Chapter 54

Building Marketing Relationships on Twitter:
A Content Analysis of University Twitter Accounts

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ABSTRACT

The current study applies a relationship marketing approach to examine how universities use Twitter to communicate with their audiences. To explore social media strategies related to top-ranked universities' Twitter activity, Kotler's (1992) model of five levels of relationship building was refined and operationalized. A content analysis of 1375 tweets distributed by 22 universities was conducted to evaluate the level of relationship building that universities establish through social media in order to engage with current and prospective students, alumni, donors, and external audiences. The authors conclude that top-ranked universities are more likely to engage primarily in reactive relationship building, which can be characterized as the broadcast of an original message with opportunities for followers to initiate post-communication interaction. Results of the message orientation analysis reveal that the vast majority of tweets in the sample were used to give opinion, suggestion, or information.

INTRODUCTION

In a time of economic uncertainty and profound challenges facing higher education, researchers have turned their attention to the role of social media as platforms for social interaction, communication, and marketing (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Research has shown that nearly 75% of U.S. adults go online to communicate with others and social media tools are among the most widely used (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Jones & Fox, 2009). In an effort to keep up with an evolving technological world and to meet the demands of technology-savvy students, many col-

leges and universities are turning to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to connect with students, alumni, and other external audiences. In addition to being a resource for universities to recruit prospective students, social media are used as part of a relationship marketing strategy (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009). Increasingly, universities have begun to engage in marketing and branding practices that appeal not only to potential students but also to donors.

However, a systematic review of the literature on marketing in higher education by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) concludes that the research in this area is "incoherent, even inchoate and lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular context of higher education and the nature of their service" (p. 318). As universities are experimenting with social media marketing, little is known about this relatively new area of communication and its effectiveness for use in higher education (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). The limited nature of the research evidence and the growing need for universities to establish their brand in the market makes building marketing relationships through social media an important area of study. This article seeks to contribute to existing research by examining how universities use Twitter to communicate with their audiences.

Social networking sites have been instrumental in creating brand communities that bring together brand enthusiasts from all over the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The authors of the current study believe that universities can encourage the same type of brand enthusiasm among their external audiences. Of particular interest to the study is Twitter, a social networking service that connects users who share similar interests, or in Twitter's terms, "a real-time information network" (Twitter, 2012). Twitter is an emerging social media technology and a form of microblogging in which users post 140-character messages or "tweets" for followers. Microblogging allows for faster and more frequent communication than traditional blogging (Java,

Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). Users can "follow" groups in which they are interested, "retweet" information from groups they follow, reply to a tweet, and mark a particular tweet as a "favorite" (Twitter, 2012).

The purpose of this investigation is to examine how top-ranked universities use Twitter to engage their audience and develop relationships with current and prospective students, alumni, and donors. The study capitalizes on prior research by operationalizing five levels of relationship marketing in terms of the structural features of Twitter aimed to promote interaction (Kotler, 1992). In the following sections, the authors review the literature on relationship marketing and social media. Next, Kotler's model of relationship building is applied to the study of social media strategies utilized by top-ranked universities. Analysis identifies what Twitter features are used to interact with audiences and determines the message orientation of university Twitter content. Finally, study implications and directions for future research are discussed.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Education marketing has been viewed as the analysis, planning, and implementation of programs that reach target audiences such as prospective students that help the university achieve its organizational objectives (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Gibbs (2002) has conceptualized institutions of higher education in marketing terms citing they "predominantly serve as producers of educational products and services for their students and their promotional platform is that those services increase the human capital of their consumer" (p. 326). In this way, universities must find their unique position in the market to appeal to potential students, donors, and alumni (Gibbs, 2002). Universities can engage in more collaborative or relationship building with external audiences. For this reason, researchers have recommended relationship marketing as one method for universities to market themselves to external

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