

Chapter 11

An Update on the Use of Facebook as a Marketing Tool by Private Educational Institutions in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

With social network sites growing in popularity, many organisations have started to use this new platform to market themselves. However, marketing on social network sites is different from traditional marketing. Its value lies in engaging members of the social network and generating shared cultural meaning of the advertised brand rather than promoting awareness of the brand to a large number of people. This is not apparent to marketers and as such, many organizations are not leveraging on this new media tool effectively. This chapter is an update on an earlier paper which examined the use of Facebook as a marketing tool by private educational institutions offering degree programmes in Singapore. The findings in the earlier paper have suggested that marketing on social network sites remained in its infancy. In this update, it was found that three years later, there has been an increase in the use of social network sites by educational institutes in Singapore. There is also evidence that there is greater engagement and the building of a virtual community on the social network sites. This suggests that the use of social network sites as a marketing tool by educational institutes in Singapore is maturing as the organisations are beginning to understand how to leverage on social network sites to market themselves more effectively.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions have traditionally focused their attention on building a robust academic programme to draw students. However, due to growing competition, it has become increasingly important for educational institutions to be like commercial organisations and adopt a marketing orientation. Educational institutions have to market themselves more aggressively to recruit students and view prospective students as consumers who need to be persuaded (Kember, 2010; Newman, 2002; Veloutsou, Lewis, & Paton, 2004).

Educational institutions have relied on various marketing communication tools to reach out to potential students. These include traditional marketing communication tools like advertisements in the mass media, direct marketing to school leavers, open house day and campus tours. When new technologies and marketing platforms emerge, educational institutions have also been quick to adopt them as part of their marketing communications (Kittle & Ciba, 2001).

In recent years, social network sites have grown exponentially in popularity, especially among young adults. Many organisations, including educational institutions, have seen the growth of social network sites as an opportunity to market themselves on this new platform. Marketing on social network sites is distinctively different from traditional marketing as social network sites are organised around people and their relationships. They allow for members to exchange information with each other and contribute to the collective making of meaning. The real value of marketing on social network sites thus lies in the ability to engage members and generating a shared cultural meaning of the advertised brand. However, many organisations do not realise that social network sites are different and continue to use traditional marketing tactics on social network sites.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent that private educational institutions in Singapore are using social network sites as a new

marketing communications tool and the extent that they are leveraging on this medium to engage with students. The findings from this study was first published in the International Journal of Technology and Educational Marketing (Leng, 2012). This chapter will provide an update to the study and lead to a better understanding of the use of social network sites as a marketing tool among private educational institutions in Singapore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Selection of Educational Institution

Selecting an educational institution by a prospective student is an important decision. It not only involves a significant amount of time and monetary resources but more importantly, the choice of an educational institution directly affects the career choice of the prospective student. In such a purchase situation where there is a high level of personal relevance and important consequences, it becomes important for the consumer to form a reasoned opinion and to devote the cognitive effort required to evaluate the choices available (Dawes & Brown, 2005; Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). As such, a prospective student will seek out information extensively and put much consideration in the decision.

Information that is important to students in making a choice include the content of specific courses, the reputation of the department and the university, the learning experience offered by the course and the university campus (Veloutsou, et al., 2004). Educational institutions will need to know how prospective students seek out this information and make decisions. Studies have shown that students have many sources of information to rely on in choosing an educational institution. These can be loosely grouped into personal and non-personal sources of information. Personal sources of information include family members, friends and students and staff members of the target

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