

AN EXPERIMENT ON USING ONLINE MARKETING TOOLS FOR PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES

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Abstract: In this study we intended, *in the first place, to analyse and determine if the online environment represents an efficient environment for promoting educational services offered by higher education institutions in Romania. Another major objective of this paper is to describe a context in which online marketing tools like Facebook and Google AdWords could contribute to promote higher education services in the online environment. In order to achieve the goal, a causal research based on experiment was designed and implemented. The type of the experiment is “before-after with control group” design*. For conducting the experiment, after developing the landing page, two advertising campaigns were designed: one of them through the tools offered by Facebook and the other one by using Google AdWords. The test units considered are two masters of the faculty of economics (one master is the experimental unit and the other is for control). The independent variable is the extent to which the masters are promoted in the online environment and the dependent variable is the number of students enrolled in the two masters during the admission period. Based on the results from this experiment, but also on data of other studies, we consider that the best results in designing online promotion campaigns for higher education institutions - when considering the tools involved in this experiment - are obtained when they are used as complementary tools. According with our observations, Google AdWords has more potential for attracting prospective students on the landing pages containing information dedicated to them, but Facebook's features can be successfully used in particular for creating and developing relationships with potential students so that they will subsequently want to become students of that institution.

Keywords: online marketing; online marketing tools; Facebook; Google AdWords; higher education marketing; pay-per-click advertising

JEL classification: M31; M37

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the benefits of using the Internet in marketing activities should be obvious for every marketer. The online environment offers an impressive number of online tools that are capable to offer tremendous possibilities to develop interesting and creative new marketing strategies. The concepts like online marketing and digital marketing are very fashionable in the context of marketing activity and higher education institutions seem more and more interested in using online marketing tools as part of their marketing strategy. As a reaction to the challenges Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have to face these days based especially on the fact that the environment in which HEIs operate changed substantially in the last years, these institutions become increasingly aware of the importance of adopting a marketing orientation in their activity (Popa, 2015b; Popa, Tarca and Tarcza, 2016). Even if more debate is needed for clarifying the core concepts

of higher education marketing (like “value” or “client”) and also regarding the place of marketing in the higher education institutions activities which is still not clearly defined in the academic literature, the specialists are aware of the potential benefits of applying the marketing vision for the higher education sector (Carlos and Rodrigues, 2012).

Though the results of a previous research showed that, at the moment, Romanian higher education institutions are not entirely led by a strategic marketing vision, it is necessary to mention that there are actions that could be included in the category of marketing activities (Popa, Tarca and Tarcza, 2016), especially regarding promotion.

In relation to online promotion, at a worldwide scale a growing trend is noticed among the specialists and practitioners for considering online advertising tools in the marketing activity of higher education institutions. In particular, the tool offered by Google – Google AdWords – generates a lot of interest from those involved in the marketing activity of these institutions (both those interested in studying the phenomenon and also the managers of the institutions, interested in promoting the educational services provided by the institution).

The awareness of the importance of online marketing in general and of the online promotion in particular for the higher education institutions is also demonstrated by the emergence of the online agencies specialised in offering online marketing services dedicated exclusively to these kind of institutions. According to Hayley Supple, a specialist from Converge Consulting, higher education, at the worldwide level, has become one of the top industries regarding the use of Google AdWords to generate traffic to the institution website because of advantages like the high search volume, targeting opportunities and transparent tracking tools (Supple, 2015).

Online marketing, in general, online advertising and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising in particular, have the merit of having brought a multitude of advantages for the marketing specialists in terms of the ways they define now the marketing objectives and develop the marketing strategies. There are a series of benefits identified for using PPC advertising in comparison with classic advertising known before. The most important of these benefits are:

- a major advantage of PPC advertising focuses on issues related to market segmentation and market targeting. It makes possible to substantially improve activities like dividing the market in customer segments based on similar needs and wants and for each targeted segment the appropriate message could be delivered;
- a second important benefit of PPC advertising, analyzed in comparison with the classic advertising, is related to the fact that PPC advertising offers concrete possibilities to measure the effectiveness of the campaigns through a complex set of metrics which include (Kim, Park et. al., 2012): hit – the number of visits to the website, request – the number of hits when the page components were successfully downloaded, visitors – the number of persons who visits the website in a specific period of time, visits (sessions) – the number of continuous visits to the website, duration time – the time spent on the website by a visitor, impressions – the number of exposures of the landing page linked to an advertisement delivered to potential customers, Click Through Rate – CTR – the number of clicks/responses received by a specific advertisement, conversion rate – the number of responses/clicks associated to an advertisement which finished through an action desired by the advertiser.
- a third benefit is related to the fact that the payment is made only when the potential customers are interested in the message and are accessing the link associated to the advertisement, so the company will pay only when the ad generates traffic to the landing page. Also, there is the possibility to permanently adjust the bid for the keywords and to identify the most appropriate keywords in accordance with the targeted objectives, valuing the traffic history offered by the

transparency of data the advertiser has in online marketing (Geddes, 2014, p. 7). Various types of settings associated to an advertising campaign can be easily experienced in the online environment, all these being far more difficult and far more expensive in the offline environment.

According to Constantinides (2014), the usage of Social Media as a marketing tool should not be treated as an isolated marketing activity, but rather as a final step of a strategic and consistent marketing effort. Higher education institutions are among those that show an increasing interest in using social media as a marketing tool, realizing especially the potential of these tools to reach and attract new students (Constantinides and Stagno, 2011, p. 7). Constantinides and Stagno (2011) argued that although the use of social media is extremely high among potential students, the impact of social networks in choosing the field of the study and the educational institution is relatively low compared to other traditional marketing tools used in higher education marketing. But Sessa (2014) states that it is vital that higher education institutions not only to include social media in their strategy, but also to use this tool strategically in order to engage the new generations of students. In a research considering a significant number of American universities regarding the usage of Facebook in their marketing activity, Sessa (2014) found that, when the managers of these institutions were asked how effective is using Facebook to recruit potential students, nearly 50% said that it is somewhat effective, while 23% said it is very effective. Fagerstrøm and Ghinea (2013) argue that to really use the marketing potential of social media, the higher education institutions should transform these marketing tools in online spaces meant to create experiences as part of the value creation process in the educational context.

2. The aim of the study

The main goal of this research is to examine whether the online environment represents an appropriate place that the higher education institutions can successfully use for recruiting potential students. In this research we aim to draw conclusions on the impact of online advertising campaigns, but also to identify the most efficient alternative of those considered in the research and the devices the most used for accessing the promotional message.

3. Research methodology

In order to analyze to what extent the online environment is appropriate for higher education institutions in their marketing activities meant to recruit potential students, and for comparatively examine two online channels used to deliver the promotional message, a causal research was conducted. The aim of the experiment was to design and test two online advertising campaigns, the tools used in these campaigns were Google AdWords and Facebook. The experiment to be performed is a “before-after with control group” design. This kind of experiment has the following characteristics (Burns and Bush, 2010; Popa, 2013, p. 79):

- it involves the existence of two groups: the experimental group and the control group;
- before the manipulation of the independent variable, the dependent variable is measured both for the experimental group and the control group;
- the manipulation of the independent variable is performed only for the experimental group;
- after a time period, the measurement of the dependent variable is made for both groups.

After performing this type of experiment the results obtained from the four measurements (two measurements for the experimental group and two measurements for the control group) could be compared and analyzed.

In the case of our experiment, the test units considered are two masters of the faculty of economics (one master is the experimental unit and the other is for control). The independent variable is the extent to which the masters are promoted in the online environment and the dependent variable is the number of students enrolled in the two masters during the admission period. Knowing the number of students enrolled for admission in the previous year for each of the two masters, comparisons can be made between the test units, but also for each test unit before and after performing the experiment.

4. Description of the experiment

In order to conduct the experiment, two paid promotion campaigns were designed, one of them through the tools offered by Facebook and the other one by using Google AdWords. In conducting the experiment the next steps were followed:

Step 1: the development of the landing page

Step 2: the design of the two advertising campaigns aimed to attract visitors to the landing page:

- an online advertising campaign via Facebook
- an online advertising campaign using Google AdWords

Step 3: the measurement of the impact of the two online advertising campaigns (the number of visitors to the page, the number of visitors that initiated an action on the landing page, the number of potential students enrolled during the admission period at the two master programs)

The advertising campaigns were conducted a few days before the admission and during the first days of the admission period.

5. Results and conclusion

In this study we intended, in the first place, to analyse and determine if the online environment represents an efficient environment for promoting educational services offered by higher education institutions in Romania. Another important objective of the research presented in this paper is to test and compare two online channels in the context of promoting higher education services. We tried to identify which of the two channels offers the best results (paid advertising via Facebook or paid advertising using Google AdWords), or eventually how to combine them in order to achieve the goal of the promotion. We also intended to draw conclusions about the appropriate settings in the design of these campaigns, such as: the most appropriate devices to be targeted in these kind of campaigns, the appropriate keywords and so on.

By comparing the number of candidates enrolled for the two master programs considered for this experiment, we firstly notice that the number of candidates enrolled for the master program that was promoted increased by about 11 percents in 2015 compared with 2014 while the number of candidates enrolled for the master program that was not promoted decreased by about 10 percents. The analysis was performed considering the first choice of the candidates when choosing the master program. We consider that this result is an indicator that supports the idea that online promotion activities using tools like Google AdWords and Facebook could be useful and efficient for higher education institutions. Further research is necessary to validate this conclusion.

Regarding the devices used to display the ads, the data resulted from the Google AdWords campaign showed that 73 percents of the ads were displayed on desktop devices, 23 percents on mobile and 3 percents on tablets. On the other hand, the results about the Click Through Rate (CTR) for different devices showed that CTR for desktop devices was 0.72%, for mobile was 1.07% and for tablet 0%. The cost per action was lower for the advertising campaign via Facebook than for the Google AdWords campaign, but so was the relevance of the results.

The overall impact of the two promotion campaigns proves that the online environment is conducive for promoting the higher education services (considering the efficiency in terms of impressions and the budget used in the campaigns). Although in terms of impact and number of impressions the results of the advertising campaign via Facebook are better, we consider that the impact of the AdWords campaign can be considered more relevant due to the fact that the impressions are search results based on keywords. An important conclusion concerns the use of mobile devices in online promotion campaigns. Consistent with the results of other research, the data resulted from this experiment are also showing that, when they want to get information about the higher education services, prospective students increasingly use mobile devices for searches and for accessing the Facebook pages. This result supports the idea from previous research (Popa, 2015c) that higher education institutions should pay special attention to the way their online presence is displayed on mobile devices, respectively, when designing online promotion campaigns, to set their ads for targeting mobile devices.

Based on the results from this experiment, but also on data of other studies, we consider

that the best results in designing online promotion campaigns for higher education institutions - when considering the tools involved in this experiment - are obtained when they are used as complementary tools. According with our observations, Google AdWords has more potential for attracting prospective students on the landing pages containing information dedicated to them, but Facebook's features can be successfully used in particular for creating and developing relationships with potential students so that they will subsequently want to become students of that institution. Based on our current state of knowledge, there are no studies with similar topics meant to compare this kind of online marketing tools in the context of online marketing for higher education institutions. From this point of view, we consider that this study may create the premises for future research with more complex design.

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