Snow explains, educational marketing is not focusing enough on potential students' perception of the university, faculty prior to their decision making process. As she points out, the mission of the university is to be present in people's subconsciousness already in the pre-choice stage [A. Levato, *How to Win Hearts, Minds, and Enrollments with Digital*, <http://blog.educationdynamics.com/higher-education-digital-marketing/>]. May the faculty be able to create positive rumours prior to admission process, the better for them. By inventing a topic of an online game to play, social media tend to copy the topic and develop discussion among potential students as well as actual ones.

As already mentioned, marketing of educational services is a continuous struggle, the trend of online marketing prevailing the offline one seems to endure for quite some time, especially given the fact that youngsters tend to search for information on the Internet. The youngsters that the educational business primarily aims at are usually searching for their position in the world. The limits they are willing to surpass given various situations are rather unclear. They are in continuous struggle for their identity. Even though this struggle is only symbolic and in case of potential university students presents their leap into adultery world, educational business may profit from their possible ambiguities.

Many authors, among whom we have picked up Slavomír Gálik and Sabína Gáliková Tolnaiová, had perceived and acknowledged cyberspace as a new dimension for human existence. In their understanding, then, digitalization of one's nature into cyberspace and experiencing digitalized self in interactions with the others in social media is just another step in technological evolution coming along our age. We are all digitalized, so we do not any longer live in one reality only. Human existence in the cyberspace is phenomenological and as Gálik & Gáliková state, they believe that there exists "*the eidos of the Internet, a kind of basic matrix on which everything is constructed and which has a structural influence on our cognitive abilities and on culture as a whole*" [5]. Cyberreality is then just another layer of one's realities they project themselves in.

Taking into account all said and having in mind the growth of active social media accounts, specifically on our faculty, creating FMK reality for #FMKpeople seems to be the way how to attract attention. For being able to provide cyber reality experience, we suggest creating personas.

4.1. Creating personas of #FMKreality

“Persona in the context of content marketing stands for a detailed description of a person who may be a suitable consumer of our content or a suitable customer for our business.” [6] As such, a persona is not a real client, it is just and only the wished client, an ideal, optimal one. By creating a persona with all expected, suitable personality qualities, character traits we help ourselves to understand the needs of our clients. Understanding them, then, leads us inevitably to being able to fulfill their needs (given the fact we have needed resources to do so). There may occur a misunderstanding in between the term persona and target group. The following shall clarify the ambiguity. *“Both represent abstract people. The basic difference relies in their particularity (specification). Persona is far more specific than target group. In other words, personas are specific archetypes in the target group.”* [Sprievodca content marketingom, <http://visibility.sk/e-booky/sprievodca-content-marketingom>] Creating a persona helps us to get ready for creating certain relationship with our client. A persona shall have all the necessary attributes identifying a human being on various levels – a name, sex (demographic data), possibly an image for illustration. A persona is further defined by its job, marital status, income, number of children, location where they live, leisure activities, needs and ideally by certain suggestions, hints how to please the persona. The attributes of a persona need to be chosen based on averaging chosen data from actual MDM database of the business (in our case the faculty). In case we do not have at disposal an up-to-date and trustable MDM database of our business, we shall run a check of our current clients having in mind previously set criteria we are going to look at. Various authors agree that one persona is for a profound study of marketing behaviour and subsequent creation of successful suggestions never enough. There shall be at least 3 personas [S. Ward, *Target marketing*, <https://www.thebalance.com/target-marketing-2948355>]. In the process of creation both, personas and target group, the marketer (in our case the faculty FMK) needs to have it clear which objective they are going to fulfill and how to do so. Then there is left some space for defining secondary objectives (targets) such as definition of the conversion specific for the upcoming marketing strategy. The conversion may be defined as the realization of wished behaviour, act by our client based on our marketing communication. Simply said, our potential client (student) does the needed steps to become our client (actual student) [7]. One of our secondary, partial objectives is to increase the number of viewers of our web page, especially in chosen sections (such as Štúdium – Bc. a Mgr. štúdium/Bachelor’s and Master’s studying programmes) that are believed to be clicked on by mostly the applicants and (Fakultný život/Faculty life or Oznamy/Announcements) current students.

It is very important for successfully defined personas to pose the questions in regards to client’s needs well. Some of the questions in regards to current students may be the following: *“Why does our student attend on faculty events? Why not? How can we interact in their positive decisions to attend faculty/*

university students? Does our student identify themselves with the faculty on social networks? If not, what is the issue? How to motivate them to link their virtual life with the faculty one?” etc. Questions that may be posed to the applicants are then the following: *“Why have our applicants chosen to apply for the studies at FMK? Does every successful applicant decide to opt for our faculty? If not, what are the reasons for doing so? What may change their decision? Are we able to encourage them anyhow else to choose us and prioritize us instead of our competitors? Which are the factors we may influence?”*

4.2 Social media in university education

To suit education to individual students used to be done based on their categorization due to student's handicap (physical disabilities, learning disabilities), exceptionally based on their race, sex (e.g. given quota supporting minorities, women, etc.). Family or financial status along with their further specific needs was never taken care of due to limited resources and inability to categorize each and every student under a fitting label. Now, with the growth of online activity, this is no longer an issue. Being interactive on social networks is for the students attending the faculty a new synonym for both keeping the pace with rapid but necessary technological development and for the faculty staying careful for their students.

In 1994, when general public did not know much about the Internet, Howard Rheingold in his book *The Virtual Community* proposed a very interesting and now even in time proven idea about finding peers and making it an interesting marketing advantage of the virtual living. A gap in real space versus the virtual one was found and profited from. Virtual community enables different students to become part of a group, to form couples, etc.

“How does anybody find friends? In the traditional community, we search through our pool of neighbours and professional colleagues, of acquaintances and acquaintances of acquaintances, in order to find people who share our values and interests. We exchange information about one another, disclose and discuss our mutual interests, and sometimes we become friends. In a virtual community we can go directly to the place where are favourite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive. Your chances of making friends are magnified by orders of magnitude over the old methods of finding a peer group.”
[8]

All clearly named and defined, the virtual community we are ready to create will offer at the same time a space where people of similar interest will gather to exchange their viewpoints on specific topics, they will create new friendships that they may benefit later on at the faculty, once accepted. At the same time, the applicants and students may still stay somehow anonymous, as the cyber space provides certain wished anonymity. The internet platform itself, as well as the virtually shared game will be the means how to attract students

and keep the pace with the actual ones in the virtual space. As we believe it to be true, the Internet has become one of the most influential and now even commodified products of human kind, especially in regards to private information sharing [9]. Just like the students expect at least one faculty representative who is always 'green' on the chat and ready to support them at any time, avoiding ambiguous real life by creating ideal reality in the virtual space will familiarize the faculty at all levels (academic, non-academic, public, etc.). Young people think of themselves high and expect their alma mater to accept ever bigger and bigger challenges. Creating this campaign is the first step in making progress towards digitalized learning at the faculty.

There are no doubts that being online on the Internet is the best way to keep being informed and staying in touch anytime and anywhere You are. May we face the challenges of the third millennium, one of them (except of many others) definitely is decreasing ability of people to communicate face-to-face with other real people in real time and space. From the marketing point of view, the Internet tends to immensely reduce the costs for marketing causes such as propagation of products and services. In university education, e-learning shall not be only a trendy word but a trend becoming ever present, too.

5. Conclusions

Currently we have at our faculty a relatively new studying program Theory of Digital Games that is accepting students for bachelor studies for third year and as it seems, it would be the blockbuster. The primary audience for creating a brand new online (social media) campaign would be fitting both current and potential students. We have in our mind a few suggestions that would outline the future campaign of the faculty. As mentioned, the blockbuster of the campaign shall be the new studying program Theory of Digital Games that we would like to connect with currently run popular PC games and console games players event Unicon organized in Trnava by the students and graduates of FMK UCM. Our vision is to create an online version of the event as a new platform on social media principle, access to which shall be granted to current FMK students, applicants and possibly some graduates at set (admin) positions.

In the process of creation of the social platform we would like to benefit from technological skills and support of our students and their tutors at the faculty. The cost of application creation as such shall be then lower than in case of a campaign run by marketing specialists and IT support as we would do both tasks ourselves.

We also suggest creating an application that would enable students and applicants to experience online Unicon as the top event, one of a kind on the ground of Slovak universities. The idea shared by the original Unicon event and our online Unicon-alike one would be playing games and creating a possible virtual space for certain kind of a cosplay via chosen avatars. This would be done based on personas that would come into existence thanks to general survey among students of FMK in specific studying program and, more important,

based on in-depth interviews with actual students. By creation of personas we would clearly define not only the target group of our campaign but also will be able to look more into university students' lives; personal and lifestyle preferences of them that would help us in recognizing and fulfilling students' needs (that is anyhow the main purpose of marketing efforts and may result in product/service selling). One of lateral activities of our campaign would be rejuvenizing the actual design of FMK web site at least for specific section of Theory of Digital Games that definitely needs to be technically upgraded. Avatars creation would serve not only the purposes of marketing of FMK but also purposes of outstanding personalities inclusion into the environment. As we all know, the community of gamers is a specific one, whose members often have issues with social inclusion due to a very different perception of various alternative living realities and sometimes even due to high intelligence quota that often comes with lower or limited social skills that online platform would help to overcome faculty future students.

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