

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN UNIVERSITY BRANDING: A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This paper examines the role of social media marketing in building a university brand. A five-stage model for promoting a university on social media is proposed, from brand diagnosis to evaluation of results. Performance indicators as well as the main risks are identified, and practical recommendations for universities are presented.

Keywords: social media marketing, university branding, brand equity, higher education, prospective students, digital marketing, content strategy, project management.

Annotatsiya. Maqolada ijtimoiy tarmoqlarda marketingning universitet brendini shakllantirishdagi o‘rni tahlil qilinadi. Universitetni ijtimoiy tarmoqlarda targ‘ib qilishning besh bosqichli modeli taklif etiladi: brend diagnostikasidan natijalarni baholashgacha. Samaradorlik ko‘rsatkichlari belgilangan, asosiy xavflar aniqlangan va oliy ta’lim muassasalari uchun amaliy tavsiyalar ishlab chiqilgan.

Kalit so‘zlar: ijtimoiy tarmoqlar marketingi, universitet brendi, brend kapitali, oliy ta’lim, abituriyentlar, raqamli marketing, kontent strategiyasi, loyiha boshqaruvi.

Аннотация. В статье анализируется роль маркетинга в социальных сетях в отношении к формированию бренда университета. Предложена пятиэтапная модель продвижения вуза в социальных сетях: от диагностики бренда до оценки результатов. Определены показатели эффективности, также выделены основные риски и сформулированы практические рекомендации для вузов.

Ключевые слова: маркетинг в социальных сетях, бренд университета, капитал бренда, высшее образование, абитуриенты, цифровой маркетинг, контент-стратегия, проектный менеджмент.

INTRODUCTION

Universities today operate in a competitive environment in which prospective students, parents, employers and partners compare institutions long before any direct contact takes place. Marketing concepts have been applied to educational institutions systematically since the 1990s [1], and a systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing has shown the growing importance of institutional image and reputation in the competition for students [2]. In Uzbekistan, this competition is intensified by the expansion of the higher education system, the development of public–private partnership in the sector and the introduction of digital technologies foreseen by the Concept for the development of the higher education system until 2030 [3].

Social media have become the main space in which young people encounter universities: they watch short videos from campus life, read comments of students and alumni, ask questions

in messengers and build first impressions of an institution. For a university, social media is therefore not merely a communication channel but a strategic tool of brand building. At the same time, many institutions use these platforms intuitively, without clear objectives, content logic or performance measurement.

The purpose of the article is to determine the role of social media marketing in university branding and to propose a practical framework and recommendations for higher education institutions. The objectives are to clarify the notion of a university brand, to analyse the functional capabilities of social media, to examine the available evidence on their use in higher education and to outline a project-based approach to managing social media branding. The study uses theoretical analysis, comparative review of academic publications and conceptual modelling.

1. University brand and brand equity

A brand is a set of associations and expectations that stakeholders connect with an organisation. According to K. Keller, customer-based brand equity arises from brand knowledge, which consists of brand awareness and brand image – the strength, favourability and uniqueness of associations held in memory [4]. D. Aaker describes brand equity through a group of assets that include brand awareness, perceived quality, associations and loyalty, and emphasises the importance of a clearly defined brand identity [5]. Applied to universities, these ideas mean that a strong brand is a recognisable institution which is perceived as academically credible, offers valuable graduate outcomes and has a distinct set of values and campus culture.

A university brand differs from a commercial brand in several respects. The “product” is intangible and its quality is difficult to evaluate before enrolment; the decision is expensive and long-term; and the brand is co-created by many actors, including students, alumni, faculty and employers. These features make credibility and social proof particularly important, and it is precisely these elements that social media can deliver effectively.

2. Social media as an instrument of brand building

A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein define social media as Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content, and they distinguish several types, including social networking sites, content communities and blogs [6]. A more detailed view is offered by J. Kietzmann and colleagues, who describe seven functional building blocks of social media: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups [7]. This framework is useful for universities because each block can be linked with a specific branding task.

Identity corresponds to the presentation of the university’s mission, values and academic profile. Conversations cover dialogue with applicants and students, for example answering questions about admission or scholarships. Sharing relates to stories, photos and videos created by students, faculty and alumni. Presence concerns real-time communication, such as live broadcasts of open-door days and lectures. Relationships include long-term interaction with alumni and partners. Reputation refers to visible reviews, mentions and recommendations. Groups denote communities formed around faculties, clubs and professional interests. Together these blocks make it possible to move from one-way advertising to a dialogue in which the brand is formed jointly with the audience.

3. Evidence from higher education marketing research

Research suggests that the effect of social media depends on the audience and on the way the channels are used. E. Constantinides and M. Stagno, in a segmentation study of prospective students, showed that the use of social media in the process of choosing a university differs between segments, which calls for a differentiated approach instead of a single communication message for all applicants [8]. A. Peruta and A. Shields, who analysed how colleges and universities use Facebook, found considerable differences in posting practices and audience engagement between institutions, which underlines the need for a deliberate content strategy and regular measurement of results [9].

Taken together, these studies lead to three conclusions. First, social media are most effective when they are integrated into the overall brand strategy and are not treated as an isolated promotional activity. Second, audience segmentation and the choice of channels are decisive for results. Third, engagement, and not simply the number of followers, is the key indicator of the quality of brand communication. It should also be noted that the existing research is dominated by studies from developed higher education systems, and the findings must be adapted to local conditions, including the platform preferences of young people in Uzbekistan.

4. A project-based framework for social media branding

Social media branding is most effective when it is organised as a managed project or programme with defined goals, resources, timeline and indicators. The Project Management Institute’s guide emphasises value delivery, stakeholder engagement and risk management as core principles of project work [10], and all of them are applicable here. The proposed framework consists of five stages.

Stage 1, diagnosis. The university analyses its current brand position: how it is perceived by applicants, students and employers, which platforms are used by target groups and how competitors communicate. Stage 2, planning. SMART objectives are set (for example, an increase in the share of applicants who first learned about the university through social media), target segments are defined, the budget and the content team are determined, and the editorial calendar is prepared. Content is organised around several “pillars”: academic excellence and research, student life, graduate careers and employer cooperation, innovation, and social responsibility.

Stage 3, implementation. Channels are selected according to the audience and the type of content: short vertical video for reaching young audiences, long-form video for programme presentations and lectures, messenger channels and chat for admission enquiries (messengers such as Telegram are widely used in Uzbekistan), professional networks for alumni and employer branding. Student ambassadors and alumni are involved as authentic storytellers, and community managers respond to questions within an agreed time. Stage 4, measurement. Indicators are grouped by brand-building objective: awareness (reach, impressions, growth of audience), image and engagement (engagement rate, shares, comments, sentiment), and conversion (visits to the admission website, registrations for events, submitted applications, cost per application). Stage 5, improvement. Results are reviewed regularly, successful formats are scaled up and ineffective ones are revised.

This sequence links social media activity with the two components of brand knowledge described by Keller [4]: reach and recognition build awareness, while consistent content and

visible interaction shape the image. The use of such a structured cycle also helps to demonstrate the return on investment to university management.

5. Risks and limitations

Social media branding involves several risks. The most serious of them is the authenticity gap: if online communication promises more than the university can deliver in reality, trust and reputation suffer quickly, because users publicly share their negative experience. Other risks include the absence of a unified brand voice when many faculties manage their own accounts, slow or inappropriate reactions to criticism and crises, dependence on a few platforms and algorithm changes, overreliance on “vanity metrics” such as likes or followers, shortage of professional staff and the need to protect the privacy of students, especially minors, in photos and videos. The framework should therefore include a communication policy, a crisis response protocol and clear rules for the use of personal data and images.

6. Practical recommendations

On the basis of the analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for universities:

- 1) formulate a brand platform (mission, values, key differences from competitors) before launching social media campaigns, so that all accounts communicate consistently [4; 5];
- 2) segment target audiences, including school leavers, bachelor’s graduates considering a master’s degree, parents and employers, and adapt channels and messages for each group [8];
- 3) use the functional blocks of social media as a checklist to ensure that identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups are all covered [7];
- 4) develop a content strategy and editorial calendar based on several content pillars and review it at least once a quarter [9];
- 5) involve students, alumni and faculty as ambassadors, ensuring that their stories are genuine and consistent with real university practice;
- 6) assign responsibility for community management, set standards for response time and prepare a crisis communication protocol;
- 7) measure awareness, engagement and conversion separately, and report them to university management on a regular basis, giving priority to indicators linked with admission results instead of vanity metrics [10].

CONCLUSION

Social media marketing plays a significant role in university branding because it allows institutions to build awareness, to show their identity and to create trust through dialogue and social proof. However, its effect is not automatic: it depends on a clear brand platform, audience segmentation, consistent content, authentic communication and systematic measurement. The project-based framework proposed in the article helps universities to manage social media branding as a goal-oriented and measurable process. Further research should test the proposed framework empirically, for example by surveying applicants and students of Uzbek universities about the influence of social media on their choice of an institution.

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