

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARKETING ACTIVITIES FOR THE FUNCTIONING OF THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. *At a time when the number of universities is growing, taking care of the image of a university is increasingly important. Traditional methods of promotion are no longer sufficient, because nowadays the choice of a university starts not with a visit to the university, but with checking its educational offerings on the Internet. This is why, in the digital age, universities need to adapt their marketing strategy to the new realities in order to reach prospective students and stand out from the competition. Many universities are actively taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the development of information technology, appreciating the importance of branding and adapting their course. This paper attempts to identify which 'communication pathway' is most frequently used by prospective university/faculty students. The aim of the study is to determine the effectiveness of promotional activities that influence prospective students' choice of university/department. The issues raised seem to be important due to the fact that radical changes in the education market have been taking place for several years now. On the one hand, there is a large supply of higher education institutions, both domestic and foreign, and on the other hand, there is a progressive demographic decline.*

Keywords: *customer preferences, marketing in education, university management.*

Introduction

The condition for the effective implementation of marketing in universities is to create a coherent composition of marketing activities that support and complement each other. The integration of marketing activities should take place not only in terms of their internal coordination, but also at the structural level related to the location of the marketing function in the structure of a given university. Many universities actively use the opportunities offered by the development of information technologies, appreciate the importance of the brand, adapt their curricula to the needs of employers, thus ensuring an advantage in the increasingly demanding higher education market. In the article, the authors

attempted to identify which "communication path" is most often used by potential students of the university/faculty.

The aim of the study is to determine the effectiveness of promotional activities that influence the choice of university/field of study by future students. The issues discussed seem to be important due to the fact that the radical changes in the educational market have been going on for several years. On the one hand, we are dealing with a large supply of universities, both domestic and foreign, and on the other hand, there is a continuing demographic decline. This situation forced branches to take intensified marketing activities aimed at establishing and maintaining permanent relationships with customers. The research covered the first years of students from the fields of Agricultural and Forestry Technology, Renewable Energy Sources and Management and Production Engineering at the Agricultural University. Hugo Kołłątaj in Kraków at the Faculty of Production and Energy Engineering. The research was conducted in three consecutive years: 2019, 2020 and 2021. The authors presented proposals for innovative solutions that can be implemented at the university for even better activities that will result in a larger number of students at the university in the future.

Literature review

Education is a very important element of functioning in the modern world. It is a pillar of development. Tertiary education has become a global service provided by quasi-companies in an increasingly complex and competitive knowledge market (Pucciarellia, Kaplan 2016) A knowledge-based society shows a constant need to improve its competences, to participate in courses as well as in all kinds of training. A unique opportunity in this respect is provided by universities, which offer the possibility of acquiring education in a chosen field. In addition, the better the reputation of a given university, the more positively the academic staff and the quality of education are assessed, the more popular it is and, consequently, the more students want to study there. (Kijanka, 2012). As noted by B. Nguyen, T.C. Melewar and J. Hemsley-Brown, in the contemporary environment "the branding of universities has increased significantly due to demands on universities to recruit more students, rising tuition fees, multiplication of courses, increasing 'internationalisation' of universities, financial pressures" (Nguyen, Melewar, Hemsley-Brown 2019)

The need to undertake university promotional activities can be spoken of as an evolving process. Consumers, including educational services, are more sensitive to the influence of external factors and trends related to the socio-economic situation, the market, technologies, geopolitics and the environment (Zhang, Watson 2020). Changing circumstances in the higher education market, have imposed the need to inform the public about the educational offerings and the successes achieved therein. While the competitiveness of HEIs is built

primarily through internal aspects such as the level of corporate culture and the effectiveness of marketing strategies, the reputation of HEIs is one of the priority factors influencing applicants' choice to study at a particular HEI (Sarkane, Sloka 2015). The pressure of high competition has forced HEIs to expensive promotional activities, the same as those used by companies seeking to attract customers for their services. As Penc (1995) states, 'the success of any business today is inextricably linked to the marketing concept of the business, i.e. the interests or benefits it seeks to realise by turning unmet market needs into profitable market opportunities. Marketing is a certain business concept that identifies market needs and, on this basis, designs and produces products and services that are in demand (Zurawik, Zurawik, 1996).

Thus, there was a need to identify the target group to which all marketing activities will be directed. Hence Domanski (2011) identifies four target groups:

- Target groups locally - where all measures taken will be aimed at residents of the city and region. In addition to secondary school students, there may also be older people wishing to broaden or supplement their knowledge through, for example, postgraduate studies or other forms of further training. This trend seems to be becoming more and more apparent as a result of the prevailing demographic decline, which is increasingly being felt. Higher education institutions are faced with the need to prepare specialised educational offers designed for a specific audience.
- Target groups in regional terms - which are the inhabitants of a city neighbouring the city in which the selected university is located. Professional preparation of the promotional and informational message allows the creation of an image of the place that gives character to the development of the city where it is located. The benefits of this spread to other towns and cities around it. A broader approach makes it possible to enlarge the group of potential audiences, which enables a fuller exploitation of the potential that a given educational institution has at its disposal.
- Target groups nationally - attracting people from outside a particular city and region to study in another is a kind of confidence they have in their chosen destination. A longer journey involves more money to be spent. The main factor that is taken into account when deciding where to study is not only the university, but also the city in which it is located. This indicates attractiveness in the eyes of the prospective student. Universities should monitor which provinces students come from most often, and city authorities should monitor whether it is advantageous for them to settle in their territory and take up employment after finishing their education.

- International target groups -Domanski (2011) distinguishes between two strategies. The first assumes long-term and consistent work on image formation, but only cities and regions with an established international presence can afford this type of campaign. Above all, those counties with a long university tradition. The second strategy is based on modernity and consists of a dynamic presentation of the educational establishment, the city and the region, innovation and great development opportunities in the district. Universities make it a point to move to the locality in which the institution is located for those not directly born there, but who wish to start their education there. Factors conducive to staying include the possibility of gaining employment after graduation, good infrastructural facilities or better development prospects.

The above-mentioned reasons not only confirm the indispensability of undertaking promotional activities, but at the same time prove that marketing should be one of the key formulation activities of a given enterprise. Furthermore, a prerequisite for the effective implementation of such activities in higher education institutions is the creation of a coherent composition of marketing activities that support and complement each other. In today's market reality, the success of such establishments is also determined by the ability to be flexible, i.e. to constantly adapt to changing trends and environmental conditions.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to determine the effectiveness of promotional activities which have the most effective impact on the choice of a university/degree programme by prospective students. For the purposes of this study, the authors assumed that marketing activities are effective when a given activity influenced the decision of the respondents on the choice of a university (e.g. information on the website). The subject matter seems to be important due to the fact that radical changes on the education market have been taking place for several years. On the one hand, there is a large supply of universities, both domestic and foreign, and on the other hand, a persistent demographic decline. This situation has forced institutions to intensify their marketing activities in order to establish and maintain lasting relationships with their audiences.

The study covered the first years of students of Agricultural and Forestry Technology, Renewable Energy Sources and Management and Production Engineering at the Hugo Kołłątaj Agricultural University in Kraków, Faculty of Production Engineering and Energy. The study was conducted in three consecutive years using a questionnaire, which consisted of a short metric and closed questions. A total of 494 students took part in the survey, from three faculties in three consecutive years.

Research review

The first question examined was the motivation for choosing a university. In the first year, the most common response from students from the Management and Production Engineering department was to choose their studies according to their interests, immediately followed by the response that the department had been recommended by people who had studied or were still studying in the department, while the least frequent response was that it was their preferred course of study in the first place. In the following year, responses ranked similarly. The most common response was to choose their studies according to their interests, and the least frequent response was for students to say that they chose this course because they did not get into another course. The final year surveyed differs significantly from the others. The most frequent answer was preferred course of study in the first place, and the least frequent answer was that they chose the course because it was recommended by friends.

When asked why they chose to study at the University of Agriculture and Forestry in Kraków in the same years, students from the Agriculture and Forestry Technology course were almost unanimous in stating that they chose their studies in accordance with their interests, i.e. it can be said that this was a conscious and planned choice rather than a quick and hasty decision.

Students majoring in Renewable Energy Sources responded similarly in the years surveyed. The most common answer given by students was, to choose their studies according to their interests, i.e. a fully considered and responsible, they chose a course of study that interested and interested them, and the fewest voted that it was their preferred course of study in the first place and that they did not get into another one. This means that the choice was not random. Taking into account the number of votes cast for these answers, it can be concluded that the University of Agriculture was not the only university to which students applied, but it was not a fallback either.

On the other hand, when asked what sources they used to find out about the educational offer in the first surveyed year, students of Management and Production Engineering most often answered that they sought information from friends or family. Most often, students reached for information from their friends or colleagues who were to some extent connected with the given university, what they had heard about it or what they studied there directly. The second most frequent answer was the University's website as well as the Faculty's website, and the least information about the offer of education was found out from secondary school teachers. In the following year, most respondents voted for the University's website and least for information provided by facebook. In the third year, the University's website and the Faculty's website were the most helpful and the least helpful.

High school teachers and information guides have proved to be effective for obtaining information. This is mainly due to the fact that young people tend to use electronic information, as this is more convenient for them and allows them to obtain the information they are looking for at any time and in any place they are in. Therefore, guides are "going by the wayside".

On the other hand, respondents from the Agricultural and Forestry Technology faculty, when asked in the first year, what sources they used to obtain information on the offer of education at the University of Agriculture in Kraków, answered that they most often used help, suggestions from family and friends, but also, in the age of the Internet, the websites of the Faculty and the University proved to be helpful, while the least helpful were open days, facebook and teachers at the secondary school. In the two subsequent years, the University's website was definitely in first place, as it provided the students with the most helpful information about the educational offer of the University, while facebook and information guides were the least helpful.

On the other hand, students majoring in Renewable Energy in the first year of the study most often used the University's information sheets and website. The least helpful were open days at the University as well as the Faculty website. In the following years, respondents found the Department's and the University's websites helpful, while Facebook proved to be the least effective tool for obtaining information about the offer of education.

Given the above, it can therefore be concluded that the websites of the University of Agriculture are becoming more popular with students every year, with more and more students going there to find out about the range of courses on offer, the courses and other things offered by the university in Kraków.

Analysing the results of the Management and Production Engineering students surveyed, it can be concluded that the most important source of information they used was the Faculty website. It was on this website that the students found the information that was important to them and which they could not find on other communicators, guides or find out from friends or family. In the first year under review, the lowest scores were given to information guides and television, and in the next year to fairs and open days. It can be seen that after such low results, the university took appropriate measures and in the following year the fairs and open days proved to be more effective in attracting new students.

When asked what were the most important sources of information they used when choosing a university, the Agricultural and Forestry Technology respondents were almost unanimous in stating that the most helpful, in each of the three years of the survey, were the Department's and the University's web pages. The University places increasing emphasis on maintaining its web pages at the highest level, frequent updates, improved visibility of the information sought, interesting graphics contribute to frequent visits by prospective students and those studying at the University. In the years surveyed, respondents found that

information guides and television were the least helpful. Nowadays it can be said that young people's acquisition of any information is done via the Internet. Fewer and fewer young people watch TV and therefore respondents made the least use of this type of information medium.

In the questionnaire that was filled in by students of Renewable Energy in three consecutive years, they declared that they found most of the information they needed on the Faculty's website and facebook page. It was there that they found the information that allowed them to make a fully informed choice of this direction and found answers to questions that dispelled doubts in choosing it. In the years studied, the presentation at the secondary school was the least helpful.

The second most important source of information when choosing a major for Management and Production Engineering students in the first two years studied is the websites of the Faculty and the University, but they also obtained a lot of information through friends and family. In the last surveyed year, invariably the second best source of information turned out to be the websites of the University and the Faculty, but Facebook proved to be an equally authoritative way. In the first year surveyed, the least helpful source of information according to respondents was leaflets, and in the next two years the least helpful source of information according to respondents was education fairs.

Students from the Faculty of Agricultural and Forestry Technology declared that the second most important source of information about the University's educational offer that they used in the first surveyed year was the University's website, and the least they could learn from advertisements on the Internet. In the following year, the Faculty's website was the second best information medium for the respondents, and the least effective, according to them, were online advertisements, leaflets. Facebook was unequivocally identified as the second best source of information from which we can learn a lot about the University of Agriculture, the educational offer and the information that potential candidates most often look for.

The second most important way of obtaining information before a very important choice such as a course of study for Renewable Energy Sources in three consecutive years is the University's website, and the least votes, which may indicate unsatisfactory ways of obtaining information, were received by information guides and leaflets.

The authors also attempted to examine the usefulness of the website. The usefulness of the website is influenced by a number of factors, such as ease of searching for information, readability, graphics and interesting facts about the life of the university. Respondents from three fields of study, such as Production Management and Engineering, Agricultural and Forestry Technology and Renewable Energy Sources, rated the website on a scale of 1-5. Most students rated the website at 4, as it does not fully meet all the requirements expected by

the respondents. Among the students' responses, the most frequent answer was that it was lacking the most:

- the possibility of reviewing assessments,
- no minimum score thresholds required for recruitment,
- difficulty in finding the timetable,
- accurate information about the first-year student research grant,
- lack of information on organised courses.

At this point, it should be noted that these were only first-year students; it can be assumed that the opinions of students from older years on the attractiveness of the faculty's website would be somewhat different

Conclusions

From the student survey, the marketing at the Faculty of Production Engineering and Energy is thriving. Therefore, the aim of the survey was achieved, as Autorm was able to establish that the promotional activities undertaken by the university are effective and directly influence the choice of university by future students. The necessary information is updated on a regular basis on the websites, which is why they are so popular, where one can obtain a lot of necessary information as well as read a lot of interesting facts. The managers of these university business cards take care of every detail and the constant updating of the websites allows for development.

Every year, more and more students are looking for information on Facebook or other platforms. It can be seen that information guides, presentations at secondary schools, fairs or leaflets of any kind are becoming a thing of the past. Invariably for the past three years, one of the most popular forms of acquiring knowledge has been both the faculty and university websites. In the age of the internet, this is one of the easiest forms of communication with the public. Today's young people cannot imagine functioning properly without access to Facebook and other communication platforms, so all kinds of changes in the life of the institution should be updated in such places or on websites so that such information can reach the widest possible audience.

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