

Chapter 10

Using Social Network Sites for Higher Education Marketing and Recruitment

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author examines how the rapid penetration of Social Network Sites (SNSs) into everyday life affects higher education marketing. Among unique features offered by SNSs are unprecedented trackability of students' interests, immediacy in responses, targeted personalization of marketing efforts, and low institutional financial obligations. Growth in Internet Penetration Rates and strong international SNSs membership suggests further globalization of marketing strategies and inclusion of lower income countries into targeted markets. Concerns associated with the use of SNSs include dearth of fluency in the sites' content and operation among admission personnel, lack in users' privacy, and absence of control over the content. The skyrocketing evolution of SNSs surpasses the corresponding research as do applications of SNSs for higher education marketing. As the result, this qualitative study had to draw information from the variety of secondary sources including blogs, web reports, group discussions, comments, forums, videos, etc.

INTRODUCTION

During the first decade of the 21 century social media or social networking -the terms are often used interchangeably- which is, in crude summary, a “socializing and networking online through words, pictures, and videos” (Reuben, 2008, p. 1) or a “mass democratization of information” (Bennett, 2011, slide 13) became an integral part

of many people's daily routine. Nielsen Online, an analytics firm that tracks social network activities, estimates the reach of social media to be over 700 million active users from all over the world with 212,001,960 users being between ages of 16 and 25 (Bennett, 2011).

Availability of hyper-connections and constant communications have been “fast and furiously” changing the way all population groups, but par-

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ticularly teenagers and young adults are acquiring, processing, analyzing, and reacting on information. “The 16-24 year olds of today are constantly connected-plugged into digital music devices, cell phones, the Internet, instant messengers and social networks, perhaps all in the same device” (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 1). Colleges and universities are quickly recognizing the growing power of social networks and seem to change their marketing strategies to response to the needs of their audience.

The above observation determines the goal of this paper which is to investigate the role of technology in the form of Social Networks or Social Media as part of the new trends in marketing higher education domestically and internationally. First, I’ll explore definition, historic development, and the use of Social Networks and Social Media for marketing of higher education. Second, I’ll examine how the use of Social Network Sites is being influenced by the different world regions’ and countries’ Internet Penetration Rates and these countries’ Gross Domestic Products. Third, I’ll investigate concerns and barriers associated with the use Social Networks and Social Media. Finally, the evaluation of how these complex variables can be used, and are being used, to support the access of international students to the HIEs in the U.S. will take place.

USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Expansion of Social Networks into Higher Education

In the years 2007 and 2008 there were two nationwide comprehensive studies conducted analyzing responses of representatives from 453 and 536 admission offices respectively from all the four-year accredited HEIs in the United States regarding this professionals’ use of social networks for recruitment of domestic and international students (Barnes & Mattson, 2010). The first study revealed that HEIs are surpassing Fortune 500 companies as

well as Inc.500 companies in “their use of social media to communicate with their customers (i.e., students)” (Barnes & Mattson, 2010, p. 2). This observation seemed logical taking into account the audience HEIs serve.

The second study taken in 2008 confirmed this finding and also emphasized growing familiarity of admission officers with social networking: 63% of admission officers were very familiar with social media in 2008, 8% increase compare to 55% a year before. Also, from 26% to 47% of these professionals were familiar with specific forms of social networking, such as videoblogging, blogging, podcasting, message boards, and Wiki. Additionally, 85% of respondents of the survey administered in 2008 admitted using at least one form of social media, a 24% increase compare to the year 2007. Barnes and Mattson (2010) insisted that “the adoption of social media by admission departments is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today’s world.

In July 2008, Rachel Reuben (2008) sent surveys to higher education professionals who subscribed to the uweb, HighEdWeb and SUNY CUADnet listservs regarding “their university’s use of social media” (p. 4). Once researchers removed duplicate answers, they found that “there were 148 unique schools responding to the survey” (p. 4). Of those responded, 53.79% reported having a Facebook page and 21.9% a MySpace page, “just over half have an official presence on YouTube and nearly 60% have some forms of blogs on their sites” (p. 5). Most of the respondents reported that they use social media for marketing, “for communicating with current students, to reach out to alumni, and for recruitment” (p. 6). National Association of International Educators (NAFSA) during its recent collegiate conversation “Using Social Media for International Recruitment” that was conducted “live” on May 19, 2011, identified that 76% of this web event participants “use one or more social media platforms to reach international students” (NAFSA, 2011, p. 1) and 56% of participants confirmed that their use of

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