

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Effectiveness of Social Media in Advertising University Programmes and Recruitment of New Students: A Case Study of St. Paul's University, Kenya

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Abstract:

Use of social media in offering learning institutions is key in today's business world. The University Public Relations Officers are exploiting new media of communication as avenues for them to reach their target audiences who in this case are students to enroll in their programs. Social media has become a game changer in how recruitment and advertising is carried out by universities in Kenya. Social media have almost replaced the traditional media of communication in reaching the students. This study sought to evaluate the use of social media by universities in Kenya in advertising, collection of feedback, and recruitment of new students. The study had three objectives. It sought to find the benefits of using social media in reaching out to students, the effectiveness of social media as a medium for advertising of academic programs as well as an evaluation of social media as a mode of collecting feedback from university students. The research employed a case study method by studying one of the Private universities in Kenya. Stratified random sampling was used to obtain the study subjects. A questionnaire was used to obtain data from the study subjects. The data analyzed was from students who enrolled during the January 2015 semester. From the questionnaires, it was established that social media particularly Facebook was most used by the students and they had visited the university page to get certain information regarding the courses they applied for. Use of social media improved accessibility of students to the university. The major problem that the use of social media encounters is that few people have access to internet and the fact that one needs to have internet bundles for them to access internet which are costly. Results from the questionnaires verified that social media was used to educate the students, collection of feedback, inform them about new aspects in the university and help the students in solving problems related to the university services. The study concluded that use of social media has had a major impact on University communication and public relations. The study recommends that social media if well used and managed can help universities reach out to more students as well as help in maintaining good communication and relationships between the university management and the students.

Keywords: Social media, university, advertising, communication

1. Background to the Problem

Social media has become a game changer in how recruitment and advertising is carried out by universities in Kenya. Social media have almost replaced the traditional media of communication in reaching the students. Many organizations today use social media in marketing their products and for public relations and communications with their clients (Evans &McKee 2010). Social media are the collaborative technologies that now define contemporary market places (Evans &McKee 2010). Beginning with the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies—the set of tools that make it easy for people to create and publish content, to share ideas, to vote on them, and to recommend things to others—the well-established norms of business marketing have been undergoing a forced change.

No longer satisfied with advertising and promotional information as a sole source for learning about new products and services, consumers have taken to the Social Web in an effort to share among themselves their own direct experiences with brands, products, and services to provide a more 'real' view of their research experience. At the same time, consumers are leveraging the experiences of others, before they actually make a purchase themselves.

The impact on marketing has been significant, to say the least. Organizations and consumers have turned to social media in a bid to source for information that enables them to make smart choices (Evans &McKee 2010). Social media have become an integral aspect in integrated marketing campaigns programs of organizations. They function alongside traditional media of advertising in the marketing mix. Through social media, there has been open access to information. Information that was previously available to only select or privileged few is now accessed by all. This provides a background to this study that Universities as institutions of higher learning need to embrace and quantify the benefits of using social media in their internal and external communication purposes well as for advertising and marketing purposes.

2. Statement of the Problem

Social media have become game changers in the field of public relations practice. Many organizations have come to embrace social media as part of their official channels of communicating and reaching out to their publics. However,

most organizations have not reached a realization on how much more social media can help them have direct interactions with their clients. Universities are made up of young people. The majority of first year students enrolled for various programs is youths. Majority of youths consume a lot of information disseminated mainly through social media channels as their key source of information. However, universities have not fully embraced the use of these media as key modes of reaching out to the students as well as find out the impact of advertising university programs using social media channels. The Study therefore set out to find out the effectiveness of social media in advertising university programs and recruitment of new students.

3. Objectives

The following were the study objectives.

- To investigate how universities use social media in advertising their programmes
- To investigate the effectiveness of social media as a medium for advertising of academic programs
- To evaluate the use of social media as a mode of collecting feedback from university students.

4. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do universities use social media in advertising their programs?
- What is the effectiveness of social media as a medium for advertising of academic programs?
- How can university management use social media as a mode of collecting feedback from university students?

5. Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Hunt and Grunig theory of public relations. The theory asserts that for a public relations campaign to be most effective, it needs to adopt a certain format of interactions among its members. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is where the information from the organization and the feedback it receives from the environment are treated with equality. There is importance placed on the two-way interactions not only on the one-sided approach.

University administration are always pinning up notices and sending out lots of information to the students using traditional channels of communication, but on the contrary the students do not give back as much feedback to the management in return. This makes the communication mostly one sided and thus not symmetrical. For effective public relations, goodwill is the end result. It is not possible to achieve this good will if the communication environment is not conducive for both parties involved. In the universities, most students enrolled are youths who use social media as their key mode of communication. On the contrary, the universities have not adopted social media as they key mode of reaching out to students and communicating with them. When used, it is mainly in the one-way approach where the students are just passive receivers of information and instructions for them to act upon.

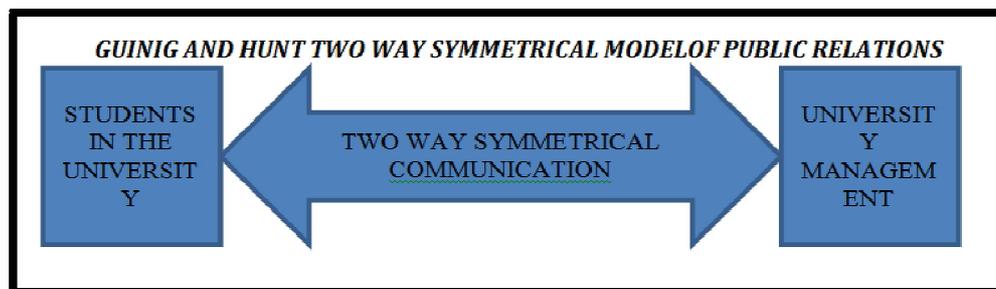


Figure 1: Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

6. Review of Related Literature

Chi, 2011 discusses that the growing popularity of social media leads advertisers to invest more effort into communicating with consumers through online social networking. Social media, especially social networking sites (SNS), enable users to present themselves, establish and maintain social connections with others, and articulate their own social networks (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007). In this setting, brand managers often seek two types of marketing communication: interactive digital advertising and virtual brand communities. The former exposes social media users to brand-related messages (Keller 2009; Taylor 2009); the latter encourage them to engage in brand-centered social relations (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinaliu 2008). However, such social media marketing trends also raise concerns about how to optimize the effects of marketing communication in the context of online social networking.

6.1. Types of Social Media

Social media refers to a set of online tools open for public membership that support idea sharing, creating and editing content, and building relationships through interaction and collaboration (Mount & Martinez, 2014). Social media are the collection of digital channels and tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) used for public communication. One defining characteristic of all social media is their potential to facilitate engagement—the interactive, synchronous communication and collaboration among numerous participants via technology. There is a multi-way communication, at

the same time but in different places, functionality available through social media, enabling the government to move from basic information dissemination typical of traditional mass media to a fully interactive information sharing dialogue with the members of the public (Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver, 2013).

6.2. Benefits of Using Social Media

Heldman, Schindelar and Weaver (2013) discuss the following benefits of social media. Social media works best when integrated with the traditional communication channels. This is because; the other traditional media of communication also record some degree of success in reaching out to the public. This therefore means that for better communication using social media, the University needs to use it in conjunction with the other traditional media.

Through social media, it is possible to target and reach diverse audience categories. The user and gratifications approach to communication postulates that people have different motivations for using the media they use. Some audiences prefer to use social media while others prefer the traditional forms. The number of social media users is steadily growing; this means that it has created an opportunity to reach audiences who may prefer to communicate with the University through those channels.

Social media also allows the sharing of information in new spaces created through technology. Social media allows communicators to engage in the new channels. People are able to share relevant content in new and emerging channels, test how their messages resonate in different spaces, and provide opportunities for multiple exposures to messages. Through the use of social media channels, the University can share relevant content where the users are already spending their time. This is an approach of going where the people are and tapping into their large audiences. Since most Kenyans are already active on social media, the government can then use the media to target and reach them with messages.

Social media also allows the communicators to listen and collect feedback in real time. This is an advantage because it is easy to monitor conversations as they occur in real time. Social media can be used to scan publicly available content to inform communication activities. Through this, the government is able to get the feedback from people on their leadership, identify the information gaps that they need to fill, and then adjust their messages accordingly. The real time aspect of communication is critical because it ensures that communication efforts between the government and the people are relevant, meaningful and useful to the audiences.

Through social media, direct engagement is increased among the participants of communication. This is because of the multi- way interactive functionality that is inherent in social media. If well used, social media can increase direct engagement to maintain and increase trust and credibility between the government and the people.

7. Research Design

The study adopted the case study design. The researcher focused on how universities use social media to reach out to new students. The main focus for this study was particularly Facebook pages and the interactions held via the medium. The case study design was best suited for the study because the researcher was interested in obtaining a wealth of information about the research topic by studying particular entities in detail. This design also afforded the researcher the ability to deal with a wide spectrum of evidence and provide a critical analysis. St. Paul's university was conveniently selected by the researchers as a case for study.

8. Population and Sample of the Study

The students targeted for the study were those enrolled in the January semester 2015 in Nairobi campus. The students were 458 in number for the campus enrolled for degree, diploma and certificate programs. Stratified sampling and simple random sampling methods were used in order to get a sample of 160 students that were used as a sample for the study. The study sought subjects from the degree program, diploma program and certificate program. Degree students were 72 since they were highest in the population enrolled, diploma was 63 and then certificate students were 25 in the sample. The subjects were drawn from both the regular and the evening programs of study as offered in the university.

Program	Mode of Study	Population	Sample (35%)
DEGREE	REGULAR	92	32
	EVENING	115	40
DIPLOMA	REGULAR	102	36
	EVENING	78	27
CERTIFICATE	REGULAR	42	15
	EVENING	29	10
		TOTAL= 458	160

Table 1: University Students Enrolled for Different Programs at St. Paul's University in January 2015

9. Instruments of Data Collection

The study adopted questionnaires and content analysis of the university Facebook account as the main tools for data collection from the students. However, some staff in the public relations and marketing department were also interviewed as part of the data collection. This was also to help triangulate the data. The questions addressed the key aspects in the research questions. Questionnaires were best for the study because they help the researcher gather a lot of data in a short while. They are also easy to fill in questions and data analysis from the statistics is relatively manageable. Interviews helped the researchers to get more details as to how the university uses social media and the particular steps

taken by the marketing department to ensure the university has online presence. Through interviews, the researchers were able to link the aims of the departments with the objectives which include enrolment of students for various programs offered at the university. Content analysis was also done by a survey of the university Facebook account to view the details and the engagements held on the medium.

10. Key Findings of the Study

10.1. The Use of Social Media by Universities in Advertising Their Programs

To answer regarding to this objective, the study targeted staff of the public relations and marketing department that it tasked with recruitment of new students to the university. The university has a Facebook account in its name maintained by the department. It also has a twitter account run on behalf of the university. The account for the university currently has about 27,000 users who have liked the page and actively use it to communicate with the university. In terms of the engagement through the media the page is managed on a daily basis and engagement is encouraged through the medium. Students connect and get various kinds of information from the Facebook page. Through the page, the various intakes are advertised and those finding out about courses offered and how they can enroll for them are also advised. Social media gives brands a captive audience for their control. The students who like the Facebook page are able to view anything that is uploaded on the University page. They are then able to comment and repost the information for the other friends they have on Facebook who might not have seen the information. This gives the university online presence and helps market it and its courses.

Concerning integration of social media into the traditional marketing mix used in recruitment of students for respective programs, the marketers in the department reported that they agreed that social media was integrated in the mix. They however feel that the medium can be used more creatively in future in order to make the page more attractive and interactive with students. Currently, the department uses social media six hours or more in a week to engage with clients. The marketers recruited to manage the social media accounts are also young which gives them the advantage of spending more time and being more creative with the content posted as well as the nature of interactions held. The top two benefits of social media marketing in the University are increasing exposure and increasing traffic. The public relations officer indicated that their social media efforts have generated more exposure for the university. It has resulted to increased traffic of clients to the organization. It has also helped the department to be abreast with what the client's needs are and be able to tailor-make the programs to suit their needs. This is very important in market place intelligence. There has also been an increase in enrollment of students to some percentage attributed to online presence on social media. However, the department does not have the tools needed yet that can help them track the specific contribution of advertising through social media independent of the other forms of advertising used by the university.

10.2. The Effectiveness of Social Media as a Medium for Advertising of Academic Programs

The specific question to answer this was asked by the question of how the students got to know about the various courses they were enrolled for. The university public relations and marketing department had carried out advertisements in various media of communication in December 2014. The advertisements were mainly through Television commercials, newspaper advertisements and Facebook pages information. Of the 160 students sampled, 34% had gotten information about the courses they are undertaking from word of mouth referrals from students already enrolled at the institution, 28% had seen the advertisement on television that prompted them to look for further information on the internet and further an interaction through Facebook with the university, 19% had read the advertisement of the programs on the local dailies advertising and 15% had gotten information about the university through Facebook before finding out more on the programs respectively at the university and 4% through information disseminated in church where the marketers visit to market the university programs.

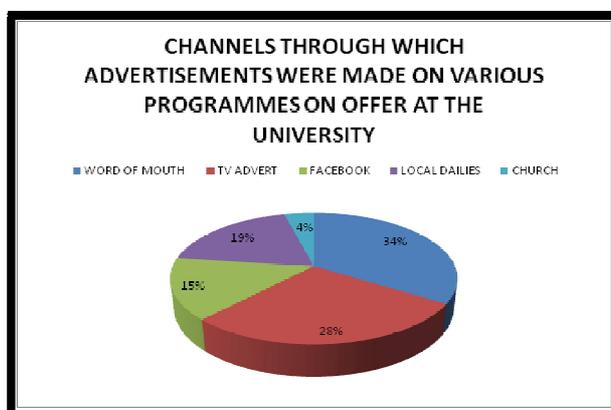


Figure 2: A Chart Indicating the Channels That Students Saw Advertisements Concerning the Intake

However, social media particularly Facebook was the best when students were seeking further the information on what they had seen through the traditional media of communication. It promoted the interactivity nature of the medium. The students were able to ask questions on when the intake would be and the various modes of study that they could

access when enrolled in the university. Facebook unlike the other traditional media of communication provided a chance for interaction between the prospective student and the university.

Students once enrolled were asked to what extent they feel Facebook had boosted their interaction with the University in terms of their choice of courses and general information. 45% of the students responded that Facebook had boosted their interaction with the university public relations desk to a large extent, 29% reported that Facebook had boosted their interaction with the university public relations desk to some extent, and 18% of the respondents indicated that Facebook had boosted their interaction with the university public relations desk to somehow and 8% reported that there was no impact whatsoever of information received on Facebook. This is illustrated below:

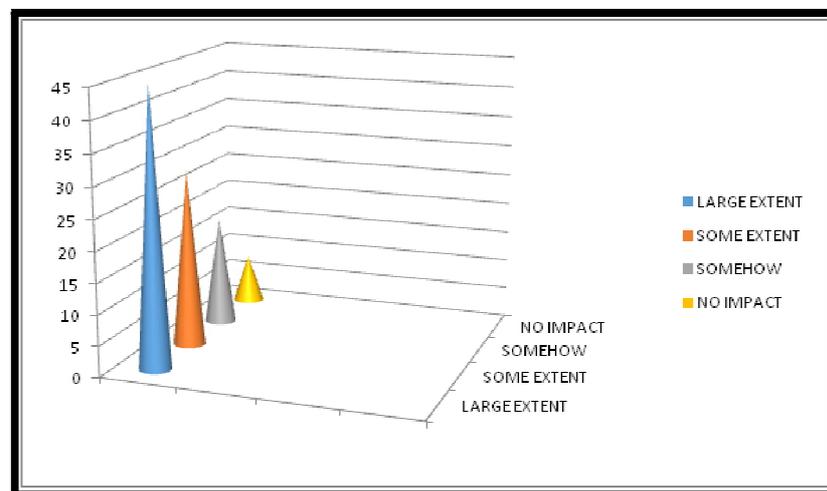


Figure 3: A Chart Indicating the Extent How Students Felt About Facebook Boosting Interactivity

10.3. The use of social media as a mode of collecting feedback from university students

The concern here was on the interactivity of the medium used in communication and advertising of the university's programs. Facebook was the best when students were seeking further the information on what they had seen through the traditional media of communication. It promoted the interactivity nature of the medium. The students were able to ask questions on when the intake would be and the various modes of study that they could access when enrolled in the university. Facebook unlike the other traditional media of communication provided a chance for interaction between the prospective student and the university. Students once enrolled were asked to what extent they feel Facebook had boosted their interaction with the University in terms of their choice of courses and general information. To a large extent, to some extent, somehow and there was no impact whatsoever of information received on Facebook. T

11. Conclusions

The study concludes that Social advertising is the promise of a known, engaged audience in a fragmented media landscape. For universities to be able to reach their target audience with their advertising messages, they have to actively use social media in their advertising campaigns. Social media is also a good avenue for the university management to interact with the students on campus because they are able to give feedback on issues that affect them. The universities need to embrace social media as one of its key modes of communicating with students on policies and general information passage. Social media is effective in advertising of university programs and it has various benefits which include Generally, there A consensus seems to be a consensus forming around social media advertising as the most promising social advertising format. The use of Mobile will also play a substantial role in social advertising as sites capitalize on usage habit shifts. In-stream advertising, easily transferable across devices, will drive the change. The internet service provider also needs to consider the rates at which the internet is provided for so as to ensure as many Kenyans as possible access the internet and actively use it for communication. This will enhance the creation and dissemination of more vibrant communication through social media.

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