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Chapter 11
The Use of Facebook as a Marketing Tool by Private Educational Institutions in Singapore

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ABSTRACT

With social network sites growing in popularity, many organisations have started to use this platform to market themselves. However, marketing on social network sites is different from traditional marketing. Its value lies in engaging members of the social network and generating shared cultural meaning of the advertised brand rather than promoting awareness of the brand to a large number of people. This is not apparent to marketers and as such, many organizations are not leveraging on this media tool effectively. This paper examines the use of Facebook as a marketing tool by private educational institutions offering degree programmes in Singapore and investigates the extent that these educational institutions are leveraging on this new marketing communications tool. The findings suggest that marketing on social network sites remains in its infancy. Educational institutions in Singapore have started to use social network sites as a marketing communications tool. However, as the majority of visitors were using social network sites as an extension to existing mediums for seeking information, there is clearly the potential for the educational institutions to move to the next level in leveraging on social network sites to engage its members and generating a shared cultural meaning of their brands.

INTRODUCTION

Higher educational institutions have traditionally focused their attention on building a robust academic programme to draw students. However, due to growing competition, educational institutions have come to realise that they need to market themselves more aggressively to recruit and retain students (Newman, 2002).

Educational institutions have relied on various marketing communication tools to reach out to potential students. These include traditional

marketing communication tools like advertisements in the mass media, direct marketing to school leavers, open house day and campus tours. When new technologies and marketing platforms emerge, educational institutions have also been quick to adopt them as part of their marketing communications (Kittle & Ciba, 2001).

In recent years, social network sites have grown exponentially in popularity, especially among young adults. Many organisations, including educational institutions, have seen the growth of social network sites as an opportunity to market themselves on this new platform. Marketing on social network sites is distinctively different from traditional marketing as social network sites are organised around people and their relationships. They allow for members to exchange information with each other and contribute to the collective making of meaning. The real value of marketing on social network sites thus lies in the ability to engage members and generating a shared cultural meaning of the advertised brand. However, many organisations do not realise that social network sites are different and continue to use traditional marketing tactics on social network sites.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent that private educational institutions in Singapore are using social network sites as a new marketing communications tool and the extent that they are leveraging on this medium to engage with students. The findings from this study will lead to a better understanding of the use of social network sites as a marketing tool among private educational institutions in Singapore.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Selection of Educational Institution

Selecting an educational institution by a prospective student is an important decision. It not only involves a significant amount of time and monetary resources but more importantly, the choice

of an educational institution directly affects the career choice of the prospective student. In such a purchase situation where there is a high level of personal relevance and important consequences, it becomes important for the consumer to form a reasoned opinion and to devote the cognitive effort required to evaluate the choices available (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983). As such, a prospective student will seek out information extensively and put much consideration in the decision.

In becoming more market-oriented, educational institutions will need to know how prospective students seek out information and make decisions. Studies have shown that students have many sources of information to rely on in choosing an educational institution. These can be loosely grouped into personal and non-personal sources of information. Personal sources of information include family members, friends and students and staff members of the target educational institutions. Non-personal sources of information include the prospectus of educational institutions, visits to the educational institutions and the websites of educational institutions (De Jager & Du Plooy, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Simões & Soares, 2010).

Despite the varied sources of information available to students, prospective students are still unable to fully evaluate the merits of an institution due to the intangible and non-standardised nature of education (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Mazzarol, Soutar, & Thein, 2000; Warwick & Mansfield, 2003). As such, any decision made will necessarily involve accepting an amount of perceived risk or the uncertainty faced when the consequences of their decision cannot be anticipated (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2010).

To reduce the level of perceived risks in such a decision, prospective students may rely more on word-of-mouth rather than advertising in making their decision (Briggs & Wilson, 2007; Pampaloni, 2010). Word-of-mouth is perceived to be more credible as the motivation for sharing the information lies in wanting to help fellow consumers in

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