

Małgorzata Koszembar-Wiklik
Politechnika Śląska

Public Relations and Relationship Marketing of Higher Education Facilities in the Time of New Media

Summary

The development of new media, especially social media, has changed the activities in the field of marketing communication. Former, one-way communication patterns in the era of Internet platforms and the prosumer approach cease to be effective, while the importance of forms based on interaction and co-participation is growing. The author, basing on the analysis of literature, indicates the most important features of the new media, especially social media as communication tools of PR and relationship marketing. In a synthetic manner, she indicates the benefits of the Web 2.0 environment. Successively, referring to Polish higher education facilities, she presents the main social media tools used by the facilities for communication. The author also conducted a questionnaire survey among students of the Silesian University of Technology. These studies involved the use of social media to communicate with teachers. The main source of information and communication is still the university site and its mailing, only 32% visited the university's Facebook profile. The introduction of social media as a communication tool between teachers and students might, as students think, have a positive effect on the perception of universities.

Key words: new media, relationship marketing, public relations, marketing communication.

JEL codes: I23, M31, L82

Introduction and methodology

Higher education facilities currently operate in a strongly-competitive market, with determined unfavorable demographic processes, and have to compete for students. One such competitive factor is the facility image and positive relationships with various elements of the environment. The strategic role, in addition to the service offer, when creating a positive image, is attributed to the adopted forms of communication.

Such concepts as public relations, marketing based on relationships, prosumer and social media are essential for communication processes at higher education facilities and image management, both in relation to the external and internal environment.

The growing role of public relations in the communication strategy of a higher education facility is the result of, among others, the changes in the expectations of, especially, the younger generation, the increasingly skeptical approach to the classic advertising and the result of the changing media technologies that enable participation and provide easy and continuous access to information.

In the following part, the author, basing on the analysis of literature, indicates the most important features of the new media, especially, social media as communication tools of PR and marketing relationships. In a synthetic manner, she indicates the benefits of the Web 2.0 environment. Successively, referring to Polish higher education facilities, presents the main social media tools used by the facilities for communication. The author randomly chose 20 public higher education facilities from among the 59 universities listed as public higher education facilities supervised by the Minister responsible for higher education. The author also presents a small section of a broader survey research conducted by her among the students of the Silesian University of Technology. The study concerned the use of social media in communication between lecturers and students and the university and students. The author presents the barriers identified by students in using this type of communication.

Features of the new media

New media mean new opportunities and new threats to creating images of higher education facilities and building the trust of the environment. The marketing policy of a higher education facility conditions whether the opportunities brought about by the changes in the way people “consume” media will be used. New media is a broad, variedly-defined category. The “popular encyclopedia of the mass media” defines the new media as any communication techniques and technologies used widely since the mid-80s (Skrzypczak 1999). L. Manovich describes new media as analog media converted to a digital form (Manovich 2010). D. de Kerckhove points out that, at present, the various technologies and means of communication have been integrated into a unity of a digital clamp, media integrated (de Kerckhove 2001). The following features are usually attributed to new media: interactivity, speed, wide coverage, storage of large number of information, poor protection of privacy (van Dijk 2010), hypermediality, digitization and convergence (McQuail 2007) access 24h/day from anywhere.

One of the most important features of communication via the Internet is its interactivity (some authors define it as dialogism (Gustowski 2012). Virtually anyone can take the role of a sender and a recipient on the Internet, the boundaries between interpersonal communication, mass and public communication is blurred. Castells suggests that new media enable mass self-communication, that is, mass individualized communication (Castells 2006).

Through the network, the contact of higher education facilities with various groups of the environment is greatly facilitated, they have a better chance to build and consolidate relationships with customers, especially with current or potential students. Such developing tools of the Internet connectivity enable the improvement of the communication process quality. Communication skills of new media result from the capabilities and limitations of various channels of communication.

The origins of the Internet in the literature are referred to as Web 1.0. The first generation Internet, although it was to a large extent based on simple web pages, already had tools for sharing and exchange of information, offered discussion groups which later turned into forums. It was, however, mostly focused on one-way communication or the function of

a simple interaction. Only then did the Web 2.0 tools enable anyone's creation and publishing information on the web. Web 2.0 came into use after a conference in 2004, it is, however, difficult to give a clear and complete definition of this term. Web 2.0 - consists mainly of blogs and microblogs, social networking sites or YouTube-type channels and enables everyone's interaction and participation in creating media, anyone (who has communication skills) can become a content sender. The main idea is to have deep, not superficial, user-portal interaction.

The important issue is that social media flow – evolve, change their form every day in all the media. They are as current in a river – permanent, but never the same (Gitomer 2011).

Pr and higher education facilities relationship' marketing

The most important environment, from the perspective of a higher education facility, is the student environment, being part of the Generation Y (with access to huge social networks). The inclusion of new media in the strategies of public relations and marketing seems to be, in terms of the characteristics of this generation, almost mandatory. For the Generation Y, the Internet is the medium in which most activities takes place – the communicate over the network, there look for information, entertainment, work, friendship etc.

The significance of the use of social media in communication is associated with the development of active consumers (prosumers) whose market behaviors are different from those of the behaviors of passive consumers. Prosumer, although it is not a new phenomenon, takes on new qualitative characteristics. In the 70s of the twentieth century, at the time of the Toffler's "Third Wave", a prosumer meant a combination of a producer and a consumer, now it is more widely understood. Prosumers are also people who actively participate in online media - comment, seek information about brands and products, post opinions, contribute content on social media. Such actions make student-prosumers increasingly contribute to the creation of the image of a higher education facility, to the extent not yet possible in the past. Hence creating long-term, mutually beneficial relationships, as facilitated by public relations, is of particular importance.

Public relations (PR), boil down to managing a company communication with its internal and external environment in order to shape its image, which is to facilitate the achievement of the objectives of the organization (Tworzydło 2003). As public relations involve a two-way communication based on an analysis of social expectations, social media have emerged as a tool created for public relations (PR). Public relations is geared towards creating positive images but also towards producing an environment of trust and building positive relationships with various groups relevant for the functioning of the organization. In this meaning, good PR is determined to be the basis of the relationship marketing.

Relationship marketing is defined in literature in various ways. I. Gordon describes relationship marketing (also called partnership marketing) as a constant process of searching and creating new value with individual customers and sharing the benefits in the area of partnership agreement, covering the entire period of the customer purchasing activity (Gordon

2001). For the purposes of the article the definition formulated by T. Cram has been adopted. He stresses that “Relationship marketing is a consistent application of up-to-date knowledge about individual customers to design a product/service that is communicated interactively in order to develop and continue the mutually beneficial relationship.” The definition draws attention to two aspects – it emphasizes the role of interactive communication and the role of the obtained benefits that should be mutual (Wereda 2001).

Relationship marketing plays an important role especially in industries where demand for services is characterized by continuity or cyclicity and consumers are free to choose the service provider. Services of such type are characteristic for universities, where the service lasts for a particular, relatively long period of time, and the student has the freedom of choice between the offers of numerous universities.

Understanding the specifics of new media by the people responsible for communicating is most important for PR and relationship marketing processes.

The directions of communication mediated by new media at higher education facilities primarily include:

- university – students,
- university – employees
- university – the external environment,
- teachers – students,
- teachers – external environment,
- teachers – teachers.

In fact, the only that remains beyond the control of higher education facilities is their students’ communication via social media between themselves and between the students and the environment outside the university. The two most important planes of communication are: university – students (current, prospective graduates) and lecturers – students.

New media at higher education facilities

The basic form of Internet communication with the environment is a higher education facility’s web page. However, social media have become an important complement to this communication and their role in building relationships has been increasing. Simple one-way communication schemes are increasingly being replaced by the interactive.

The analysis carried out by the author aimed at identifying what social media are most commonly used by Polish universities. The method of the analysis of secondary materials (university web pages) was adopted.

In the first place, profiles of selected public universities, as subordinated to the Minister responsible for higher education, were subject to quantitative analysis.

According to the ministerial list, on 21 March 2015, there are 59 academic public universities in Poland, including: 18 university of technology, 18 university, 6 university of life sciences, 6 academy of physical education, 5 university of economics, 5 pedagogical uni-

versities, 1 theological university. The study assumed that one third of the universities will undergo the analysis – 20 universities selected in proportion to each group (6 universities from the first two categories, 2 universities from categories 3-6).

Table 1
Social media used by Polish universities

The name of the university	Social media	People who like it (on Facebook)
Selected university of technology		
Silesian University of Technology	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter	13 496
Cracow University of Technology	Facebook, Instagram, YouTube	16 095
Warsaw University of Technology	Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, University Blog	1273
Gdańsk University of Technology	Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Wykop,	8 755
Opole University of Technology	Facebook, Google+, YouTube	417
Czestochowa University of Technology	Facebook, YouTube	2 634
Selected universities		
University of Warsaw	Facebook, YouTube	32 300
Jagiellonian University in Kraków	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter	44 212
University of Rzeszow	Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube	7 542
University of Bialystok	Facebook	7 101
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	19 366
University of Zielona Góra	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	3 764
Selected university of life sciences		
Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences	Facebook, Google+, Twitter, YouTube	9 429
University of Life Sciences in Lublin	Facebook, Google+, YouTube	8 324
Selected academy of physical education		
Academy of Physical Education in Katowice	Facebook	2 902
Academy of Physical Education in Poznań	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	8 559
Selected pedagogical universities		
Jan Długosz University in Czestochowa	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	4 120
Siedlce University of Natural Sciences and Humanities	Facebook	4 021
Selected university of economics		
University of Economics in Katowice	Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Wykop	12 186
Poznań University of Economics	Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, Goldenline, Piterest, Instagram, Twitter	17 025

Source: own study.

All of the analyzed universities use social media to promote themselves. Different is the scale of the use of social media – from one to several different media (Table 1, as at 22 March 2015). At the same time there are no major differences in the use of social media between technical universities, universities and other higher education institutions.

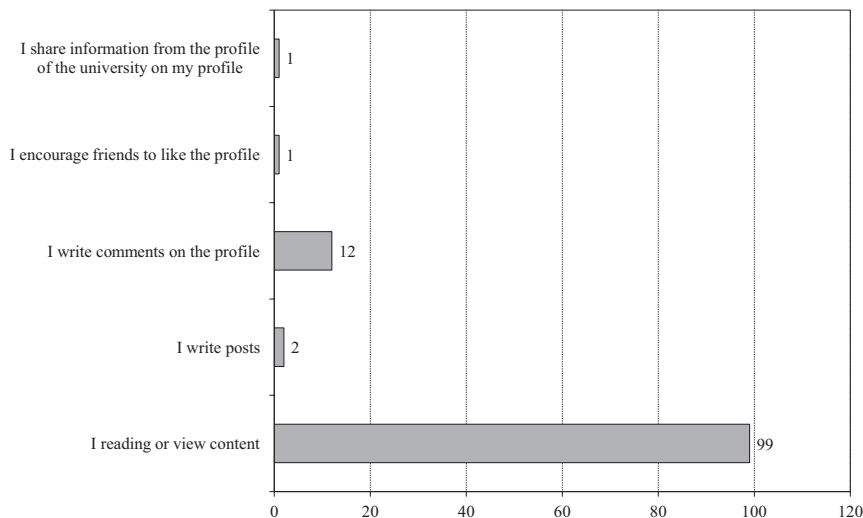
Facebook is the most common medium used by all of the analyzed universities. Apart from the university-wide profiles at most universities, there exist individual Facebook profiles of departments, student governments and academic libraries. With the exception of one university (on the site of which there are no links to social media), almost all universities have links to social media on their home page. But statistics of “likes” of universities differ considerably.

Having reviewed university profiles on Facebook, it can be said that they are carried out professionally and continuously updated. The profiles include a variety of information, photos, videos and links to other social media and the web site. Interaction on the profiles obtains the worst results. There are still relatively not many opinions and comments of students, despite the often large numbers of likes.

This reflects the still small involvement of students in the co-creation of content. Interactivity is limited to a simple funnel. It is not conducive to greater involvement, the task of PR specialists is thus to activate recipients. Some profiles on university sites organize contests, e.g. concerning the university, aimed at encouraging students to deeper interaction.

The author also conducted a questionnaire survey among students of the Silesian University of Technology. Among the 186 respondents, only 32% visited the university Facebook pro-

Figure 1
Activity on the Facebook profile of your university (in %)



Source: Authors' own research.

file, of which 99% of those who visited the profile only viewed content, and only 12% wrote a comment¹. Even fewer people at the university viewed Twitter (6%) and the YouTube channel (19%). The main source of information and communication is still the university site and its mailing.

The second important issue in the relational approach is the lecturer – students communication. From the point of view of PR, this type of communication will also determine the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of students and will influence the image of the university in the environment.

Students were asked whether faculty teachers use social media in the process of communication. In most cases, the response was negative (88%).

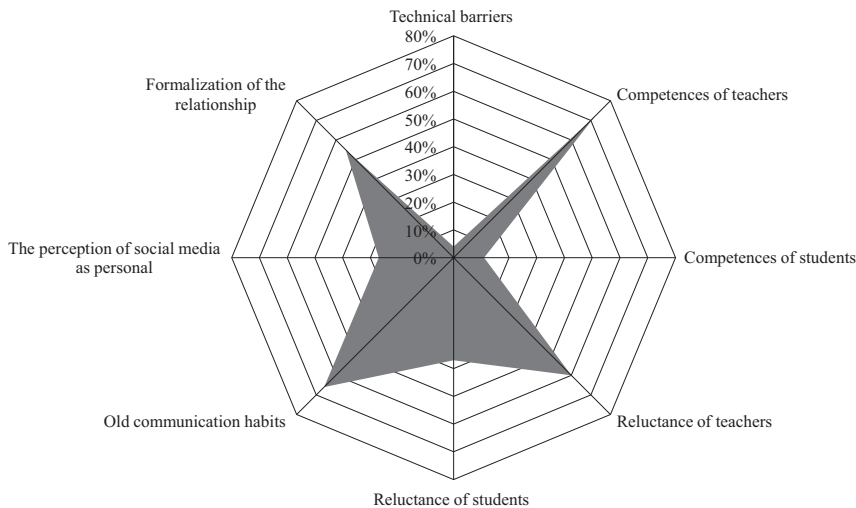
When asked about barriers to the use of social media in such communication, students frequently pointed to old communication habits of faculty teachers, their low social competence in the field of media and reluctance on the part of faculty teachers.

Barriers to the use of social media in communication between teachers and students (identified barriers are described on the basis of an earlier survey of students) (Figure 2):

1. Formalization of the relationship (55%) – a high degree of formalization of mutual contact between lecturers and students.
2. Competences of teachers (72%) – lagging behind technological change on the part of teachers, insufficient skills in the use of new communication channels.
3. Competences of students (11%) – lagging behind technological change on the part of students, insufficient skills in the use of new communication channels.

Figure 2

Barriers to the use of social media in communication between teachers and students



Source: like in Figure 1.

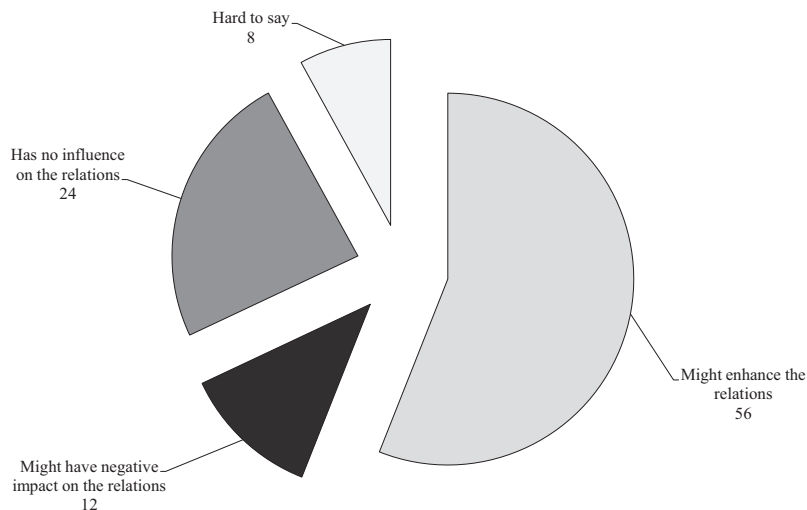
¹ More about these studies in the article: Koszembar-Wiklik (2015).

4. Old communication habits (62%) – fixed old habits of faculty teachers, old habits among teachers.
5. The perception of social media as personal (27%) – for students social media are a personal, private communication channel with their friends.
6. Technical barriers (4%) – lack of adequate equipment, software.
7. Reluctance of teachers (60%) to use this type of communication with students.
8. Reluctance of students (37%) – a negative attitude on the part of students to use this type of communication with lecturers.

The introduction of social media as a communication tool between teachers and students might, as students think, have a positive effect (56%) on the perception of universities whereas 24% consider them as having no influence on the relations (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The use of social media in the process of communication (in %)



Source: like in Figure 1.

Students see blogs of faculty teachers as most welcome tools, to a lesser extent they would like to use Facebook.

Conclusions

The features that distinguish the model of communication in a hypermedia computing environment from the models of interpersonal and mass communication include: the selec-

tivity of choices and the ability to maintain relationships between the various parties of the communication process (Kramer 2013).

The use of social media in the process of PR communication with students requires a great deal of consideration and planning. Forming relations with the students through social media can be divided into the following stages:

- Analysis of the young people's preferred ways to communicate, their expectations and information needs.
- The selection of social media for particular groups of recipients. Edition of content in the media.
- Enabling student participation and interaction in the communication process through providing the ability to comment on the content.
- Building relationships with the use of appropriate social media tools through, amongst others, keeping regularity of the entries and responses to comments or the organization of competitions for students.
- Rating the satisfaction level connected with the communication between the university and students, on the basis of analysis of comments in social media as well as marketing research.
- Student and employees education on the subject of responsible use of social media.

In the university-student or professor-student relationship marketing, it is not only important what media to choose, but also what sort of information should appear in the media and what language they are written in.

Universities were one of the first to start using online media in image-building strategy (Kaczmarczyk 2013). However, the dynamics of changes in media and in the behavior of young people in the network, leads to continuous analysis of trends and ways of using the network. Social media might in certain circumstances pose a threat to the image of the university. Posting negative private entries about the university or professors on the forums and blogs may have a destructive influence on the image of the university.

As far as universities are concerned, not only the educational offer itself is essential, but it is also important how the service is communicated as well as what the communication with students throughout the duration of the service is like. The use of new media in communication with students is one of the important factors influencing the establishment of long-term relationships. Moreover, effective communication increases both student satisfaction and the chance to create a positive image.

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Public relations i marketing relacji uczelni wyższych w dobie nowych mediów

Streszczenie

Rozwój nowych mediów, a w szczególności mediów społecznościowych, zmienia działania z zakresu komunikacji marketingowej. Dotychczasowe, jednokierunkowe wzory przekazu, w dobie rozwoju platform internetowych i dojrzewania prosumentyzmu, przestają być skuteczne, znaczenia nabierają natomiast formy oparte na interakcji i współuczestnictwie. Autorka, na podstawie analizy literatury, wskazuje na najważniejsze cechy nowych mediów, a w szczególności *social media* jako narzędzi komunikacji PR i marketingu relacji. W syntetyczny sposób wskazuje na zalety środowiska Web 2.0. Kolejno, odnosząc się do uczelni polskich, przedstawia główne narzędzia *social media* wykorzystywane w komunikacji przez uczelnie. Autorka przeprowadziła również sondaż ankietowy wśród studentów Politechniki Śląskiej. Badania te dotyczyły wykorzystania mediów społecznościowych w komunikacji z wykładowcami. Nadal głównym źródłem informacji i komunikacji jest strona internetowa uczelni i mailing, tylko 32% badanych odwiedza profil uczelni na Facebooku. Warto wprowadzić *social media* w komunikację między wykładowcami a studentami, ponieważ zdaniem studentów miałyby to pozytywny wpływ na postrzeganie uczelni.

Słowa kluczowe: nowe media, marketing relacji, *public relations*, komunikacja marketingowa.

Kody JEL: I23, M31, L82

Public relations* и маркетинг отношений вузов в эпохе новых медиа*Резюме**

Развитие новых медиа, в особенности же социальных медиа, изменяет действия в области маркетинговой коммуникации. Прежние, однонаправленные образцы информации, в эпохе развития интернет-платформ и созревания просьюмеризма, уже неэффективны, значение же приобретают формы, основанные на интеракции и участии. Автор, на основе анализа литературы, указывает самые важные свойства новых медиа, в особенности же социальных медиа (англ. *social media*) в качестве инструментов коммуникации PR и маркетинга отношений. Синтетическим образом она указывает пользу среды Web 2.0. Затем, ссылаясь на польские вузы, она представляет основные инструменты социальных медиа, используемые вузами в коммуникации. Автор провела также зондажный опрос среди студентов Силезского технического университета. Опросы касались использования социальных медиа в общении с преподавателями. По-прежнему основным источником информации и коммуникации является сайт вуза и мейлинг; лишь 32% опрошенных посещает профиль вуза на Фейсбуке. Стоит ввести социальные медиа в общение между преподавателями и студентами, поскольку, по мнению студентов, это оказало бы положительное влияние на восприятие вуза.

Ключевые слова: новые медиа, маркетинг отношений, *public relations*, маркетинговая коммуникация.

Коды JEL: I23, M31, L82

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Afilacja:
dr Małgorzata Koszembar-Wiklik
Politechnika Śląska
Wydział Organizacji i Zarządzania
ul. Roosevelta 28
41-400 Zabrze
tel.: 32 277 73 10
e-mail: gosia.wik2@gmail.com

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