THE ACADEMIC PROMOTION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:
Among other significations, social media marketing means using the social networks for developing a brand on internet. Even academic institutions as Universities, find that social media are a valuable tool, for connecting with the public, including current and potential students, and also for brand consolidation. Researches show that those two public categories mentioned above are the most present on Facebook and other social media. This article aims to answer some questions: How much major universities in Romania are promoting their pages through Facebook? What structure their communication campaigns through social networks and how is promoted their educational offer? The methods used for empirical research are content analysis of social media platforms for major Romanian universities (especially Facebook).

Keywords: Academic promotion, social media, social networking, online marketing

1. Promotion through social media - conceptual benchmarks

“Over the past five years, the social media business has grown from a sleepy, sophomoric way for college kids to communicate to perhaps the future of how people will share information and bring their offline lives online. It’s truly been amazing to see how much the Internet business has evolved as a result of Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and other social media technologies”. (Treadaway & Smith, 2010 ). We started from the words of Chris Treadaway and Mari Smith, the authors of the book "Facebook Marketing. An hour a day", which are relevant to the interest for social media in last years, illustrating especially their rapid evolution and their increasingly important role in the lives of individuals, companies, institutions. Other authors define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The concept of social media includes the social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter, blogging technologies, sharing sites: Youtube, Wikipedia encyclopedia.

Chart 1. Representation of social media

Of all the social media, Facebook has the highest number of users, reaching at the end of 2012, according to the declaration of the founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, one billion users worldwide, using the social network actively every month.

The role that Facebook plays in marketing communication has also increased a lot lately. According to Hubspot, a British company that carries out researches in the online environment, in 2012, 42% of people with major marketing positions in companies worldwide declared that Facebook is very important and important for promoting their business.

In 2012, GFK Romania conducted a study entitled "How do companies use social media" on a population of 410 people, decision-makers or co-decision-makers regarding the communication activity in the Romanian companies. One of the objectives of the study was to identify which are the social networks preferred by companies and why they are used. According to GFK results, if in 2011, 69% of companies used especially the promotion via Facebook, in 2012 there is an increased trend of already well positioned channels, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Youtube, but there is a growing interest for Twitter - mentioned by 19% of companies (increase by 8% compared to 2011) and independent blogs - interest of 27% (increase by 6% over the previous year).

Regarding the purpose of communicating through social media, the study highlights a shift in the interest of the companies from the efforts to establish a brand image in 2011 to being close to the customers and their needs.

Since the companies in Romania show growing interest in the promotion through social media, in particular Facebook, the premises of this article were to test the interest of the universities in Romania, based on the idea that the academic institutions are also aware of the advantages of these media to promote their brand image, in order to arouse the interest and to keep it constant among the "consumers" of educational services.

There are several reasons why academic institutions would be entitled to turn to marketing through social media. One of them, and perhaps the most important would be the role that social media (especially Facebook) occupies in the life of young people in our country. According to statistics, at the end of March 2013, in Romania there are over 5,800,000 Facebook users, representing a penetration rate of 27% among the population and a penetration rate of 67% among Internet users. Of all those who use Facebook, the largest category of users is represented by those aged between 18 and 24 years (over 30%). This category represents also the population of major interest for the universities, among whom are recruited the future students, either for the initial education or for the master degrees representing the academic educational offer.

![Chart.2 Facebook usage rate by age groups](chart.png)

Source: www.facebrands.ro
Secondly, Facebook allows more actions than other social networks: social interaction combined with the distribution of information, connection with brands, companies, institutions, etc. The promotion is performed in an accessible and friendly way, and the fans of the page choose what they like and for what they want to receive updates.

The third reason is that the promotion through social media can be done with small budgets, or at least up to a certain point - for free.

2. Research methodology

This article is based on an empirical research of the authors, which was also carried out in the online environment. The reference population for this study was the population of the Universities in Romania, which according to the classification of 2011, were declared Universities of advanced research and education (12) and Universities of scientific education and research (30). The practical approach was to monitor the Facebook pages of these Universities, through a grid of indicators to test the visibility, the impact of this promotion method, as well as some features related to the academic marketing. The research was conducted on an exhaustive sample group, all these universities having at least a page using Facebook promotion. Moreover, other 8 Romanian universities that have managed in the last years to build a visibility of the university brands through social media, were subsequently included in the study.

The research methodology for this approach was the realization of a content analysis on the Facebook pages of 50 academic institutions in Romania.

The analytical approach was based primarily on recording or calculating some quantitative indicators, such as: the duration of the promotional page, the number of people who appreciate that page - fans (index of appreciation Ia), the number of people who talk about the page - people engaged in discussions, comments, posting, distributing, interacting on that page, index of return Ir and the number of "discussions" in relation to the appreciations (index of feedback If - calculated using the formula If=Ia*100/Ir), the frequency of the posts on the page in the last month, etc. The quantitative indicators were illustrated and calculated using a quantitative software of statistical processing, SPSS.

In the second sequence of the analysis it was observed the presentation of the posted information (if the information is visual and customized), the interaction with the public, the responses to comments, the participation in the conversations on the page. We have also tried to highlight if there is a marketing communication strategy on the pages of the studied universities. This qualitative analysis was conducted only for the pages with at least 5,000 likes, considering this threshold as a minimum visibility requirement for that page. As a matter of fact, for a lower number of likes, there is the possibility of creating personal profiles on Facebook, which allow maximum 5,000 subscriptions (virtual friends). Thus, of the 50 universities (42 classified and another 8 in the additional list), only 15 of them were analyzed at this stage.
3. Conclusions and recommendations

Of the 42 pages of promotion considered as being part of the initially studied population, only 9 of them meet the criteria of minimum visibility, as we have defined it above, having at least 5,000 likes (numbered with Arabic numerals and highlighted in bold). Other 8 universities (highlighted in italic) are added to these, promoting their academic offer through Facebook and having the index of appreciation with values above the minimum threshold considered in the study. The following table contains the universities in Romania (from the mentioned classification) that reach the highest number of likes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of the university</th>
<th>Index of appreciation* (of feedback)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td><em>Spiru Haret University of Romania</em></td>
<td>66,582 (0.35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>1 University of Bucharest</td>
<td>29,763 (7.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>2 Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi</td>
<td>23,974 (6.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Politehnica University of Bucharest</td>
<td>14,152 (0.78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>University of South-East Europe Lumina</td>
<td>11,724 (5.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>3 Academy of Economic Studies of Bucharest</td>
<td>11,173 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>4 Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj</td>
<td>9,435 (1.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava</td>
<td>8,987 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University</td>
<td>8,537 (0.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>5 Police Academy Al.I.Cuza of Bucharest</td>
<td>8,099 (0.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XI</td>
<td>6 Transilvania University of Braşov</td>
<td>8,192 (**)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XII</td>
<td>7 West University of Timişoara</td>
<td>6,459 (4.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIII</td>
<td>8 Politehnica University of Timişoara</td>
<td>5,943 (1.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XIV</td>
<td>Valahia University of Târgovişte</td>
<td>5,370 (0.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XV</td>
<td>9 University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timişoara (page in English)</td>
<td>5,186 (3.63)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own calculations *updated on March, 24th 2013 ** there are no available data on the page

The index of feedback was calculated for the analyzed Facebook pages that contained information, in order to provide a better picture of the degree of interaction between those who declare themselves "fans" of that page of promotion (it is an index of the quality of interaction on a Facebook page). According to the methodology used by DMS Group, for a page that has less than 100,000 likes, an optimal value of the Index of return is when it represents 10% of Ia; if Ia > 100,000, the optimal value of Ir is 5% of Ia. From the universities in the top of the classification made by M.E.C.T.S., only for two of them there are values close to the value of an optimal communication based on feedback, namely the value If = 10.

This is the case of the University of Bucharest, with the highest Ie (29,763), but also the highest If of the universities considered in the research (7.47). The second university from this classification, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iaşi, has the index of appreciation Ie = 23,974 and the index of feedback If = 6.75. Among the officially elite classified universities, the average indexes of feedback are noticed in the case of the West University of Timişoara (If = 4.13) and the University of Medicine and Pharmacy of
Timișoara (If = 3.63). In the case of these two universities, the index of feedback reveals that there is a certain quality of the interactions, but this should be optimized.

On the other hand, according to Wildfire, a division of Google, the objective of a Facebook page in promotion should be that the "involved users" (those who simply open a picture or click on a link of the page) represent 15-20% of the fans of that page every month. The number of these active users, who do more than to become fans of that page, represents a piece of information that is only available to the administrators of those pages and have not been subject to the analysis in this research.

The population of the initially investigated universities increased by 8 academic institutions that have an index Ia > 5,000. Among these there are cases in which there is a very low value of If, although the Ia value is high. For example, in the case of the Spiru Haret University, which has also the highest value of Ia (66,582), the If index is only 0.35, which expresses the lack of interaction on this page (even though the information is posted several times a day). However, in this list there are also Universities with an increased feedback of the posts. In fact, in the case of Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, the If value is the highest of all 50 academic institutions which were analyzed (Ia = 8,987, If = 15 respectively). Another example of increased value of If is in case of the University of South-Eastern Europe Lumina (Ia = 11,724, If = 5.61).

There is another situation: that of the academic institutions with low visibility on Facebook, with low values of the index of appreciation, but with high values of the index of feedback. It seems that, while these universities do not attract the amount of users on the page to create a bigger audience of the posted information, they manage to connect a community (in particular of students), with a high number of those who interact, rebroadcast the information, comment on posts. In this category there is the Land Forces Academy of Sibiu (Ia = 788, Ir = 229, so If = 25), the National School of Political and Administrative Studies (247 active fans of a total of 1931, i.e. If = 12.79), etc.

Another indicator considered in the assessment of the promotion on Facebook of the Universities in Romania was the frequency of posts. The following categories of post frequency were established: 1. very rare posts 2. post every few months; 3. post once a month 4. post every 2-3 weeks 5. post once a week 6. post every 2-3 days 7. post once a day 8. posts several times a day.

According to the quantitative analysis, there is a direct correlation of average intensity between the number of appreciations for a page and the frequency of posts (correlation coefficient R = 0.51). In other words, we expect that the pages where there are posts with an increased frequency to attract a higher number of appreciations. Therefore, it is no exception that on the Facebook pages of the first two Universities in the top of appreciations (from the list of universities which are classified A and B), there is information posted also several times a day (the highest frequency of posting). Thus, on the page of Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (24,096 likes) it is posted several times a day, in March 2013 being no less than 121 posts. The same goes for the University of Bucharest (29,904 likes), where there is a high frequency of posting, having as a result 80 posts in the same period.
There is no statistically significant association between the duration of a Facebook page and the indicators of attraction or feedback. In other words, the "age" of a page, the simple presence on Facebook offers no guarantee of success in promotion.

In terms of the form of presentation of the posted information, we analyzed whether this is presented in a visual form or not. In the case of the two universities mentioned above, over 90% of the information is visual (of total posts in 2013). In general, the tendency to present by visual elements is a characteristic of all top universities based on the number of appreciations. Similarly, the pages for which the index of feedback If has higher values are also those who on which it is posted frequently and the information is (also) visual.

In conclusion, a high frequency of posting, but also visually attractive information is necessary in order to promote a page in optimum conditions.

There are other features that can contribute to effective promotion of the academic institutions. The successful strategies to promote a page should include (Dunay & Krueger, 2010) information with relevant content, frequent posts, conducting contests or campaigns to increase interaction on the page. Many other authors agree that the updated and authentic posts, the visual and multimedia information, which is addressed personally, the interaction with the public by responding to comments, the participation in conversations on the page are the necessary steps in promoting a brand through social media and building an audience. The information should also be structured through a communication strategy.

We can say that in the case of the Universities in Romania there is still enough space related to the increase of the interest in promoting the academic pages by using Facebook. Few universities have made efforts in this regard so far. In almost all cases there is no communication strategy, the information being chaotic and the interaction with the audience is limited to an incipient form. In many cases, the universities fragment their identity by presenting multiple pages (2, 3, 4 or even 5) of the same type or different type (personal profile, page, place, etc.) which causes confusion among the users of Facebook and decline rapidly their degree of affiliation with the pages in question.
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