Social Media Image Promotion Strategies Used by Timișoara Universities

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Abstract: *The desire to systematically study the way social media tools are used in university marketing in Western Romania is the starting point of this paper, given the fact that, throughout my study years, I was particularly interested in issues related to online promotion, especially for the economic and associative areas. As I have learned that the online environment tends to become a priority for promotional activities, my intention was, through a case study which included local public universities, to identify the extent to which universities use the online environment, the way the image of such an institution is being promoted, but also the way such institutions interact with the target audience by assessing the interaction with the students they want to recruit.*

Keywords: *social media, social networking, educational marketing, strategies.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate a concise informative framework regarding the promotion of Timişoara universities in the online environment, but also the students' vision in relation to the social networks and the way these are used by the Timişoara universities.

Social media is a form of social interaction, which means that it easily maintains a close link with the target audience, which is why universities had to pay special attention to the online environment. Given the fact that today's young people spend a lot of time online, the information distributed by universities with the help of the internet reaches the target audience much faster, as this manner is more efficient than offline methods which seem to be forgotten by the majority of young people. As we have learnt that the online environment tends to become a priority for promotional activities, our intention was, through a case study which included local public universities, to identify the extent to which the universities use the online environment, the way the image of such an institution is being promoted, but also the way such institutions interact with the target audience, namely assessing the interaction with the pupils and the students these universities want to recruit.

2. Research method

We chose as research methods the monitoring of online communication tools used by Timișoara universities, the content analysis of university posts, and the content analysis of documents from the university's image department, as well as a focus group. The content analysis was chosen as a research method to track the way the traditional methods-based elements are translated into the online environment, and how often social media platforms are used by universities in Timișoara, which is the frequency of posts, the number of likes, the number of followers, but also the number of comments and responses. We also used the content analysis to compare the activities of the image departments of Timișoara universities as well as to identify whether online communication is the result of the university policy or just a fashion trend, in order to compare the promotion methods used. The focus group is useful because it is possible to obtain answers from the participants about the subject in question (the socialising platforms used by the Timișoara universities).

Within such a group, participants are encouraged to express their point of view and, unlike the individual interview, the focus group allows participants to talk to each other, which leads to the identification of answers as close as possible to the target audience.

The content analysis is useful to analyse the posts distributed by the universities in Timişoara in April 2017, namely the posts distributed by the Politehnica University of Timişoara, Victor Babeş University of Medicine and Pharmacy, the West University of Timişoara, and Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania", in order to highlight the way they choose to promote themselves in the online environment, the topic of the posts, the frequency with which the persons assigned to manage social media tools post, and also the type of the content posted. The monitoring interval is outside the active recruitment period for admissions, which makes posts' addressability to particularly focus on strengthening institutional culture and maintaining communities around each institution, and to focus on the external environment as a second purpose.

The focus group is a qualitative research aiming at a thorough study of this topic, the goal being to obtain meaningful data about the students' opinion regarding the presence of universities in the university environment, namely on the socialising platforms. According to Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey (2005: 21), the focus group is "a planned group discussion, organized to obtain perceptions relating to a strictly defined area of interest, unfolded in a permissive environment; group members influence each other, responding to ideas and comments". For the proposal to be relevant and to meet the existing requirements, we conducted a study based on qualitative research, namely on the focus group. This research method was chosen due to the fact that it facilitates the obtaining of clear information from the persons belonging to the group and it allows the interaction between the moderator and the respondents, and the most important thing is that the respondents' reactions can easily be noticed, thus allowing us to realize when they are

disturbed by the question or when they are nervous or sincere. The interview guide for directing discussions can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. We opted for the semi-structured interview to allow the statistical processing of expressed opinions, but also to identify the consensus negotiation mechanism that occurs through group discussions.

3. Results

The following example is a content analysis of the Facebook page of the Politehnica University of Timișoara. UPT's official Facebook page (source: https://www.facebook.com/UPTimișoara/, accessed on 16.03.2017) was created in 2009. Currently, it has 11,772 likes, and 11,611 people follow the Facebook page, and the number is steadily increasing. By analysing the Facebook page of the Politehnica University of Timișoara, we noticed that the posts inform about the activity carried out within the faculties, the posts' subject being diversified. The total number of the posts during April was 16 and it should be noted that as far as their visibility is concerned, all posts have been set publicly so that they could be tracked by anyone interested.

Types of formats posted

14%   12%

32%   82%

- Multimedia
- Image
- Video
- Text
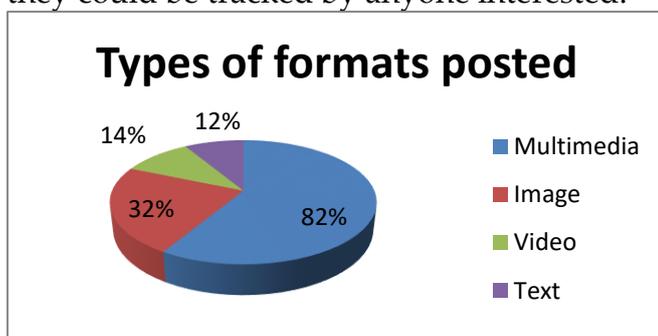
Due to the fact that the posts' topics are diversified, we found out that they could be divided according to their format, namely: text, video, image, and multimedia. The following statistics shows the proportion of each of these formats on the official Facebook page of the Politehnica University of Timișoara.

Based on the statistics' analysis, we found out that multimedia items are the most common, with a 82% share, followed by images (32%), video (14%), and text (12%).

Due to the fact that the videos posted on the Facebook page of the Politehnica University of Timişoara had attached various descriptive texts, they were considered as "multimedia" format, and not video format.

Concerning the posts topic, we could easily notice that the posted pictures contained both information about the events that were about to take place, as well as an update during the events, where the activities that took place within the faculties of the University Politehnica Timişoara can be watched. Multimedia videos included interviews with people who attended the events or people invited by TeleUniversitatea to discuss some topics of public interest. Thanks to the posts on the Facebook page of the Politehnica University of Timişoara, one can say that the interactivity with the public is high, as the public can see, appreciate, and comment on the events before or even during their course.

A very good way to promote is represented by the posters created by the specialists in the field and by the specialists who are in charge of promoting the official Facebook page because, thanks to them, the public can find out in advance about the events taking place at the university, thus succeeding to attend such events.

One can also easily see that the Facebook page is interactive, as the personnel in charge answers in a timely manner to comments and the posts are made in a friendly manner, as can be seen below.


Universitatea Politehnica Timisoara
21 Aprilie

Cei mai buni elevi din țară au trecut astăzi pragul Universității Politehnica Timișoara 🙂
#elevifaini #viitorularatabine #olimpiada #matematica

Based on the analysis we noticed that the "like" button is a key element in the use of this social network because it confirms that users want to receive further information about the Politehnica University of Timișoara and about the activities carried out within its faculties. At the same time, in order to disseminate the information shared by the university in an effective way to the target audience, it is possible to share it with other users who may be interested in the content of the information.

The following categories are found on the Facebook page: "Home", "Posts", "Reviews", "Videos", "Photos", "About", "Likes", "Follow", "Share" which are static and by which users can follow only what interests them, without having to search much for the information they want, thus generating interactivity. In addition to the "like" button, there are other key elements specific to the Facebook platform, and these are sharing, commenting, or using other buttons similar to "like" ("love", "haha", "wow!", "sad", "angry"); these buttons help users express their point of view in a very simple way, namely by choosing the right button for the post followed.

At a first glance, one can notice that the Facebook page uses the multichannel concept, because both the phone number and the university's email address are displayed, and in order to connect the Facebook page and the official web page of the Politehnica University of

Timișoara, the link that leads to the site is placed in the "About" section, thus ensuring increased accessibility. Also, in this section, there is the map guiding the fresh students to the Rectorate of the Politehnica University of Timișoara.
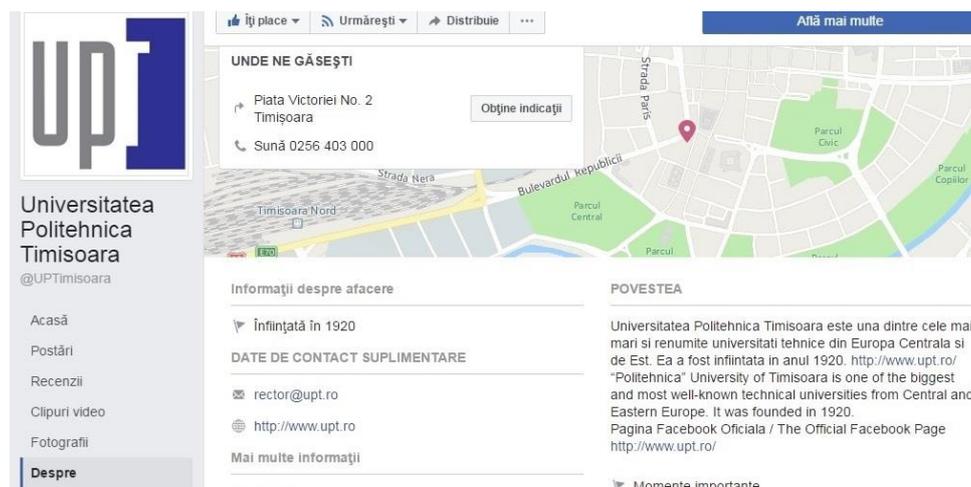
In conclusion, the Facebook page is one of the most popular tools for the promotion of the Web 3.0 era, but this page features a series of multimedia elements and a high degree of accessibility and interactivity, which is why one can say it is an efficient tool for promoting the Politehnica University of Timișoara. Another conclusion of the analysis is the existence of a single socialising platform, namely Facebook, which is the most used social network in Romania. It should also be mentioned that the Politehnica University of Timişoara does not have a Youtube channel, but that they post on the Facebook page the videos posted by TeleUniversitatea, and these videos are shared from Youtube.

4. Specialised sources consulted

People use social platforms to communicate, recommend, capitalise on the information received, and to create information. They benefit from the resources that are made available free of charge by social media

platforms such as forums, groups, social networks, blogs, and even audio and video content platforms.

Kaplean M. Haenlein (2008: 34, *apud* Horea Bădău, 2011: 16) defines social media as "a group of online applications growing on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content". More specifically, they are easy-to-find information search channels, online communication, propagation and social interaction channels through which the participant communities have the opportunity to collaborate by producing and sharing photos, text, audio or video materials that can be distributed from one user to another in the way that the public wants according to the "wireless phone" principle; an important concept in social media is the "world of mouth" - "the world of mouth-to-mouth information" (Bădău, 2011: 16).

In the article "The use of social media tools in ViCaDiS Virtual Campus", Andone et. al. (2010: 1) pointed out the fact that, for the generation born after 1980, the digital world is the only world they know, and that such a world is more present and omnipresent for them than for the others. Children and adolescents who have lived all their life in a constant change of the digital world can be called the net generation. Significantly, most students in higher education belong to this group. These students were identified as a special group according to their characteristics and it was considered that this community has different learning habits as compared to the previous generation students.

Educational marketing can be considered as an exchange of relationships between universities and the target public which can consist of pupils, students or adults who contribute to young people's career and training decisions. In addition, educational marketing provides the institutions that take correct managerial decisions with market position analysis tools.

Educational institutions that are organised and structured on the grounds of entrepreneurial principles are increasingly aware of their

responsibility in solving the problems of providing with, managing, and assessing the educational services they develop.

The concept of "entrepreneurial university" implies not only a managerial organisation that takes over the latest acquisitions of contemporary management, but also a mentality that keeps up with society developments (https://www.oecd.org/site/cfecpr/EC-OECD%20Entrepreneurial%20Universities%20Framework.pdf, accessed 06.04.2017). In a competitive, globalising world where educational services are embedded in GATT agreements (http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002149/214997e.pdf, accessed on 06.04.2017), universities are almost forced to take over business-inspired market positioning models.

5. Conclusion

This research has helped me to become aware of the workload, the need for strategic planning and competences which must underpin universities' socialising platforms approach, as well as that of other communicators from the public space. For my future profession, if I had institutional communication responsibilities, I would make sure that I use the online promotion tools to successfully reach the audience. Following the analysis of the Timișoara universities, we found that most universities are present in the online environment, but only three of them have official pages on the Facebook social network. We did not go deeper to analyse the faculties or other universities' entities, as we were interested in the strategic level, that of institutional positioning. As far as public relations strategies in social media are concerned, we have found that mobile phones are a very good public relations tool, as they are more effective than letters or other offline means. One can read emails on the mobile phone, and social media information can be tracked and information can be updated via mobile phones. One can say that mobile phones become smarter, and can be compared to portable laptops which become more and more indispensable every day.

It turned out that mobile phones are the most used devices among young people.

Acknowledgement

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Webography

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