ONLINE UNIVERSITY MARKETING: OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Under the conditions of intensifying competition, increasing costs and rapidly decreasing student numbers, universities are facing difficulties in promoting educational offers and attracting students, trying to find the best ways to interact with target audiences to improve and develop the institutional image and reputation, increasing notoriety, increase the attractiveness of study programs and stimulate enrollment. Therefore, the issue of marketing strategies, policies and tactics becomes increasingly current and of major interest to universities. At the same time, the studies conducted allow us to find that marketing remains one of the fields often ignored by universities. The use of digital channels becomes a necessity for any university marketing strategy.

Introduction

The national development strategy "European Moldova 2030" represents the national long-term strategic vision document and indicates the country's development directions in the context of the Association Agreement and the status of a candidate country for EU accession [1], and the main policies in the field of education, the content and the mechanisms for achieving them are contained in the Development Strategy "Education 2030" [2]. Like other previous strategic documents, the "Education 2030" strategy recognizes education as a national priority and a basic factor in the promotion of democratic values, the assurance of human and citizen rights, in the development of human capital, in the formation of consciousness and in the valorization of aspirations of European integration, with a primary role in creating the premises for sustainable human development and building a knowledge-based society.

Speaking about some more important developments and activities with a positive impact on the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova, specific for the last periods of time, we can refer to the implementation of the stipulations of the Bologna Process and the implementation of the new Education Code, the start of the implementation of the Framework of Qualifications, the development of the Reference Framework of the University Curriculum, the initiation of the development of Qualification Standards for all levels of studies, the establishment of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Research (ANACEC), the wider access of universities to national funds intended for research in conditions of competition, the launch of an extensive reform in higher education with promises to allocate large funds for the modernization and development of universities etc.

At the same time, the higher education system also faces a series of chalenges and problems such as: the dramatic decrease in the number of students simultaneously with the increase in expenditure per student, the insufficient funding of universities, the lack of considerable public investment for research purposes, the level low presence of the research component in universities, the low status of scientific and didactic staff and researchers in higher education in society and the lack of motivation due to low salaries, the small number of academic mobility for students, teaching staff and researchers, weak interaction and unsatisfactory mechanisms of interaction of higher education institutions with the sphere of research and development and the business environment, the low participation of universities in European and international projects and programs, the passivity and weak motivation of students due to the lack of a real perspective in the development of a successful professional career in Republic of Moldova, respectively, their reduced responsibility towards learning results, the undervaluation of the individual work of students in the teaching-learning process and their weak involvement in research activities, the decrease in the prestige of higher education in general and its tarnished image etc.

In the context of the above, universities in the Republic of Moldova also face a series of difficulties, including in promoting educational offers and attracting students, given the dramatic decrease in their number in all programs, forms of education and study cycles.

Certainly, in the conditions of the establishment of the single European area of higher education and the appearance of new opportunities to study abroad for graduates of pre-university education, the universities of the Republic of Moldova are facing increasingly tough competition, and it is necessary to apply appropriate strategies of educational marketing to engage with target audiences, to increase awareness and drive study enrolment. And even if traditional marketing, including that based on the use of television, radio, print media, other forms of promotion continues to maintain its importance and can still be considered to be predominant in marketing activity, its effectiveness is continuously decreasing, and digital marketing, considered to be a new stage in the evolution of the modern marketing concept [3], comes with new solutions, which involve the active use of the Internet and electronic devices.

Results and discussion

The purpose of educational marketing in general and digital marketing in particular is to implement various marketing strategies to promote valuable educational content to applicants, students, teachers and other interested parties. Universities can use online marketing primarily to help prospective students make the right choice when deciding where to study, to increase their brand awareness, to

showcase their strengths, what makes them different from competitors etc., and as a consequence – to stimulate enrollment in studies.

Universities can opt for different online marketing strategies, tactics, channels, techniques and tools, which offer various opportunities to achieve the proposed objectives. Among the most important are:

- *University's web page* can provide information about what the university stands for, the university's offer with reference to study programs, courses, additional services (canteen, sports club, extracurricular activities, frequently asked questions with answer contents), the values offered by the university, the practiced models of study organization (with physical presence, without frequency, online, distance, in mixed form), various educational materials, virtual tours, success stories of former students, etc. The presence of a chat-live, or chat bot gives the possibility to provide instant answers to visitors' questions. For many people the website creates the first impression of the university and its image. A website should represent a clear and memorable brand, fast, mobile-friendly, and easy to use and an important source of improvement is the users' opinions regarding their likes and dislikes, proposals, and improvement suggestions. [5, pp.139-140];

- *E-mail marketing* is considered to be a quick way to communicate with current and potential customers and cheaper compared to other online marketing tools. It enables the possibility of two-way communication both between institutions and between institutions and their current and potential customers. It refers to the process of sending messages for the purpose of information to a specific audience. E-mails may contain information about the educational offer, services provided by the university, newsletters, news about the university and current and future events organized within it, information about open days, personalized offers, successful experiences (stories) of former students, opinions, reviews, discount opportunities, new study programs, extracurricular activities within the university, other information. Among the most frequent questions of candidates who intend to enter the university are the provision of accommodation in student dormitories, living conditions, accommodation tax, accessible equipment, lecture halls and their facilities, learning opportunities, extracurricular activities, etc. Emails can influence study applicants to take the next step in deciding.

- *Online advertising* refers to the presentation of promotional messages and ideas to a specific audience on the Internet. The online environment offers advertising options placed on specialized portals through which it is possible to increase online traffic, the notoriety of the university, study programs, etc. The biggest advantage offered by digital advertising compared to traditional advertising is precise targeting based on demographics, geography, interests, behavioral patterns, etc., with positive effects on click-through rates. Online advertising messages can take different forms, such as [4, pp. 112-124]: *online advertising banners* static, in the form of images, animated, which give the impression of movement through rapid change; interactive, which allow the input of information by the user (for example, asking questions), the possibility of answering users' questions or even enrolling in studies; extensive, which offers an additional space to display the message at the time of display, by expanding the size, after the user has passed the mouse over it or clicked on it; video-banners, which have the shape of a regular banner and have a part intended for playing the video clip, etc.; *interstitials* ("inline", "pop-ups", "Pop-unders", superstitions, etc.) - are textual, graphic, video, etc. advertising messages that appear in the time interval between leaving a page web and loading another or when switching from one page to another of a site; *floating advertising* ("floating ads"); advertisements etc. To increase the effectiveness of online advertising, search engine marketing tools (Search Engine Marketing -SEM) are of particular importance, considered to be the most important means for attracting visitors, increasing search traffic and obtaining customers, to the

extent that most applicants turn to search engines to find information about universities, using keywords for this purpose. At the same time, only the registration on search engines is not enough, it is necessary to optimize the position on the search engine in order to improve the place of the university or its programs in the pages resulting from the search. For this, universities can pay search engines for placement on results pages, or they can focus on organic placement (without paying) on search results. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of optimizing a website so that it ranks in the search results, on the first pages of search engines, in the first positions or higher than others, and as a consequence – better traffic to the university website. Among the most commonly used advertising channels in online university marketing are considered to be search engine advertising, social media advertising, advertisements, banners and video ads.

- *Social networks* (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Linkedin, Tik Tok, Pinterest, YouTube, etc.) offer a large number of opportunities for interaction with the general public, but also with the target audience represented by young people and their parents, to gain attention of users and generating traffic to the university domain, an excellent way to reach a certain target audience, to exchange information with current and potential students, to build long-lasting relationships with them, to develop promotional campaigns, to obtain information about people who follow social media profiles, to increase awareness, to build the reputation of the university, to obtain feedback from the target audience regarding programs, services, image, to conduct marketing research and obtain information about the needs, wishes, opinions and interests of study applicants, to improve the interaction with them or even the number of enrolments.

- *The blog* (from the English expression web log, meaning diary on the Internet) represents an important communication tool and a component of the promotion strategies of universities. It is a website where texts, comments, reviews, impressions, video and audio materials, photographs, images, drawings, links to other blogs or sites to develop online traffic As topics of discussion can be used the presentation of the university campus, the courses offered by the university and their importance for professional training, the scientific-didactic and didactic staff available at the university and the posting of captivating interviews, as the case may be, the favorable location of the university, as an important factor of motivation in choosing the university, and places nearby (cultural institutions, entertainment, green spaces, facilities offered to students, etc.). Depending on the audience and its purpose, the blog can be updated with a certain frequency (daily, weekly, etc.).

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, universities can also use other online marketing channels, tools and techniques, such as public relations (communication with the press in the online environment by transmitting information about the activities carried out, creating links on websites relevant, creating blogs, using the company website for information purposes, etc.), viral marketing, content marketing, inbound marketing, influencer marketing, video marketing, can create virtual communities, can use mobile marketing tools through the intelligent and rapid use of all available resources with the aim of gaining efficiency and quality in what the university's marketing team does (agile marketing).

Online marketing strategies can include the use of one or more online marketing channels, techniques and tools, these being developed and implemented with your own efforts, or by calling on the services of digital marketing agencies. Multi-channel marketing involves the use of multiple channels in online marketing strategies: social networks, e-mail, Internet, text messages, etc., in order to reach the target audience more effectively, taking into account the preferences, opinions and interests of actual customers and potential, using for this purpose relevant contents and appropriate channels [6,

7]. For this, it must be taken into account that customers can quickly switch from one digital channel to another, requiring a systemic approach regarding the style of messages and their content. In order to be understood correctly and maintain the attention of customers, regardless of the channel through which they are transmitted, the content of the message must be easy to read, easy to view, easy to understand and convey the same content on all communication channels.

It should be noted that the studies and analyzes carried out, with reference to the universities of the Republic of Moldova, have shown that none of them has a marketing strategy, in general, or an online marketing strategy, in particular. At the same time, the absolute majority of them have Strategic Plans (Strategies) for institutional development for a period from two to five years, in which special attention is paid to university marketing, predominantly with reference to traditional marketing actions, and in a lesser extent - online marketing tools and techniques [8 - 24]. At the same time, the universities of the Republic of Moldova recognize the importance of digital marketing strategies, in order to attract graduates from high school, colleges and centers of excellence, the need for their periodic updating [12], the improvement of the online presence through permanent updating with relevant information, the online promotion of the educational offer for bachelor's and master's studies in Romanian and English at the national and international level through the creation of appropriate advertising materials [22, 24], the development of promotional materials regarding the university and their placement in various electronic media and platforms [21], of capitalizing on communication opportunities through online tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) [22], of online promotion of events of any nature, which take place at faculties and universities as a whole [18], of the online organization of the open day [10] etc.

Among the possible online marketing channels and tools, the greatest attention in the Strategic Development Plans of universities (Strategies) is given to the use of opportunities offered by university web pages, and among the most important directions of activity and actions are:

-         considering the university information portal as the most important marketing communication channel [8];
-         modernizing the structure and continuously updating the university's website, transforming it into an effective tool for information, communication with the beneficiaries (students, employers) and the university's partners (pre-university institutions, the business environment, authorities, organizations and other stakeholders), ensuring feedback regarding the institution's performance [14];
-         strengthening and maintaining the university's website [11];
-         development of web page content [9];
-         improving the appearance and structure of the university web page [19];
-         development and periodic updating of the university website [22];
-         the development, modernization and management of the university's web portal in order to provide electronic services for beneficiaries (students, graduates, teaching, administrative staff, researchers, partners) in terms of an attractive and modern design, a well-structured, useful, informative and updated content [12];
-         updating and developing the university website as a corporate communication tool [11];
-         paying special attention to the didactic section of the site [22, 24];
-         modernizing the structure and updating the content of the university's web page and transforming it into an effective tool for information and communication with the beneficiaries (students, employers) and with the university's partners (pre-university institutions, the business environment and other stakeholders) [21];

- the development of the university's website as a tool for promoting the institution's image at the national and international level [23];
- publication of information regarding the academic offer on the university's website [17];
- promoting the academic offer in the virtual environment [15];
- improving the web presence by developing the university's website (in Romanian, English and Russian languages), taking into account the evaluation criteria of the international web-rankings [18];
- the development of QUIZs about the university, with prizes, to be published on news portals for young people and on the official website of the university, the development and publication on the official website of the university of video material, the publication of success stories of university graduates on the official website [9,10];
- periodic updating of the web page [16];
- taking measures to increase the number of accesses to the university informational portal [8] etc.

Increasing attention in the university marketing activities stipulated in the strategic development documents is also given to the use of social networks for the purposes of informing the target audience and promoting the universities and the study programs offered by them.

Thus, the *The State University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Nicolae Testemiţanu"* considers it necessary to implement an annual social media strategy, which involves the promotion of the university's image on social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Linkedin, YouTube, etc.), the promotion of the educational services provided and the activities carried out mainly through social media marketing, the diversification of channels and the increase in the number of followers on social media [8]. *The Moldova State University* aims to increase the institution's presence in the social media space and the permanent updating of the institution's Facebook and Instagram page [9]. The intensive promotion of the university on social networks to attract potential students from the country and abroad and to strengthen the institution's image among young people is provided for in the Strategic Development Plan of the *Academy of Music, Theater and Fine Arts* [13], and the capitalization of communication opportunities and online promotion on social networks - in that of the *State University "Bogdan Petricescu Haşdeu" from Cahul* [14]. The *Trade Co-operative University of Moldova,* as well as the *State University "Bogdan Petricescu Haşdeu" from Cahul*, want to expand the presence of universities on social networks and strengthen the virtual community of universities [14,21]. *Alecu Russo State University of Balti* and *"Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University* in Chisinau propose to promote their academic offers on social networks [15,17], and the *Moldova State University* - distributing QUIZs, video materials on the university Facebook pages and the faculties, the periodic updating of the YouTube channel with the recorded video materials [9,10]. The Technical University of Moldova envisages in the Institutional Strategic Development Plan the support of the participation of teaching staff, departments, faculties in TV and radio shows and the dissemination of achievements and events through social networks, the presence on social networks of collaborators, departments, faculties, centers and the university as a whole [12].

Even e-mail marketing (electronic mail) is considered to be a fast way of communicating with current and potential customers and cheaper compared to other online marketing tools, only the *The State University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Nicolae Testemiţanu"* recognize institutional e-mail addresses as an important communication channel in marketing [8], and the *Moldova State University* proposes the creation of an informative bulletin, to be distributed through the university's e-mail [9,10]. It should be noted that only the *Moldova State University* has a distinct strategy for promoting study

programs [10], and the Technical University of Moldova is the only university in the Republic of Moldova that has a blog on the university's website. In the same way, UTM proposes the continuous monitoring of the performance criteria and indicators, used in the development of international university rankings related to their presence in the virtual space (Webometrics) and undertakes actions in order to improve them and better position the university [12].

The strategic development documents of the universities of the Republic of Moldova do not refer to other online marketing tools and techniques, even if some of them are found in the practical activity of the universities.

Certainly, in order to have competitive advantages and be successful in the new conditions of the educational environment, universities need a strategic approach in organizing their activity and a marketing orientation, which seeks to build and consolidate the best possible image of the university as a whole and the degree programs it offers, including through the use of modern online university marketing tools.

Developing and implementing marketing strategies, running online university marketing campaigns can proceed in different ways. At the same time, the main activities of an online marketing campaign must include:
1. Carrying out market research, which involves collecting information about the educational environment, the competitors in the market, the prices of educational services, the existing opinions about universities, their endowments, the provision of qualified staff etc., in order to know the opportunities, but also the dangers generated by this environment;
2. Analysis of the activity of your own university in order to know the resources it has, its strengths and weaknesses in relation to the main competitors on the market;
3. Defining short, medium and long-term primary and secondary marketing objectives (e.g. increase enrollment, increase student numbers, increase university brand awareness, increase traffic, engage with a specific group of prospective students a specific region etc.). Objectives must be relevant, achievable, measurable and time-bound when they can be achieved;
4. Analysis of the behavior and desires of potential students, what they value, what criteria they take into account when making decisions (prestige, quality, educational model, proximity to home, testimonials of students and graduates, etc.);
5. Defining the target audience depending on interests, location, other possible market segmentation criteria;
6. Identifying the sources of information they consult and the specific channels for attracting applicants to studies;
7. The choice of marketing channels, depending on their advantages and disadvantages, but also the extent to which they allow reaching the target audience;
8. Development and optimization of contents and messages for each channel, according to the established objectives and preferences of the people who form the target audience;
9. Measuring the results of marketing campaigns in order to optimize ongoing campaigns or launch a new campaign, as well as to measure the effectiveness of the campaign.

One of the main advantages of online marketing is that it allows for the measurement of marketing values. For this purpose, key performance indicators (KPI - Key Performance Indicators) can be used, which can be different depending on the types of campaigns and marketing channels used, and among the most important are considered to be: [6,7]:

- Unique visitors – the number of people who access the page, each visitor being counted only once in the analyzed time period;
- How people find the site (sources of web traffic used to make the first visit to the site or landing page);
- Returning visitors to the university website – visitors return to the website or landing page when they want more content (more information) or intend to take a specific action;
- Total number of site visits – the number of unique browsing sessions by individual site visitors;
- Sessions - the set of interactions, such as page views and clicks, that the same user performs in a certain period;
- Total number of unique visits – the number of people who visited the website or landing page;
- Organic and paid traffic - represents the number of sessions that come from search engines and paid campaigns on the web;
- Click rate (CTR) – is the percentage of visitors who clicked on the call to action button or clicked on the link;
- Average time on page - the average length of time visitors spend on the page;
- Bounce rate - is the percentage of users who make a single visit, without performing other interactions, such as clicks and page views;
- Conversion rate - is the resulting percentage between the number of visits and the number of conversions made;
- External links - is the volume and quality of links from other domains that direct to the university website or blog;
- Return on investment (ROI) – shows how much a marketing campaign generates customers compared to the costs incurred;
- Customer acquisition cost (CAC) – is calculated by dividing customer acquisition costs by the number of new customers attracted during the reference period;
- Cost per acquisition (CPA) – is calculated by reporting the expenses to the contacts acquired in a given period of time;
- Cost per lead (CPL, cost per client) – represents the expenses necessary to generate a new potential client;
- Retention and abandonment rate – represents the total number of customers at the beginning and end of the reference period, together with the number of new customers, or how many customers leave, for example, each month, usually expressed as a percentage;
- Traffic per channel – the number of visits to each marketing channel, to understand how well each of them works;
- New sessions – are calculated according to the involvement of a user within 30 minutes (several visits for 30 minutes are considered a session);
- KPI related to results: coverage in digital media, engagement in social networks, transfer of social networks to the website;
- Reputational KPIs: position in national media surveys, position in national and international university rankings, etc.

KPIs can be tracked on Google Analytics (cooler - GA4), Google Tag Manager, Kissmetrics or other digital platforms.

At the same time, using modern online marketing strategies for now does not mean giving up traditional marketing strategies altogether, even if the return on investment in them is lower.

Conclusions

In today's digital world, traditional university marketing strategies are no longer as effective as they used to be. Universities in the Republic of Moldova must become more market-oriented, use online marketing tools to address the target audience in a more efficient and effective way.

Even if the universities of the Republic of Moldova have a strategic vision in their development, embodied in strategic development plans (strategies) for a period from two to five years and annual action plans, in which special attention is paid to university marketing, universities do not have sectoral marketing strategies, and the use of online marketing channels, tools and techniques is mainly limited to the university website and social media marketing, to a lesser extent - email marketing.

In order to achieve marketing objectives, universities must develop and implement distinct marketing strategies, in which special attention is paid to online marketing tools.

Online university marketing strategies and marketing objectives must be based on the results of in-depth marketing research with reference to the activity of the own university and the behavior of potential students, and special attention must be paid to measuring the results of the implementation of marketing strategies in order to correcting and optimizing ongoing campaigns or launching new campaigns.

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