

## Chapter 38

# The Use of Social Media in the Networking Strategy of Higher Education Institutions: The Polish Experience

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes the opportunities that arise from the use of social media as an effective communication network between an educational institution and its stakeholders. Four examples of Polish tertiary institutions' use of social media sites to communicate with stakeholders are analysed. Particular emphasis is placed on the "Connection" communication model developed by the Faculty of International Relations and Political Science at the University of Lodz, which is innovative by Polish standards. The goal of the Connection project is to implement a modern communications system that is based on a copyrighted social media site, the objective being to integrate the environment surrounding the faculty, as well as providing a tool that enables easier communication between four stakeholder groups: students, alumni, faculty staff, and local businesses. These groups have been defined as crucial from the point of view of the faculty. The role of social media sites in the communication structure of the faculty as well as its position in the future is described, as well as further possibilities to conduct research in the area.*

### INTRODUCTION

The goal of the article is to present the current state of utilisation of social media by selected Polish tertiary institutions as well as to present the new possibilities this type of medium creates

for building relations between a university and relevant groups in its environment.

The use of social media in the Polish academic system is still marginal and provides a strategic challenge for many tertiary institutions. The challenge is all the more important due to the fact that

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creating positive relations with their surroundings by the use of social media will become an integral part in the marketing strategy of tertiary institutions. Social media sites can play a crucial role in building marketing relations as well as the process of creating a tertiary institution brand to which it is connected.

The following article is of an exploratory nature and is based on a particular case study. It has been prepared from a marketing strategy point of view. The article's origin is tied to the realisation by the authors, in 2012 and 2013, of an innovative project using social media sites in the process of building relations between the University of Lodz and its alumni (the Connection project – see below). Particular emphasis was placed on integrating the university's system of communication with various stakeholders within a coherent marketing strategy.

The modern Internet platform, created at the University of Lodz's Faculty of International Relations and Political Science in 2013, is an innovation for Poland. The innovative nature is based on building a stable contact base with the faculty's students, alumni and local businesses. The Internet platform is meant to integrate communication with various stakeholder groups with the goal of correcting and improving the flow of information as well as including alumni in creating new, innovative forms of co-operation with the university.

Up to now the system of Internet communication used by Polish tertiary institutions has generally relied on building a system of communication with potential as well as current students. They were based on a unilateral direction of information flow (university-student or university-alumni), rather than a dynamic multilateral and interactive process.

The new model of the Internet platform guarantees a multi-dimensional nature to the marketing communication process. Of particular significance is the way it enables communication with graduates as well as local businesses that are interested

in working with the university. The philosophy behind the model is to build around the interdisciplinary faculty with common goals, interests, and values that relate to a common identity. Faculty graduates become a key element of this community, playing an active role between the past, the present, and the future of a university. They are the key connectors between the various groups of stakeholders. By using their own contacts, knowledge, professional experience and understanding of the specifics of the university, they have a huge influence on the developmental process.

This model is inspired by examples from two of the best private American universities, as Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which have built around themselves a strong community of different stakeholder groups. Observations were made in 2012 during an academic visit to the United States. Based on the results of their own observations of Polish tertiary institutions, the authors analyse the views of students and graduates with regard to co-operation with the university on the basis of social media websites. The main challenge remains to activate the chosen groups and awaken them to work in common for their maternal institution. The answer to this problem is an attempt to link the goals of individuals and graduates in harmony with the goals of the university.

This innovative Internet platform will, in the future, be used as a strategic tool to create a faculty brand, as well for analysis of perceptions of the faculty in the local and international environment. The main aspect of the analysis refers to using social media sites in the process of building relations with strategic stakeholder groups as well as perfecting marketing communication instruments.

The platform could also play a huge role in the process of testing new educational services as well as assessing the expectations of the market in the terms of education, advice, research, and social events. It provides the opportunity to adjust its response to specific micro-segments, which suit the needs of the interested stakeholder groups

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