Social Media and Public Universities. Theoretical Aspects

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Abstract

The massive and dizzying irruption of Information and Communication Technologies that we are currently witnessing has substantially transformed the way in which people learn, teach, communicate, work, and, basically, how they live. It has affected nearly every fact of life, including the educational process. The universities, both public and private, have begun to increasingly rely on the Internet, and especially on social media, to reach out and get closer to students. As a result, social media marketing has received increased attention in marketing for higher education. This paper aims at clarifying some of the concepts of marketing communication in public universities and set the theoretical background for future research.

1. Introduction

Every society needs a public sector, whose main function is to define the guidelines of society (Florescu, Malcomete & Pop, 2003). The second role of the state administration is to provide public services of vital importance to the public interest, such as the defense and organization of the army. Central and local governments consider that they should be responsibile with the provision of essential public services, such as law enforcement, infrastructure, education and health care etc. (Kotler and Lee, 2008). The third role is to provide the necessary public services that neither the private companies nor the non-profit organizations want or can provide with existing resources. Thus, administrations usually provide assistance to those in need independently or together with non-profit institutions.

Like any other organization, educational institutions develop specific activities in a very dynamic business and social environment. Demographic trends and technological developments, global changes, the economy, the international labor market and the standard of living of citizens have significantly affected the higher education system and its image in society. In addition, in the context of the economic crisis, both businesses and individuals place greater responsibility on higher education institutions for the efficiency of graduates and their adaptability to the requirements of employers. In turn, universities face various problems rising from specific macroeconomic development, and their response to local community demands is sometimes considered to be slow.

2. Theoretical background

The reform of higher education in Romania began in the 1990s, in the context of post-revolutionary economic transformations. Like many other ex-socialist states, the number of Romanian universities increased significantly, from 46 in November 1989 to 63 in 1993 and then to 126 in 2000. The number of students also increased from 533,152 in 2000/2001 to 907,353 in 2007/2008 (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, Romanian Statistical Yearbook (2011). The demand for higher education programs was very high in the first decade after the revolution, which led to the phenomenon of market expansion and diversification. As a result, competition between higher education organizations has increased dramatically and the market has now become

saturated, and in addition to a high level of competition, Romanian universities have faced many threats in recent years. Consequently, in the last years, the main concern of Romanian universities has been to attract enough students to ensure the survival of academic programs and faculties and their maintenance in universities.

More and more universities, whether public or private, are looking to promote professional performance among students (Ali-Choudhury & Bennett, 2008). They seek a solution to address the coherent challenge of higher education in attracting and retaining young people in their curricula, given the significant societal and labor market dynamics.

The arguments are also outlined from the perspective of the desideratum, imperatives and recommendations for higher education existing in the agendas and official documents of the European Union. The Europe 2020 strategy imposes as major objectives at the level of the European Union and the Member States the reduction of the early school leaving rate below 10% and the increase of the share of the population with higher education between the ages of 30 and 34 (NESET (2013).

Consequently, at the national level, the objective of increasing the share of tertiary education graduates to 26.7% was assumed in 2010, emphasizing that for this purpose reforms are needed not only in education, but also in the economy meant to support the expenses with education. Also, one of the national objectives of Horizon 2030 is "placing the education and training system in Romania at the level of superior performance in the EU; significant proximity to the EU average in terms of educational services provided in rural areas and for people from disadvantaged or disabled backgrounds." (Romania's National Strategy for Sustainable Development Horizons 2013-2020-2030).

Although the share of the population aged between 30-34 with a level of tertiary education registered a constant increase of approx. 5% in recent years, the graduation rate of tertiary education is one of the lowest in the EU (25.6% in 2015, compared to 38.7% in the EU). According to reports published by the European Commission (European Commission: Monitoring Education and Training 2017), these are some of the most relevant measures proposed to increase the graduation rate at university level:

1. Increasing the number of high school graduates and attracting more types of students - candidates who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or socio-economic places, who belong to ethnic groups or who have a disability.

2. Elimination of financial obstacles.

3. Improving guidance and counseling for students to help them choose a suitable course (pre-college guidance).

4. Development of educational infrastructure - increasing the number of educational units, increasing investments in technology.

5. Improving the quality of higher education and increasing its relevance to the labor market - for example, by increasing the number of teachers, increasing the number of advisers, increasing the number of active readers of university libraries.

6. Increasing investment and expenditure in research and development.

7. Reducing dropout rates and the time required to complete studies.

3. Findings. The challenges faced by the universities in the context of social media

With the emergence of the internet, the development of the web allowed people to have greater access to information through blogs, forums, institutional accounts and various thematic portals. However, as Koivula, Keipi, Koiranen and Räsänen (2018) point out, it was not until 2000, with the creation of social networks, that people had the possibility of living an interactive experience, participating in social circles and interests on various topics, enriching the configuration of his personal self and his environment.

A social network does not only consist of a channel to access information, but it also consists of a platform connecting people and communities. The platforms can be classified as horizontal or generalist (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), or as vertical or specialized (LinkedIn, Soundcloud, Flickr) when users interact in communities segmented by geographic scope, thematic and / or sociodemographic. Social networks are a space where conversation is generated by sharing and not

the mere passive presence of users in an online world or community (Rodrigo, García and Martín, 2011), connected in real time (Koivula et al., 2018), with access to endless content (Mosquera & Bartolomé, 2017) produced and shared by other users in a natural and interactive way that shape the lives of millions of people (Kurkula, 2011; Clark et al, 2016).

Universities are institutions of great importance for societies and they need to develop more agile processes in order to satisfy the needs of their environment (Hemsley-Brown, 2011). Of course, for any organization that must face a digital transformation, it is a great challenge to adapt to horizontal structures and processes, especially because it requires greater transparency and closeness to users. However, it is a necessary path that must be implemented comprehensively, and not as a commercial or institutional communication aspect (Rivera-Rogel et al., 2019; Çetin, 2004).

The new shared means of communication, such as social networks, require that universities consider two aspects: establish clear goals that they want to achieve and how they will be achieved with the participation of the public, internal and external (Mazza and Palermo, 2019). As Opresnik (2018) explains, the participation of brands in the digital environment requires the design of a SMART methodology that involves the entire organization: the objectives to be achieved must be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and structured in an achievable time frame (Time).

The Universities must be aware of this change and adapt to it and to the new situation to take advantage of certain derived benefits (such as the creation of social communities, immediacy and the unreserved availability of geographic time or place, in addition to the valuable dialogue between organization and society (Howard, 2013). But the transition does not seem to be easy, especially in an institution characterized by a bureaucratic and complex administration, composed of a large set of internal and external stakeholders.

In relation to the use of web 2.0, it is worth highlighting the definition used by Filip (2012), who classifies it as "a social phenomenon in relation to the creation and distribution of content on the Internet, characterized by open communication, decentralization of authority, the freedom to share and use, within an approach that treats human relationships as conversations". As generators of conversations, the absolutely key role that users play in shaping the medium in the idea of Web 2.0 is revealed. Without their active participation, a good part of the existing services on the Internet would not make sense. Therefore, the most important thing about Web 2.0 is citizen participation that encourages and provides feedback. Users are no longer mere passive receivers, but interactive receivers, with the ability to create and disseminate information and messages, placing themselves at the forefront of the new generation of the Internet (Cebrián Herreros, 2008; Chapleo, Carrillo Durán, Castillo Díaz, 2011).

This implies a feedback, exchange and discussion, gathering in a participatory community a large number of users. (Cebrián Herreros, 2008; Ramachandran, 2010). Web 2.0 has empowered the user, making him an almost inexhaustible source of content and favoring the emergence of a new concept related, on the one hand, to the media and, on the other, to the fact that the users of the network themselves dedicate themselves to generating content that may be valuable to other users (Peruta & Shields, 2018).

Maringe (2006) considers that social networks are appropriate to use in the educational environment, as they promote communication with students in a bidirectional way. The traditional student has always shown a reactive attitude when it comes to the relationship with the university. However, by using social media, the traditional reactive attitude becomes proactive, since they can express their opinions much easier and faster than before

At the university level, institutional communication is one of the most important tools that these public institutions have (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Any intervention in institutional communication must be framed within a global perspective, which justifies its implementation as part of a broader communication strategy. This strategy must fit within the institutional objectives of the organization and bring together all the communicative interaction policies under the same parameters as the rest of the policies (Losada, 2004).

4. Conclusions

Despite the reluctance, there are numerous studies that testify that universities can effectively use Web 2.0 to communicate and engage with the students (Clark et al, 2016); thus fulfilling its social function as a public institution (Taecharungroj, 2014).

According to Clark et al (2016), University 2.0 is not just an option for educational institutions, but something more important; perhaps a fundamental resource for their survival. In fact, it was suggested a concept that goes even further: University 3.0. In this sense, Ali-Choudhury and Bennett, (2008) spoke about three concepts: "University 1.0 is the traditional model of knowledge transmission; University 2.0 recognizes certain interactivity and diffusion of content on the Internet; and University 3.0 will be social, semantic, understood within the conversational dynamics that we live in".

Social networks allow and favor the publication and sharing of information, self-learning; team work; communication, both between students and between student-teacher; feedback; access to other sources of information that support and even facilitate collaborative learning and contact with experts. Together, all these applications and resources make learning more interactive and meaningful and, above all, that it takes place in a more dynamic environment.

In conclusion, public universities can benefit from applying marketing techniques and embracing social media technologies. Even if the public university system is influences by legislative and organizational rigors, public universities can find the way to communicate, interact and engage with the students. What is more, marketing concepts and theories from business can be successfully applied to the public sector, and more precisely to the higher education sector, if properly adapted to its particularities.

5. References

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