

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' NEEDS FOR A MORE EFFECTIVE ONLINE MARKETING IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract: *Considering that the results of previously conducted research revealed that higher education institutions (HEIs) of Romania consider their own websites as rather a communication tool with current students than a marketing tool by which to communicate and attract potential students, the aim of the research presented in this paper is to analyze and verify whether the approach of higher education institutions is consistent with the expectations of potential students. Moreover, it is trying to evaluate whether they expect that the information from the official websites of these institutions address them. The research also seeks to capture which were the different search methods and the importance of online information sources for admission to university/faculty, which are the devices used in the search, what information the students consider that would be needed to make the right choice on university, faculty and specialization, the importance given to activities ranging from email marketing and search engine marketing etc. Finally, based on primary data resulted from research conducted and the analysis of secondary data resulted from other research, we identify the main pillars that the online marketing strategy of a higher education institution should be built on according to the needs of potential students: the official Internet pages designed so as to meet the needs of the prospective students (and even parents thereof), activities specific to email marketing and Pay Per Click campaigns meant to attract the prospective students to the pages that have a potential interest to them. The results of the study confirm the results of previous research according to which higher education institutions should attach great importance to the way they think their online presence.*

Keywords: online marketing; higher education marketing; search engine marketing; email marketing; content marketing; social media marketing.

JEL classification: M30; M31.

1. Introduction

The importance of online presence of any organization is no longer debated, being universally accepted and recognized. In addition, it is highly topical the developing of strategies by which the online presence of the organizations to be readily accessible and especially visible for those interested in the products or services offered by it. According to Kritzinger and Weideman (2013), the search engines are the key to achieving the objective of being found by the right people at the right time. The results of previous research (Popa, Țarcă and Tarcza, 2014) which analyzed the aspects of the online presence of higher education institutions (HEIs) of Romania have revealed that these institutions tend to be largely a communication tool with the current students and to a very small extent a tool to attract potential students. Based on this conclusion, the study presented in this paper aims to analyze and verify whether the approach of higher education institutions is consistent with the expectations of potential students.

2. Literature Review

The online presence of a large number of companies (<http://www.higher-education-marketing.com>, Circa Interactive - <http://circainteractiveseo.com>, Eduvantis Digital - <http://digital.eduvantis.com/about/> etc.) offering services regarding online marketing in general and AdWords campaigns for higher education institutions in particular demonstrates the interest in this kind of services. Also, according to the information posted on the websites of these companies, worldwide, higher education institutions have a growing interest to resort to these services in order to attract potential students. A considerable number of organizations (including Google, Top Universities - <http://www.topuniversities.com>, Ruffalo Noel Levitz - www.noellevitz.com) periodically conduct a series of research aimed at the online search behaviour for a variety of industries, including education.

According to a study conducted by Google and Compete in 2012 in the USA (Howard, 2013), 9 out of 10 students used the Internet to analyze higher education institutions prior to admission, and 1 in 10 students used exclusively online sources to get information on universities/colleges; half of the prospective students use mobile devices to request information about higher education institutions. Another global study of Top Universities, having as theme the analysis of how potential students use digital resources to search for information on higher education institutions shows that (Top Universities, 2014): approximately 64% of the respondents consider the online and offline resources equally important in the search for information on the purpose of admission to the university; 30% considered more important the online resources and only 6% considered more important the offline resources; the device used the most in the search for information on universities and admission was the laptop (47%), followed by smartphone (22%), desktop (17%) and tablet (14%). According to the same study (Top Universities, 2014), although the contact forms on websites of universities / colleges and social media are the most used ways to contact the university / college, the study shows that, in fact, these are not the contact ways preferred by the respondents, the modality preferred by them being the email. Extremely useful and interesting information for HEIs is offered by Noel-Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive and NRCCUA and published by Noel-Levitz (2014): parents have an important influence in the choice of the future students of the university / college; both students and their parents indicated the official websites of higher education institutions as the most influential resource in the choice, followed by the information received by email; both the prospective students and their parents consider the websites of higher education institutions more useful to the detriment of Facebook pages; the study confirms an upward trend in the use of mobile phones to search for information about higher education institutions for admission; about 67% of the potential students and 59% of the parents said that the website of the higher education institution they are visiting affects how they perceive the institution; the most popular information for the prospective students on the websites of universities is that relating to academic programs offered by the institution, the cost and details of the scholarships; the communication via electronic mail (activities regarding the topic of email marketing) are popular both for the prospective students and their parents; regarding paid search campaigns or paid social media campaigns, the results show that nearly one in three students have accessed a promoted message (of the messages accessed so, about 40% came from a search using the Google search engine and about 30% from the ads posted on the Facebook page).

3. The objectives of the research

To achieve the goal of this research, we have established the following objectives necessary to clarify the issues considered:

- to assess the extent to which the students have turned to the online environment

- to get information for admission to college;
- to identify the main sources of information used in the online environment that contributed to the decision on admission;
- to analyze the extent to which the quality of information found raised to the expectations and how this information contributed to the choice of the college;
- to analyze the way in which information sources were used.

4. The Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the research, based on the results of previous research and the analysis of secondary data resulted from this research, we aimed to design and conduct a research of descriptive transversal type meant to analyze the image, at a certain time, of the phenomenon studied (Popa, 2013: 118). To implement this research, the survey was chosen as the research method. The research focused on the students of a faculty of economic sciences and took place during March-April 2015. The sampling method was the stratified sampling, it was applied to a total of 120 questionnaires of which 89 have been validated. To conduct the survey a questionnaire with 25 questions and a total of 12 statements evaluated on Likert scale with five levels was designed and tested. 7 of the questions are open questions, the rest being closed or mixed questions. In developing the questionnaire, the technique of free association as a variant of projective research methods was considered. This was capitalized in the request to students to associate the major with a color and an object, the aim being to obtain information from the respondents regarding their beliefs, their thoughts and feelings in a way that seeks to dissimulate the investigated element (Balaciu et al., 2014).

5. Results

For start, the scores on a Likert scale with five levels for a set of statements are presented (Table 1). It is noted that the students consider that the Internet has played an important role in making the admission decision, the highest score of choice of the university, college and major being obtained by the choice of college. Yet, they do not consider that the information found on the Internet has greatly influenced their choice. The highest score (3.88) was obtained by the statement: *For admission to college I got informed by visiting the websites of the college*. A high score (3.76) also had the information that highlights *the importance of searching for information using the Google search engine*. These results demonstrate that higher education institutions should pay great importance to the way in which they think their online presence, especially to the information posted on the official website. A low score was obtained by the use of the Yahoo search engine in the search for information. Perhaps surprisingly, yet consistent with other research, social media (Facebook pages of higher education institutions) achieved a low score as a source of important information for deciding on admission. However, the respondents consider that visiting the Facebook pages of those institutions would have been useful.

Table 1

Afirmații	Scoruri
1. In choosing the university I applied for, using the Internet to inform me had a very important role.	3,20
2. In choosing the college/faculty I applied for, using the Internet to inform me had a very important role.	3.40

3. In choosing the major I applied for, using the Internet to inform me had a very important role.	3.06
4. The information I have found on the Internet regarding the colleges and majors greatly influenced me in my choice.	2.64
5. All the information I needed to inform myself for admission to college was available online.	3.73
6. I believe that visiting the Facebook pages of the college and / or departments within the faculty would have been useful in making the best decision for admission to college.	3,24
7. For admission to college I was informed by visiting the websites of the colleges.	3,88
8. For admission to college I was informed by visiting the Facebook pages of the colleges..	2,39
9. For admission to college I was informed by searching for information using the Google search engine.	3,76
10. For admission to college I was informed by searching for information using the Yahoo search engine.	1,48
11. For admission to college I highly trusted the information found on the Internet.	3,37
12. For admission to college I had more confidence in information found on the Internet than in other sources like booklets, opinions of friends or teachers etc.	2,67

Source: own research

Regarding the devices used to get informed on the admission, the results show that the main devices used are the laptops and smartphones (Figure 1). This result demonstrates the importance given to adapt the web pages of higher education institutions for viewing on smartphones. The results confirm the results of previous research achieved at international level, the results presented in the literature review section of this paper.

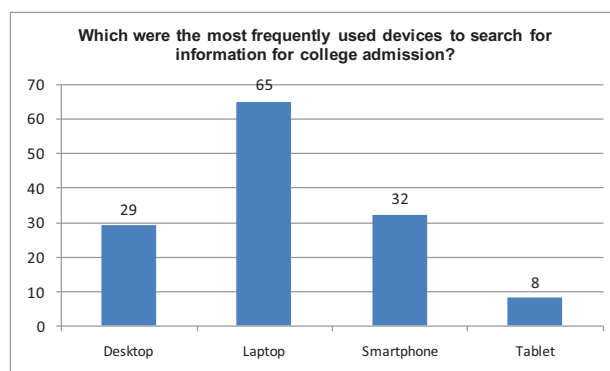


Figure 1: Which were the most frequently used devices to search for information for college/faculty admission?

Source: own representation

Regarding the ranking of sources of information used for admission, this time, too, the results show that the websites of the higher education institutions are the main source of

information (with a score of 7.77 on a scale from 1 to 10), followed by visits to the college or booklets or leaflets received from institutions of higher education (Figure 2). The information received from the family is on the fourth position and that obtained from friends and colleagues on the fifth position. The official social media pages obtained in this case a relatively low score. Also, a low score was obtained by the blogs and discussion groups as sources of information.

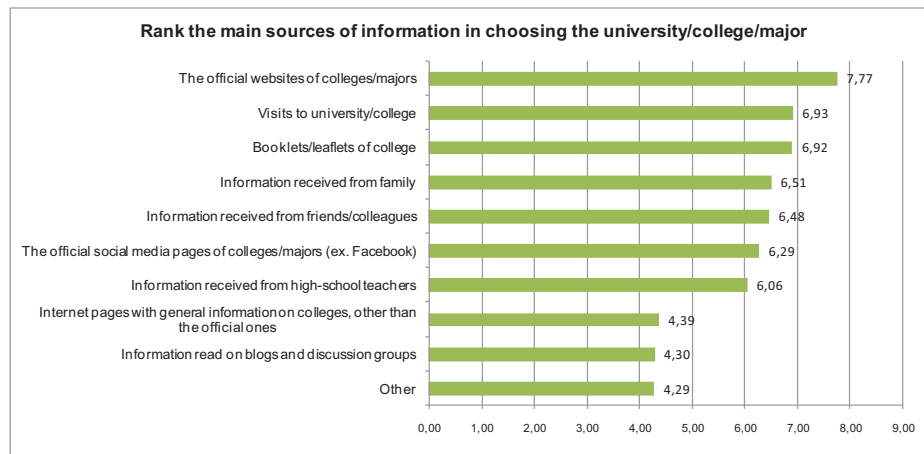


Figure 2: Rank the main sources of information in choosing the university/ college/major
Source: own representation

Another aspect analyzed is the identification of the information that the prospective students considered necessary for the college and major choice. The results reflected in Figure 3 show that the most frequently sought information is that related to the curriculum, followed by that related to school tuition and the possibility of getting a scholarship.

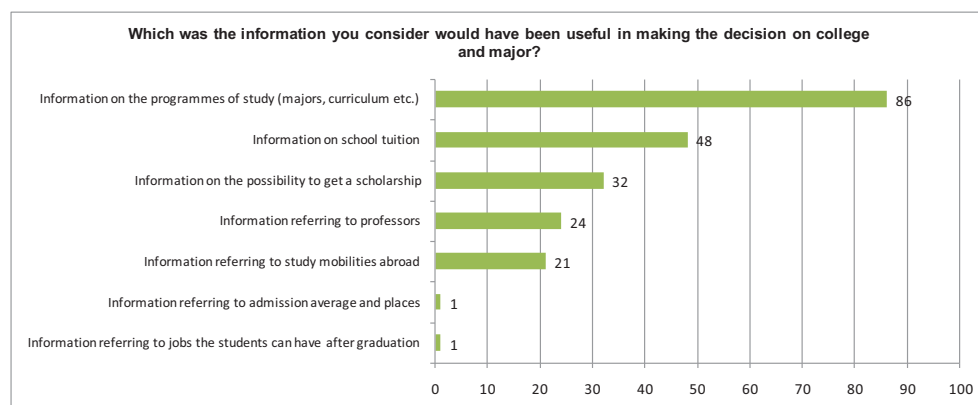


Figure 3: Which was the information you consider would have been useful in making the decision on college and major?
Source: own representation

According to the research, 46% of the students say they have started to look for information on admission just one month before admission, while 34% said they had sought information 6 months before admission (Figure 4). However, an estimated number of 17% sought information about one or more than one year before admission. This can be useful for identifying the most suitable period to conduct the promotion campaigns.

Figure 4: How long before the admission to college have you started searching for information to help you in making the decision on the college and the major you want to apply for?

Source: own representation

To analyze the importance that higher education institutions should give to activities in the email marketing category, the respondents were asked to assess on a scale of 1 to 5 how useful would have been to receive, from the higher education institutions, email messages describing the college and the majors. The score to this question is 4.1 and we believe that this value demonstrates that the activities in the email marketing category should be taken into serious consideration by higher education institutions to communicate with the prospective students, and even more, to build relationships with them before the admission period. Unfortunately, as other previous research shows, these activities are not considered largely by higher education institutions in Romania.

Other issues analyzed relate to the evaluation of the extent to which the students consider that the university, the college and the major they have chosen is suitable for them. The scores calculated on a scale from 1 to 5 are almost equal, having values of 4.04 for the university, 4.00 for the college and 4.04 for the major.

Asked to evaluate on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 - less important, 5 - very important) the importance they consider that the advice from their parents had for friends and colleagues, the score is 3.40, which demonstrates that the parents are considered as an important factor in choosing the college or the major. When they were asked to associate the major with a color and an object, the color with the highest frequency was blue (38%), followed by red (22.5%) and green (12%) and the objects specified with the highest frequency have been book / pen (29%), PC / laptop (11%) and money (9%), with no significant differences between students from different majors. It is worth noting that blue is a color that reflects the need for communication, the desire to develop relationships, red is associated to the need for action, the desire to achieve results, and green is associated to the need for knowledge (Balaciu et al., 2014). Deepening such an analysis could lead to the creation of the profile of students' interests and their expectations about the services offered by the higher education institution.

3. Conclusions

The information analyzed in the study, both that obtained from secondary sources (previous research conducted by various organizations) and the primary information resulting from the research conducted, highlights, in particular, the importance the students attach to information posted on the official websites of higher education

institutions, and also to the communication via electronic mail. This latter aspect should emphasize the importance that these institutions should pay to activities specific to email marketing. Previous research (Popa, Țarcă and Tarcza, 2014) however shows that higher education institutions in Romania are not currently aware of the benefits these activities could bring.

The research also identifies which are the fundamental pillars on which the online marketing strategy of higher education institutions should be built at the moment: *the official Internet pages designed so as to meet the needs of the prospective students (and even parents thereof), activities specific to email marketing and Pay Per Click campaigns meant to attract the prospective students to the pages that have a potential interest to them.*

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