

Chapter 107

Marketing Higher Educational Institutions on Social Network Sites

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ABSTRACT

With social network sites growing in popularity, many organisations, including educational institutions, are starting 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. As marketing on social network sites remains in its infancy and educational institutions are only beginning to understand that it is different from traditional marketing, it is not clear as to how educational institutions can leverage social network sites for their marketing effort. Using a case study on the use of Facebook as a marketing tool by a private educational institution offering degree programmes in Hong Kong, this chapter proposes a framework for marketing higher educational institutions on social network sites. The model suggests that educational institutions should encourage the participation of students on social network sites and engage the students through activities. The activities and participation of students on social network sites not only provide positive reinforcement of the decision to enroll in the education institution but also provide information to prospective students when they are evaluating the alternatives in the choice of an educational institution. In addition, the model also proposes that social network sites should facilitate the decision to enroll in the education institution by providing support in the application process.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions have traditionally focused their attention on building a robust academic programme to attract 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).

In their marketing efforts, 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, and direct marketing to school leavers through activities like 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; Leng, 2012b).

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 reach out to their prospective customers using this new platform. However, marketing on social network sites is distinctively different from traditional marketing. Unlike traditional marketing where the marketing message can be dictated by the advertiser, the marketing message on social network sites is created or shaped through the shared participation of members.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of social media in marketing higher educational institutions. The chapter will first review the literature on the consumer decision making process of students in selecting an educational institution. Following this, the review will identify

some of the characteristics of social network sites and distinguish social network sites marketing from traditional marketing. To put the literature review in a real-world perspective, the third section examines a case study in Hong Kong on its use of social media marketing. The experiences of the case study will be compared with the reviews in the earlier sections and in the last section, a framework is proposed for the use of social network sites as a marketing tool.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR OF STUDENTS IN SELECTING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Marketers need to understand how consumers make decisions so that appropriate marketing strategies can be put in place. The literature on the consumer decision making process generally agrees that there are five stages in the consumer decision model. This model theorises that a consumer is first made aware of his or her needs in the problem recognition stage. The second stage involves searching for information to satisfy the needs. In the third stage, the consumer evaluates the information obtained and subsequently, in the fourth stage makes a decision to purchase to satisfy the need. In the last stage, the consumer evaluates the purchase and determines if the purchase has achieved its objective in satisfying the need.

As this model was conceptualised before the Internet age, it was suggested that refinements to the model was necessary. Besides the traditional flow of information from the advertiser to the consumer, the Internet allowed for information to flow from the consumer to the advertiser and also from consumer to consumer. This multi-directional flow of information allowed consumers to tap into additional sources of information in the decision making process. The additional sources of information can sometimes overwhelm the consumer and hence, organisations in providing information on the Internet should also consider

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