Chapter 24
Justifying the ROI of Social Media Investment in Education

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ABSTRACT

To invest or not to invest? In the context of Higher Education, the decision around social media adoption is ultimately driven by the end users–students–increasingly demanding in their expectations of technology support provided by universities. This presents a new set of challenges to HE institutions of how to effectively adopt social media in a range of modes provided to students, alumni, external stakeholders, etc. This chapter sets the agenda for future research into methods of measuring effectiveness of social media applications in Higher Education. Drawing on a rich account of social media applications throughout the entire student lifecycle, the chapter identifies common objectives to social media campaigns and uses in educational settings. A framework for social strategy adoption by HE institutions is proposed for further empirical testing. The chapter provides an approach to measuring the effectiveness of social media in higher education and offers practical recommendations and identifies areas needing future research.

INTRODUCTION

According to recent statistics social media is now placed ahead of many other essential online activities (Ofcom 2012). Only three years ago it occupied 25% of online time usage, while current statistics shows a dramatic increase in social networking activity as a share of time spent by users online. There has also been a shift in the demographics of social media usage, while the younger generation appears to dominate Facebook usage, nevertheless 46% of Facebook users are aged over 45. Attracting more and more professionals, Facebook reports that 57% of its users have a college education. Similarly, LinkedIn reports that 50% of its user base have a university degree and 72% of its registrants use the network for business purposes (Onlinemba.com 2012).

Commercial presence on social media has also risen over the last five years. Projections for the growth of social marketing are quite optimistic, facilitated by the expansion of applications, rise

of mobile device capabilities and diversification of mobile networks (Woodhouse 2012). Woodhouse also cites statistics of the top most popular internet sites, which include Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn amongst the top 12 most visited in the world. The organic growth of social media marketing and convergence of social networking sites offers opportunities for consolidated marketing.

Earlier research (see for review Benson, Morgan & Tennakoon, 2012) opened up a discussion of how universities adapt social media, not only for marketing but for relationship building, career management and learning and teaching purposes. This chapter focuses on the performance evaluation of social media channels for universities, which can bring Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) a step closer to being able to define their goals and metrics for social media effectiveness. This will enable HEIs to establish a successful, as well as efficient, social media communication strategy and to be in a position to measure the ROI of the new technology investment, enabling effective decision making regarding investment and approach.

We discuss a set of metrics for ROI of social media adopted in business marketing and suggest a framework for aligning strategic objectives of HEIs along with possible social strategies to achieve them. These strategies are applicable in various stages of the student lifecycle, which differs markedly in terms of university goals, students' expectations and the objectives/involvement of a wide variety of external stakeholders. We discuss a successful application of a mature social media strategy at a UK university, which is located in London and has a network of international links. The social media strategy has been facilitating internal and external communication of the HEI with a wide range of stakeholders. The paper proposes a framework for aligning social media practices with university goals, taking into account characteristics of individual higher education institutions. It is argued that student recruitment, engagement, achievement and employability can

be improved through the integration of social media in higher education. We hope that the article will help bringing HEIs closer to solving the dilemma of being able to justify investment into social media and to measure effectiveness (or the lack of thereof) of the elusive new technology. The article concludes with a practical social media strategy matrix for the adoption of social media, based on strategic objectives which can be tailored to individual HEIs.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

We live in the digital universe where social media touches every aspect of student being, across the whole lifecycle, from initial search, pre-entry, the education itself, job search and as alumnus. HE organisations have incorporated social media into the education process as well as its marketing communication channels, often without fully understanding the impact this may have on their operation or their students. The nature of students is changing (and perhaps, being changed) by technology and the increasingly large, always-on community which is enabled through social media. Today's Digital Natives are used to 'bite-sized, on-demand' learning, but also are increasingly collaborative and experienced in global communications. Many years have passed from the time Prensky (2001) came up with the term 'digital natives', the technology has changed dramatically and is indeed ubiquitous, changing the face of the learning landscape on a global scale.

The application of social media technology to learning and teaching has attracted attention from academics. Online social media allows learners to communicate and collaborate across national and cultural boundaries, generate academic content, and become active participants in the learning process. The use of social media has increased across a range of disciplines, as wide ranging as medical, architecture, marketing, and business as

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