

Social Media And Universities: Challenges And Opportunities.

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Abstract: *Social media are playing a vital role among young people, who are constantly searching for new efficient ways to communicate and aggregate the flow of information around them. Social media seem to respond to the need, by allowing the user to follow specific information sources, people and events that somehow resonate with the user's lifestyle and his needs. Universities in Poland however, neglect to notice the phenomenon and treat the new medium as another way to send their message to the public. In the paper, author discusses the case study of University of Lodz, as an example of such institution, which slowly attempts to adopt to the new interactive communication methods.*

KEYWORDS: *university, marketing, media, communication*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social media are growing rapidly as more and more users which to become a part of the new, living community aggregated by social media. The phenomenon is especially strong among young people, for whom, portals like Facebook, Instagram or YouTube are a standard method of communication. According to data provided by Tunheim (Jackson, 2013) in 2013 almost 96 percent of students in the United States had a Facebook account, that was accessed on a regular bases. In Europe the situation is a bit more complicated, as situation differs in particular countries. However estimates made by the PEW Research Center in 2014 indicate (Hillsbery, 2014), that more than 78% of young people in collage use social media regularly. Finally, analysis made by Top Universities (Tucker, 2014), indicate that more than 40% of young people search for information regarding universities and courses using social media. This translates into a large group of people that are willing and able to listen and respond to messages using this particular media. Situation in Poland is very similar to the one indicated by the data above, yet universities have trouble establishing themselves in the new reality. The goal of the paper is to explore these problems, while attempting to find good examples and solutions that can be implemented by universities. Author centers on the University of Lodz, as the unity can provide all the data required by the research. Furthermore Lodz along with Poznan are the two places in Poland, where International Students can begin their studies with a '0' year, which allows

them to familiarize themselves with requirements, customs and language required to study here full time. Having that many students from different countries requires a different approach to communication techniques. As students are now required to submit their admission documents via Internet, is only natural, that this is the way to continue communication with the candidates and students. However, this is not always the case.

II. INTERNET USE IN POLAND

To make the analysis more transparent, one has to clearly state that any problems with communicating through Internet, cannot be adhered to problems with Internet access or the inability of polish young people, to effectively communicate using the medium. According to the official report published by the General Statistics Office (Szymański, 2014), in 2014 almost 75% of Poles had access to a broadband Internet connection at home. Furthermore the same report states, that most of the 25% without broadband Internet access at home, were able to regularly (at least every 2 days) surf the Web at their workplace, school or library. Therefore Poles in general, have a stable access to the Internet, which may not be as fast, as in Western European countries, but for communication purposes it is good enough. The We are Social Report also states, that Poles spent 4,9 hours per day using the Internet, which is equal to USA (Majchrzyk, 2014). One final note, Poles are also interested in the mobile Internet, as 84% of the population uses a 3G/4G mobile broadband on a regular basis. All these data indicate, that Poland maybe behind in terms of Internet speed, but it does not translate to

Internet activity. In most cases, the country is only a few places behind countries like the USA, Germany or the UK, in terms of Internet proliferation. There is a vast number of people that already adopted the global network as their primary communication tool, so it cannot be the reason why universities are unwilling to start a conversation on the Network. One could say, that maybe it is because Poles do not use social media regularly and it is not worth it to invest time in it. The data coming from Facebook and other social networks, seem to suggest the opposite.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Users in Poland have access to all publicly available social networks and there are no restrictions in this matter. For purposes of this paper, author will concentrate on four most popular, as they gathered the most number of active users. By active, the author means, accounts that are being accessed at least once a week or more. The local social media network Our Class (Nasza Klasa) was established based on the Canadian counterpart Classmates.com, as an optimized service for Poland. The general idea behind the service, was to give its users a tool, to search for old friends from primary school. This was an innovative idea at the time, as many people were interested in keeping in touch with old friends they last seen couple of years ago. The problem was that the portal never went beyond its original idea. As new users entered the portal, they were no longer interested in just keeping in touch, but a place to share their thoughts and experiences. For younger generations mobile phones, e-mail and instant messaging were the key to keep in touch, so Our Class was becoming obsolete (Wojas, 2012). In 2006 a localized version of Facebook was launched, which became a direct competitor for the portal. Our Class had also its own issues, with intrusive advertising, constant hacker attacks and no content curation, which resulted in a significant drop in number of users. In its peak in 2009, Our Class had around 12 million unique users. Since that the number was dropping slowly, while Facebook was gaining new users quite rapidly. In June 2011, Facebook surpassed Our Class and became the most popular social media portal (Social Media, 2012). Currently Facebook remains the most popular portal with 12,4 million users (Prejs, 2015), while Our Class dropped below the 8 million mark and the trend continues. The phenomenon clearly shows that Poles are very likely to adopt new

solutions and ideas. The dominance of Facebook is a typical trend in Europe, so it was just a matter of time, before the same thing happens in Poland. This can be viewed as a message to all that new media are important for Polish users and should be treated accordingly. Looking at other portals like LinkedIn, GoldenLine (a Polish clone of LinkedIn) or Google+, one must realize that their popularity is minimal with LinkedIn being the most popular at about 500 thousand users, with no significant increase since 2012, when a Polish localized version was launched. The Polish social media scene seems to be quite stable, with Facebook being the big player, while others, trying to fill in the niches like LinkedIn or Pinterest.

IV. THE PHENOMENON OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Before discussing specific examples, one must understand what communicating through social media means and what kind of advantages it has over different methods. Before Web 2.0, Internet could be treated as a standard linear medium similar to television or radio. There was a group of people possessing the necessary knowledge and means to broadcast their message to a wide audience. The audience had almost no way of returning back a message, other than simply refusing to watch or listen to a particular show (Rada, 2012). There were attempts to get feedback from the audience, by organizing live shows, surveys using phone or SMS etc., but it was always artificial for the viewer. It is the sender of the message, who had the tools and power to decide how such viewer pool would be organized and always required some additional effort from the viewer. Furthermore one could argue, that opinions gathered in such a way may not always be valid, as people behave differently in their typical environments like home or workplace, than when they are asked to formulate an opinion in a specific setting. Social media change the rules completely as they blurred the line, between content creators and receivers. Any one present in the social sphere can start a conversation, discussion or a survey on a particular topic, brand or product without asking anyone for permission. Portals like Facebook are essentially a toolbox, designed to allow average Internet user to create content and share it with other people. On the other hand, the toolbox can be used to aggregate content and allow a stream of information to be delivered directly to you. By clicking the like button, the user expresses the need for information on a particular subject, as

well as the need to be a part of a community. This however may result in an information overflow, where user is being flooded with different information, that not always directly corresponds with his interests. That is why, users are becoming more and more conscious about what kind of services and profiles they subscribe to. They are attempting to create their own personal infospheres (Patrut & Patrut, 2013), that provide relevant information and advice when needed. That is why institutional profiles have to be personal as well, as people are seeking contact with other people, rather than another flow of product related information. In the United States more than half of social media users aged 18-25 have contacted customer service and were able to solve their issue, without the need to revert to phone or direct service (Taylor, 2014). This means that a new market is emerging, where people – customers, are searching for a way to contact their favorite brands using their favorite medium. It is no surprise, that there will be a shift from traditional customer support to Internet based solutions, that are cheaper to maintain, faster and more transparent, than one-to-one service. Of course, there will always be those that prefer a more private approach, therefore it is unlikely, that social media based consumer service will render phone or direct contact obsolete. The most important outcome from data presented above is that universities and educational facilities in general, should invest in social media. Their prospective customers – students already use the medium and like to communicate and establish relationships with brands and people they like. Universities should be interested in establishing such a relationship as students stay with them for quite some time, especially in the case of full time studies. Furthermore, from author experience, students come each year with similar questions, so posting answers in public and discussing those issues, results in more people getting informed. This approach can have some negative aspects, which will be discussed in next paragraph.

V. UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In Poland there are 42 public universities. The biggest one in terms of number of students is the University of Warsaw, followed by the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and the University of Lodz in the third place. The issue of how universities utilize social media to communicate with its stakeholders, have not yet been fully explored in Polish academic literature. In 2012 Emanuel Kulczycki published a paper

(Kulczycki, 2012), where he explored the problem in a quantitative manner. The research focused on the problem of presence of these universities on different social media portals, without going into details such as type of content published. The paper indicated that all of public universities were present on at least one social media portal, with the University of Lodz being present on 5 different portals, which was the highest number. Year later, in 2013, Domański and Sędkowski published an article which focused not only, on the presence of an university, but on type of content published (Domański & Sędkowski, 2013). The results indicated that all Polish public universities are present in the social sphere, but the presence is somewhat passive. The content published was relevant and in some cases, quite appealing for the prospective consumer, but the content lacked a key element. As it was stated before, social media became popular, as they empowered people to speak their mind freely and discuss relevant issues on a new level. The main focus was put on interactions, rather than simple information sharing. The information remains an important element, as it must be the spark that ignites interest and discussion. Therefore the message must include a call to action, a personalized invitation to act upon the content viewed by the consumer. The problem is that all universities treated the medium, as a simple extension of traditional non-interactive communication system: ‘we’ the university send a message, while ‘you’ the audience can listen to it or not. No action from the second party was required nor expected (Rozaime, 2014). The result was, that the top three universities in terms of number of students: University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University in Cracow and University of Lodz with over 40 thousand students, had less than 10% of the number, following them on Facebook (official profile). The number of comment per post was non-existent, as was the sharing factor. The number of likes, averaged from 5 to 30 on each post, but the author believes that this indicator cannot be treated as a form of active involvement. Many authors argue (Carter, 2013; Lee, 2014; Forbes, 2015), that the ‘like button’ can be treated as a factor, only in coordination with other indicators like sharing posts or comments. If a user clicks the button, it only means, that the message reached him, but does not mean he actually read the whole post or moreover acted upon it. Therefore it is very important, to conduct a deeper research into the subject.

University of Lodz according to the Polish General Statistics Office has over 45 thousand active students. More recent data from the university suggest that the number is currently slightly lower reaching about 42 thousand. This year 2015, the university celebrates its 70 years of operation, which is a good opportunity to look into the communication methods utilized to inform about the event and overall activities. On the main website links to Facebook and Google+ are provided at the very top, inviting the visitor, to follow the unit. Although the Facebook profile is alive and constantly updated, the Google+ profile is inactive, with last post being dated at 3rd of September 2012. There is no clear answer why the profile is still available and promoted at the top of the page, but one can assume that its existence is simply ignored, as Google+ is in decline and Google is slowly preparing to shut down the service. Unfortunately such omissions may create an impression that this form of communication is not treated with priority and discourage users from participating in any discussions. On the right hand side of the page, one can find other social media channels including GoldenLine, Flickr, YouTube, Twitter and repeated links to Facebook and Google+ profiles. Author will omit the Google+ account, as it is no longer active, so discussing any content published there is irrelevant. GoldenLine is a Polish clone of LinkedIn, aimed at offering a professional profile and a job market for specialists. The profile is an open discussion group, where one can post a job offer, ask for help in their studies or offer internships. The group has nearly 25 thousand subscribers, but the content published is irregular. One can clearly see that the group becomes active at the beginning and at the end of each semester. Between these periods there are gaps with no content at all. Furthermore the content is not curated in any way, so the offers and requests published have to be treated with caution. In general, one must say, that such a place is needed and should exist, but the university must put more effort into shaping the discussion, which requires time and effort. If the profile lives on its own, while university actively promotes it on its front page, any crisis that can occur will automatically fall onto the profile owner, which is a risk. Flickr on the other hand, is completely under the influence of the Department of Promotion of the university. Photos published come from official university events as well as events from particular faculties. The photos are professional and attractive. The problem is, that the profile exists since 2008, has over 14 thousand photos and only 25 followers, while an average

album has from 300 to 600 views. Furthermore there is no discussion whatsoever and the profile is just a simple showcase. There are a few reasons why this situation occurs, best explained with an example: on the 24th of May 2015, Umberto Eco was awarded the honorary doctorate. The event was a part of the 70 years of University celebrations. The event was very well documented and high resolution pictures uploaded to Flickr. The main problem is that the photos have no description. An album was created, and nothing else. Therefore if one would like to know more about the event or who is actually on a particular photo, has to do his own research. One could argue, that it is impossible, to tag all people present on the event, which is true, but the most important guests were sitting in the front row, so it was easy to identify them. Secondly a brief description of what is happening on the photo, would also allow the viewer to become more involved in the content. As it stands, Flickr is a collection of professional, but anonymous photos. Similar situation can be observed on the Youtube channel. There are numerous video materials documenting events from the university life along with interviews with academic professors, alumni and people connected with the university. A year ago in June 2014 a reboot of the channel was announced with the University TV project. The idea was to bring fresh information to the users, by producing regular content exploring not only particular events, but the daily life of the institution. It is true, since then the content is being published 3-4 times a month, rather than 4 clips a year and the content is more focused on people which is more attractive. The main problem lies within the lack of any sort of description or additional information attached to the material. During the first six months of 2015, a series of interviews was published with people somehow connected to the university: professors active and retired, alumni etc. as a part of the 70 years anniversary. The interviews were focused around the accomplishments of those people and their views on the past and future of the university. Unfortunately no additional information was given regarding those people, any links to read about them, their biography or academic accomplishments. This resulted in those materials being somewhat out of context and the average views per video are little above 100.

The last medium that needs to be discussed is Facebook and Twitter, as one can clearly see that these two portals are updated most frequently. However after a short analysis it is clear that

Twitter offers the same content as Facebook, especially that the latter offers automatic publication of any content on a given Twitter account, without any need for user input. The Twitter account has over 1500 followers, while only 20 users are being followed. The content published is a bit difficult to understand as Facebook allows for longer messages than 140 characters, while Twitter cuts off everything after the mark, so the message many times looks unfinished. Facebook content seems polished and well thought out. The information published ranges from information about events inside the university, information about successes of students and employees, to contests and materials from students like photos from academic trips and holidays. Facebook also serves as a hub for aggregating all content published on different portals. When a new video is being published on YouTube, an invitation to watch it is published on Facebook. The problem however is that there is no call to action within these posts. Information provided is generic in nature, although there are exceptions. As part of the university anniversary, a new program was launched called 'The Alumni Card', which allows all alumni to get a free id card giving certain privileges and discounts. Posts on Facebook reminding that there is such a card are more personalized in nature. Phrases like 'Do you have your id card yet?'; 'Your id card is waiting for you' along with a very concrete list of benefits, gets people attention. The Facebook profile was established in 2009 and has about 16 thousand subscribers. The profile is updated 2-3 times a day and has an average of 30 likes and 3 shares. The post about the alumni id gathered almost 70 likes in a week and 16 shares. What is more, there is an ongoing discussion about the card, which does not happen in regards to other content. Naturally it is quite obvious, that such a tangible thing would gather more attention, than a post about a new publication or a conference, especially that the card is available to all alumni of the university. However it also shows, that people are willing and able to become more involved if the content published is more personal and friendly to some extent.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The problem indicated here, results from the university not having the capability to conduct real time communication with its stakeholders. Using social media properly requires a shift in mentality, that it is not enough to have professional

content, but it has to be engaging. The real problem is not about content creation, but changing the type of message the content is trying to convey. Currently students have access to all kind of information at a glance, so if the university wants to reach its stakeholders, the message needs to be special in some way. One could argue, that the easiest route is to make the message more personal, more dynamic and finally more engaging by formulating a call to action. This however, would mean that the university as an institution leaves its comfort zone of standard official messages and brings a more personalized, human-like experience. The decision on the receiver part, whether to get involved or not, is not based only on objective factors. One has to keep in mind that emotions play an important role in the decision making process. In order to get an emotional response, the message has to convey an emotional load, to start a process within those receiving it. A message that only plays on the objective side of human nature, will get lost among many others like it and nobody will notice it. There is always the problem, that once a discussion starts, there is no way to shut it down and it can have different outcomes. Crisis in social media can happen any day, therefore close monitoring is a necessity. This might be the biggest issue. Being active in the social sphere requires a lot more effort, than simply publishing a post on a web page. Facebook and other portals alike are never idle, someone is always active and may respond to a message or a post in a positive or a negative way. That is why, as it was mentioned above, being successful in the social sphere requires leaving the comfort zone of standard, impersonal messages, for a more emotional and involving approach. The change is already happening in the private zone, where brands noticed that the customers are searching not only for professional service, but for a personal bond of sorts and a feeling of uniqueness. Universities will have to follow the same route, as they are offering long term services for 3 or 5 years. During this time some kind of bond has to form, the question remains what kind. Universities have the tools to influence positive bonds and emotions, but currently there are not willing to use them. Growing competition and dropping number of students, will force them to change the approach at some point. Social media are here to stay and there is no denying that more people will use them.

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