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The Role of E-marketing Tools in Constructing the Image of a Higher Education Institution

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to describe specific aspects regarding the use of e-marketing tools as a factor influencing the perception of the image of a higher education institution among its target groups. The article draws on primary data acquired through surveying respondents with the use of a questionnaire. More specifically, the analysis is based on 400 responses given by students at the Faculty of management - University of Prešov in Prešov. The crux of the article consists in examining the opinions of the respondents, concentrating on selected website elements such as design, clarity, content quality, inclusion of social elements and on selected e-marketing tools such as a Blog, Microsite, Q&A / FAQ portal, E-mail newsletter, Wiki, Online publications / eBooks, Live chat, and Mobile application. The research results have shown that there is a significant correlation between the perception of the overall image of the faculty and the evaluation of individual elements of the faculty website. The hypothesis that there is a significant correlation between the students' attitude towards the necessity to use new e-marketing tools and the expressed evaluation of the faculty's image has not been confirmed.

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1. Introduction

We live at a time when we are being surrounded by an enormous amount of advertising messages, most of which we do not even notice. The market is over-saturated with lots of products and services, which on a daily basis are being pushed into the attention of potential customers. Suhányi (2011) states that in most cases, the competitive

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advantage does not lie only in a quality product or a great idea, but it is actually marketing and an optimal use of its tools that can on a decisive level decide about the success or failure of a product or service in the market.

There are authors who point out that higher education institutions should be marketed more and also managed more like corporate brands (Schüller & Chalupský, 2012). Whelan & Wohlfeil (2006) and Maringe & Carter (2007) state that university managers and academics have to consider the marketing not as an alien concept imported from the business world, but as both a viable philosophy and strategy for developing an higher education sector which meets the needs of home-based and international customers. With regards to this topic, many authors specialise in e-marketing communication tools, where the main focus is on website evaluation, e.g. Bauer & Scharl (2002); Nielsen (2000); Rovňák (2010). Their research focuses on improving the quality of websites and on the possibilities of the use of e-marketing tools for marketing communication. A number of authors concentrate on these issues, such as Castro, Marcos & Caceres (2004); Kaplan & Haenlein (2010); Dekker (2007), Lewis et al. (2008); Krombholz et al. (2012); Durkasree & Ramesh (2011); Huttmanová & Synčáková (2009); Otim & Grover (2006); Parasaruman & Zinkhan (2002); Rajnoha et al. (2013). Based on the above and on research carried out in this field, the aim of this paper is to describe specific aspects regarding the use of e-marketing tools as a factor influencing the perception of the image of a higher education institution among its target groups.

2. Theory

After a long period of exclusive focus on traditional media, public relations have thanks to the Internet become real relations with the members of the public, where various forms of on-line content allow the organisations to communicate directly with the consumers (Scott, 2010). The Internet has become a key, or one could say a strategic weapon: this is significant given the current hyper-competitive environment, which simultaneously raises the question of its reliability (Davidavičienė & Tolvaišas, 2011; Aladwani, 2006). The significance of online marketing is currently increasing, as we can observe changes in the ways people communicate and also in the ways they spend their free time. The advantage of the Internet as a communication medium likewise lies in the fact that it allows us to target the conveyed information at a precisely specified audience segment (Phillips, 2009). These facts seem important from the perspective of their use in public relations activities not only in the business sphere, but also in academic environment. Watson & Noble (2007) state that public relations in an online environment are mainly about convincing the public to use this medium to make positive comments about the organisation's products or services. Unlike the off-line environment, the nature of the Internet provides a possibility to quickly connect without any geographical constraints groups of people who are interested in discussing the organisation and its parts.

The image of an educational institution can be influenced by objective and subjective characteristics of the particular institution. Světlík (2009) shows that when it comes to objective characteristics, their change is very difficult; alternatively, it requires considerable financial means. Subjective characteristics amount to the perception of the institution by individual groups of respondents. The current image of an institution (especially in the educational sphere) is usually based on its previous reputation and at the same time displays relative stability. This shows that with many factors, change can only be effectuated by long-term and patient work. This notional physical distance is overcome in the Internet environment with ceaseless communication using e-marketing tools such as a website, blog, Microsite, Q&A / FAQ portal, E-mail newsletter, Wiki etc. The importance of e-marketing tools is shown in a number of academic works (Keegan & Green, 2008; Belch & Belch, 2007). With regard to websites, Kírářová (1995) states that website content is very important and its renewal may be very difficult also because visitors do not like static sites, and it is an unforgivable mistake when websites are not regularly upgraded. This mistake could affect the perceived image of the organization.

Higher education institutions focusing primarily on providing services in education have similar characteristics to other market subjects, whereby the students represent the customers who realise their buying decisions – the choice of an educational institution based on available information, including the image (Shanka, Quintal & Taylor, 2006; Švandová, 2013). Fransen & Van Rompay (2011) state that marketing efforts in the online environment support the increase of loyalty to the organisation by various typical ways in which an organisation can transform user experience and which help it form its image.

3. Calculation

Currently (2014), there are 36 educational institutions with more than 150 faculties, including institutes, centres and branches, operating in the higher education market in Slovakia. It is worthwhile to mention the fact that in 1996, there were only 14 universities functioning in the higher education market; in 2002, this number has almost doubled to 24 universities. This period, characterised by quantitative growth in higher education in Slovakia, was also accompanied by a growing interest in higher education, which reached its maximum in 2006-2007 (see Fig 1.).

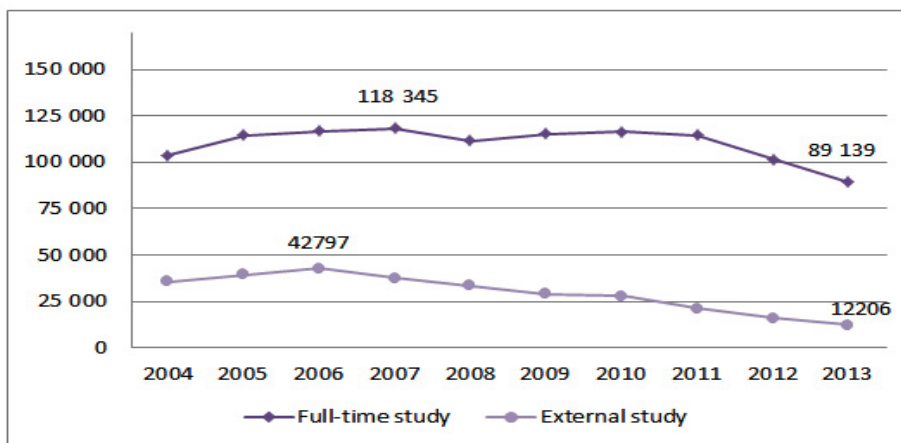


Fig. 1. Development trend in the total number of university applications submitted in Slovakia.
Source: Uips.sk (2014)

A more detailed view of the faculties with economic/managerial specialisation in the Slovak market, which includes also FM PU in Prešov, can be characterised as very competitive. More specifically, FM PU in Prešov from the domestic market viewpoint is part of a competitive environment with 33 faculties (including institutes, etc.) specialising in economics and management. Out of related faculties in Slovakia that have been identified on the basis of similarity with the course programme at FM PU in Prešov, we have identified 12 faculties (including institutes, etc.) at private higher education institutions, which represents a proportion of 36%.

It is not necessary to stress that higher education institutions – whether public or private universities – are constantly seeking and competing for prospective students, or clients. In this regard, we must note a falling trend in the number of university applicants, which reflects the level of population growth after 1990, which reached its low in 2002. A yearly decline in all the submitted applications in the period of 2012-2013 in the case of full-time study represented 12%. When it comes to part-time study in the same period, a decline of 24% was noted. The declining trend confirms a 23% fall in the total applications submitted by applicants for full-time higher education programmes in comparison with the years 2013-2010. In a similar comparison of applicants for part-time study programmes, this decrease represented as much as 56% (Uips.sk, 2014).

A detailed look at the structure of university applicants for both forms of study (applications submitted) in 2013 shows the dominance of a group of study programmes classified as social sciences (these include social disciplines and services) with a 54.50% share (55,255 submitted applications). In particular, economical sciences as part of the social sciences that FM PU in Prešov falls under within this group dominate with a 32% share, which represents 17,606 applicants or submitted applications (Uips.sk, 2014).

It must be noted that as much as 93.70% of the entire population of the Slovak Republic between the ages of 16-24 use the Internet every day or almost every day (data for 2013); in the case of the age category of 25-34 years this share represents 88.70% (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2013). We also find it significant that young people aged between 12-26 in Slovakia spend 4 hours a day on average on the Internet (data for 2013, TNS Slovakia, 2014), which provides additional confirmation of the significance of the Internet as a relevant communication channel (medium) from the viewpoint of FM PU in Prešov and its target audiences.

4. Methodology

In view of the research goal defined above, the total population for the purposes of quantitative research consisted of full-time and part-time students enrolled in bachelor's and master's programmes at the Faculty of Management of the PU in Prešov. The research sample consisted of the answers of 400 respondents, which represents 20.83% of the total population. By using cluster sampling in data collection, we aimed to achieve a balanced representation of respondents in all years and both forms of study. Specifically, the research sample consisted of 80 respondents from each year with the ratio of 50:50 regarding the full-time and part-time form of study. The surveyed research sample consisted of 75% of women, which reflects the overall gender structure at the faculty (specifically, 74.11% (1,423) are women and 25.89% (497) are men). Regarding the age groups participating in the survey, it was dominated by the age group 18-25 with an 83.25% share. It is worth noting that 66.50% of the respondents studying part time also fall within this age group. When it comes to the type of secondary school completed, the survey was dominated by secondary grammar school graduates with a 35.25% share. This was subsequently followed by similar percentages of the hospitality college (22.25%), business colleges (23%) and vocational schools (19.50%) graduates.

Table 1. Gender structure of respondents.

Sex	(%)	Σ (N=400)	(%)	Part-time students (N=200)	(%)	Full-time students (N=200)
Male	25.25	101	20.00	40	30.50	61
Female	74.75	299	80.00	160	69.50	139

To acquire empirical material, we used the explorative method of data collection with a questionnaire, based on acquiring information through subjective statements of participating respondents, who in this case were full-time and part-time students enrolled at FM PU in Prešov. In its introduction, the questionnaire submitted to the respondents contained basic identification questions in order to determine the basic characteristics of the research sample for subsequent analysis; more specifically, they referred to basic demographic information and also course-related information (form of study, year, and type of completed secondary school). The aim of the other group of mostly closed survey questions was to identify attitudes and preferences of the respondents in relation to the analysed research topic, more specifically concentrating on the website as an e-marketing tool and also on e-marketing tools in general. The respondents were randomly approached before and after lectures on the premises of FM PU in Prešov. Data collection took place in the months of March and April 2014.

5. Results and Discussion

In analysing the attitudes and preferences of students with regards to webpage as an e-marketing tool, we focused on both the website of the FM PU in Prešov and on the website as a tool of e-marketing communication in general. When exploring the students' perception of the website as a tool for constructing a positive image of a higher education organisation, 52.75% of students strongly agreed with this statement, and on the whole, 83.75% expressed a positive stance.

It was our intention to find out as part of this analysis whether among the students at FM PU in Prešov there is a significant correlation between their evaluation of the overall execution of the faculty website (design, clarity, content – course information, content – faculty life, inclusion of social elements) and their expressed degree of evaluation of the faculty image as a whole. In this article, we will evaluate 2 hypotheses:

H₁: *It is assumed that there is a significant correlation between the perception of the overall image of the faculty with the evaluation of individual elements of the faculty website (design, clarity, relevant content – course information, relevant content – news on faculty life, inclusion of social elements).*

Given the type of variables, we used the correlation analysis method (Pearson correlation coefficient) that analyses the strength of the relationship between variables to evaluate this hypothesis. The analysis focused on the relationship between the following variables: perception of the faculty's image – website attribute.

Table 2. Pearson correlation analysis.

	AVG	STD	r(x, y)	r ²	t	p	N
Perceived image	3.095000	0.763172					
Design	3.010000	0.858337	0.316106	0.099923	6.647128	0.000000	400
Clarity	2.645000	1.105455	0.265851	0.070677	5.501695	0.000000	400
Content – course information	3.357500	0.939095	0.295199	0.087143	6.163895	0.000000	400
Content – faculty life	3.217500	0.942026	0.295396	0.087259	6.168402	0.000000	400
Inclusion of social elements	2.747500	0.911494	0.221920	0.049249	4.540510	0.000007	400

Based on our findings (Table 2.) with regards to the hypothesis we have formulated, the evaluation of the faculty image is most strongly correlated with the evaluation of the website design and most weakly correlated with the inclusion of social elements on the website. The strongest correlation has reached the value of $r=0.316$ and the weakest $r=0.221$. There is a significant correlation between the perception of the overall image of the faculty and the evaluation of the individual website elements (design, clarity, relevant content – course information, relevant content – news on faculty life, inclusion of social elements). It can be stated that the evaluation of the individual elements of the faculty website is significantly associated with the perception of the overall image.

The highest average mark was given to the variable “Relevant Content – course information”, i.e. 3.36. The variable “Design” was not only identified as having the highest correlation relationship ($r = 0.316$), but also received an average mark of 3.01. The lowest average mark 2.65 was given to the variable “Clarity”. The assumption that there is a significant relationship between the perception of the overall image of the faculty and the evaluation marks given to individual elements of the faculty website (design, clarity, relevant content – course information, relevant content – news on faculty life, inclusion of social elements) has been confirmed. This finding supports the fact that a website in general represents the main e-marketing tool, subsequently followed by other tools.

Table 3. Evaluation of the level of individual elements of the website of FM PU in Prešov.

(N=400)	(%)	1	(%)	2	(%)	3	(%)	4	(%)	5
Design	5.25	21	18.25	73	49.00	196	25.25	101	2.25	9
Clarity	16.25	65	30.75	123	30.75	123	16.75	67	5.50	22
Content – course information	3.25	13	12.75	51	39.00	156	35.00	140	10.00	40
Content - faculty life	3.75	15	16.25	65	42.75	171	29.00	116	8.25	33
Inclusion of social elements	8.75	35	27.75	111	39.25	157	13.50	54	3.25	13

Legend: 1 –Least important; 5 – Most important

In this respect we must note the fact (Table 3.) that in the case of faculty website, the students most often positively evaluated (4 and 5) content relevance, both with respect to “Content relevance – course information” (45%) and with respect to “Content relevance – news on faculty life” (37.25%). The highest proportion, or 49%, of neutral evaluations was related to the “Design” of the faculty website. It should be noted that “Clarity” as a researched variable received the most negative marks; specifically, the proportion of negative evaluations (Bad – 1 and Very bad – 2) equalled 47%. The second highest proportion of negative evaluations (1 and 2), i.e. 36.50% referred to the variable “Inclusion of social elements”.

Table 4. Degree of importance of individual website elements.

(N=400)	(%)	1	(%)	2	(%)	3	(%)	4	(%)	5
Design	3.50	14	12.00	48	33.00	132	33.50	134	18.00	72
Clarity	4.50	18	11.75	47	19.75	79	21.75	87	42.25	169
Content - study information	2.00	8	7.75	31	21.75	87	25.75	103	42.75	171
Content - faculty life	1.25	5	10.50	42	28.50	114	35.25	141	24.50	98
Inclusion of social elements	4.00	16	17.00	68	44.50	178	24.50	98	10.00	40

Legend: 1 –Least important; 5 – Most important

From the point of view of the evaluated degree of significance for the students, the survey results (Table 4.) show that they consider the most important element to be “Content – course information”, where the proportion of positive evaluations equalled 68.50% (4 and 5). Website clarity with a comparable proportion of positive evaluations – 64% (4 and 5) has from the students’ viewpoint placed as the second most important element of the website. The design of the website is considered important by 51.50% (4 and 5) of the students. The evaluation of the least and less important elements was dominated by “Inclusion of social elements” with a 21% share, which also dominated in the case of neutral evaluation with a share of 44.50%.

Another one of our aims as part of the undertaken analysis was to find out whether among the participating students there is a significant correlation between perceiving the need to use new e-marketing tools (blog, microsite, Q&A / FAQ portal, e-mail newsletter, wiki, online publications / eBooks, live chat, and mobile application) and the degree of evaluation of the faculty image as a whole expressed by the same students. The following hypothesis has been formulated for verification:

H₂: *It is assumed that there is a significant correlation between perceiving the need to use new e-marketing tools and the degree of evaluation of the faculty image as a whole.*

To evaluate the hypothesis, we used the correlation analysis method (Pearson correlation coefficient) that answers the question of the strength of the relationship between the analysed variables. Analogous to the previous hypothesis, the same verification steps have been used. The analysis focused on the correlation of the relationship: perception of the faculty’s image – necessity to use new e-marketing tools.

Table 5. Pearson correlation analysis.

	AVG	STD	r(x, y)	r ²	t	p	N
Perceived image	3.095000	0.763172					
Variable	4.005000	0.849576	0.014727	0.000217	0.293844	0.769031	400

Variable - necessity to use new e-marketing tools

The correlation coefficient has been calculated as $r=0.0147$. The significance has only amounted to the value of $p=0.293$. The analysis has not shown a statistically meaningful relationship between the variables. The assumption that there is a significant correlation between the students’ acknowledgement of the necessity to use new e-marketing tools and the expressed evaluation marks of the faculty image as a whole has not been verified. In this case, the average student evaluation equalled $M=4.005$ ($\sigma=0.849$), which suggests a positive attitude of students in this respect. Despite the fact that there is not a statistically relevant relation between these variables, the high average value of the expressed agreement with the given statement suggests that the students are familiar with the significance of the use of new e-marketing tools in constructing a positive image of the organisation and the public relations activities associated with this.

Table 6. Significance of e-marketing tools as an indispensable prerequisite for constructing a positive image.

	(%)	Σ (N=400)	Full-time students		Part-time students	
			(%)	Σ (N=200)	(%)	Σ (N=200)
Strongly disagree	0.25	1	0.00	0	0.50	1
Rather Disagree	4.25	17	3.50	7	5.00	10
Neither agree or disagree	21.50	86	21.50	43	21.50	43
Rather Agree	42.75	171	43.00	86	42.50	85
Strongly agree	31.25	125	32.00	64	30.50	61

In this respect, we should note the fact (Table 6.) that with regards to the question focusing on identifying the perceived importance of the use of e-marketing tools as an indispensable prerequisite for constructing a positive image of FM PU in Prešov, a rather positive attitude was prevalent, represented by 42.75% of the students; overall, a positive attitude was expressed by 74% of the students (4 and 5).

In our opinion, it is a significant finding (Table 7.) that the Questions & Answers – FAQ tool was dominating, with the proportion of positive evaluations equalling 61.75% (4 and 5). With its 58% (4 and 5), live chat with a guidance counsellor on the faculty website was ranked as the second most important tool by the students. Based on the survey results, online publications and microsites placing above the benchmark of 50% can also be considered e-

marketing tools that the students evaluate positively. When it comes to negative attitude expressed by the students, the possibility of running a mobile application dominated with its 19.50% (1 and 2). Blog as an e-marketing tool has received the highest proportion of neutral evaluations with its 40.75%.

Table 7. Significance of the tools of e-marketing as a communication channel.

(N=400)	(%)	1	(%)	2	(%)	3	(%)	4	(%)	5
Blog	2.00	8	13.00	52	40.75	163	30.75	123	13,50	54
Microsites	1.25	5	6.25	25	38.00	152	37.25	149	17,25	69
Discussion forums	1.75	7	11.25	45	35.00	140	29.75	119	22,25	89
Q&A / FAQ	2.50	10	8.25	33	27.50	110	30.50	122	31,25	125
Newsletter	4.50	18	14.25	57	39.00	156	29.75	119	12,50	50
Wiki	3.50	14	14.75	59	38.00	152	26,50	106	17,25	69
Online publications	1.50	6	16.25	64	31.75	127	29,75	119	21,00	84
Live chat	4.50	18	9.50	38	28.00	112	31,00	124	27,00	108
Mobile application	4.50	18	15.00	60	31.75	127	27,50	110	21,25	85

Legend: 1 –Least important; 5 –Most important

6. Conclusion

It is quite a common occurrence that the quality of faculties and universities is not sufficiently expressed in their marketing and promotion, and all the more so, in our opinion, in the Internet environment. In this respect, we concur with the opinion expressed by Štefko (2003), that research increasingly points to the fact that a respected university of high quality is predominantly a product of good management, which is not afraid to change the routine stereotypes, and which views the educational institution as a subject that must behave in an effective marketing way in the market environment.

This analysis has shown that the students at FM PU in Prešov have a positive attitude towards the website of an educational institution as a relevant tool for the construction of a positive image of the organisation, and at the same time a tool that has an influence on the perception and evaluation of a university faculty from the perspective of university applicants in relation to competing faculties. This finding reflects the fact that in the set of examined elements of the faculty website, the students were the most critical about its clarity; this, on the other hand, as part of the evaluation of perceived importance was viewed by the students as the second most important element of the website out of all the examined elements. The results have shown that when it comes to constructing a positive image of the organisation, the students show a greater preference for practical information – information about the courses rather than information relating to current events or articles about faculty news. This fact can be called a “need” for information related to the study programme itself, which is reflected in the e-marketing tools we have examined.

It should be stressed that the topic of e-marketing in the environment of higher education institutions is a relatively new but at the same time a wide sphere of knowledge, which is constantly growing hand in hand with the technological development in online technologies. These facts can be considered significant from the perspective of future scientific trends in this area. Based on our analysis, we have identified other possible research areas – problem areas: more specifically, we refer to further exploration of the possibilities of using online social networks as another e-marketing tool in the higher education setting, especially as a direct online communication channel between the organisation and its target audiences, and as a cost-effective promotion tool.

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