

# Utilising Social Media Technology to Raise Brand Awareness in Higher Education

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**Abstract:** Marketing and more specifically raising brand awareness is vital for any successful organisation and its importance is demonstrated across all industry sectors. The widely adopted social media (SM) technology is believed to bring opportunities for brand awareness; and many universities worldwide have already broached the concept of using SM to communicate with potential students. However, the social media arena is deemed by many HEIs as frivolous, and the significance of SM is yet widely realised. This research will look at the power behind social media technology; the main focus is to explore whether the utilisation of SM technology could increase the brand awareness. In order to achieve this research aim exhaustive literature search was conducted and the available literature is systematically reviewed. The research found that although SM platforms have been exploited by most of institutions, there is little evidence to suggest that higher education is currently using social media effectively to engage with students, increase brand awareness and enhance image.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The term social media is often associated with the term Web 2.0 which includes social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Blogging sites e.g. Blogger.com and micro-blogging sites e.g. Twitter. Within this umbrella also includes Video (e.g. YouTube), Audio (e.g. iTunes and Podcast.net) and live-casting (e.g. BlogTalkRadio and Live 365) and the virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life). This clearly outlines the complexity surrounding the term social media, however the one commonality between all of the above areas is that they all focus on building online communities within which people are interacting and influencing each other.

Universities worldwide have adopted social media to an extent and whilst some have successfully recruited students to their programmes using social media marketing (Reuben, 2008) the majority use it mostly to stay in touch with graduates and current students. Although there are numerous articles written regarding the power of social media marketing, very little is available in relation to the public sector and in particular the Higher Education sector. Also it has been identified that marketers in the public and private sectors have extremely

differing viewpoints on the relevancy and importance of social media.

The primary purpose of this research is to examine the effect of social media presence on brand awareness in higher education. With this in mind, a literature search was conducted using Emerald Insight and ProQuest journals in the areas of social media marketing and higher education. Three key themes emerged from the literature search, which were: use of social media for marketing; use of social media to raise brand awareness (and image and reputation) and use of social media for learning. Key research in these areas of interest will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

## 2 OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA ADOPTION IN HE

Studies of US universities have shown that many are now using SNS to conduct marketing targeted to the individual student's needs (Wandel, 2008; Mattson and Barnes, 2009). The study by Mattson and Barnes (2009) was concerned with how admissions

departments are using social media to connect with students in order to attract them to their programmes. They also used social media to research prospective students. Whilst this report demonstrated some success in engaging with students this was with the purpose of recruitment and it was impossible to say whether brand awareness was raised through its use. However they also discovered that only half of the universities researched were using social media to monitor any conversations about them online.

Reuben's (2008) research also showed that universities across America are using social media in their marketing and recruitment efforts as well as to communicate with current students and maintain contact with alumni. These studies agreed that institutions need to better understand what their students use SNS for by learning the "rules of engagement". This is confirmed by the findings of Boon and Sinclair (2009); Hemmi et al. (2009) and Madge et al. (2009) who all raised concerns about appropriate channels of communication between university and student and said that social media should be used with caution in education. However, these studies were concerned with the interaction amongst students and academics when used as a platform to support learning and engagement, rather than the use of social media to raise brand awareness. Concerns were also raised about the loss of control as institutions felt that having a presence on social media could leave them open to abuse and negative comments. Other studies have shown that being able to respond to online negativity enables brands to start a conversation with their communities and change perceptions of their organisation (Sharp, 2011).

Minocha (2009) looked at how SNS were being used to support student learning at 18 Higher Education Institutions in the UK. This highlighted a number of benefits such as improved team building and peer group support. It is generally considered acceptable by students to communicate with their classmates in this way to enhance their learning experience but it was found that most students did not welcome the idea of communicating with their lecturers on their personal social spaces. The study also raised concerns that the institutions would have little control over the public social media sites. The Open University has a Facebook application called 'My OU story' which allows prospective students to interact with current students (Redecker, 2009). This offers the benefit that students can find out more about their prospective university and intended course to support their decision about where to

study. Current students are giving positive messages about their experience at the OU and this enhances the online reputation of the university and also their brand image. The University of Westminster has a similar social networking forum aimed at staff and students (Oriadni and Saunders, 2008) which enables students to interact with their lecturers giving a positive learning experience. Smith et al (2007) agree that SNS can be used by universities to generate word of mouth (WOM) publicity to promote their institution and its achievements. If this is true, then it is reasonable to assume that promoting the successes of an institution should increase brand awareness and image.

Whilst not concerned specifically with social media, the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) highlight how institutions of higher education are tackling the issue of branding. It was found that branding was not approached in a strategic manner by most universities and was a combination of online and offline resources, including brochures, prospectuses, location and rankings. They also found that universities often have several brands within the institution, for example a sub-brand for each separate school, faculty, research department, etc. Whilst this might not seem to be an issue, the information about how students use social media would suggest they might struggle to identify which brand they should be engaging with when presented with a choice of many which can effectively weaken the overall brand.

### 3 SM USAGE FOR LEARNING

The majority of social networking sites users are of university age and it therefore makes sense that universities would want to capitalise on this additional communication channel. However, some studies (Boon and Sinclair, 2009; and Madge et al, 2009) reported that students have reacted unfavourably to the blurring of boundaries between formal relations with tutors in class and informal discussions on SNS. Many students consider their interactions on social media platforms as private (between their friends and family) and see this as a social medium rather than one to engage with official bodies. Whilst most people will like a number of business pages on Facebook, their engagement with these pages is limited and Kalpana and Anandan (2013) found that any content posted needs to be designed to suit the target audience. Their study examined ten higher education institutions in India and they concluded that

organisations need to aim to connect with their community by finding out about their lives and becoming part of that, rather than simply posting marketing messages. Their findings suggested that the type of content was also important with messages containing pictures and links far more likely to attract attention than those that were text only. According to Facebook (2013) status updates containing pictures get 120% more attention than those without. In addition, shorter messages (less than 250 characters) are felt to gain more interaction. Similar conclusions have been reached from commercial organisations with regard to the use of Facebook for engaging with customers.

Isacsson and Gretzel (2011) developed a collaborative project between a university in Texas, USA and another in Finland. They set up a Facebook group where students from both universities could collaborate whilst learning about sustainable tourism. Whilst the lecturers involved put a lot of time into setting up the social media platform and some students did find it useful to collaborate in an informal environment, other students were uncomfortable about communicating with people that they did not really know. Although the project was considered a success it highlighted that participants in different countries have different views on how to engage using social media. The authors concluded that they had to coerce students to participate in discussions and encourage them to post on the message boards, which confirmed a belief that when students connect with their institution in this manner they see it as a means of accessing information, rather than a medium for two way communications.

Shaw (2013) found that whilst the majority of students use social media more than once a day, they are either unaware of their university's presence or do not consider the information trustworthy or relevant to their needs. It was felt that universities need to be more responsive to their students' requirements. Lilley et al (2012) found that 94% of the students they surveyed consider Facebook important for keeping in touch with friends and family and socialising, whilst over half said they did not consider it important for receiving advertising messages and many of those questioned said that they often ignored such messages anyway.

In the main, young people appear to be using social media to connect with friends and to socialise, rather than be marketed to. In terms of university students, they do use social media to help settle in to life on campus, make new friends and interact with their classmates (Wandel, 2008). Whilst they might

use it in this way, most seemed less inclined to engage with academic staff and might not interact with the official university presence on social media.

#### 4 USE OF SM FOR DIRECT MARKETING

Organisations develop strategic marketing plans to promote and sell their services and more recently this has included social media marketing. This is a relatively new concept, meaning to gain attention or website traffic through the use of social media (Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi, 2012). It has developed since the arrival of social networking sites (SNS), particularly Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Newson, 2009). With the advent of social networking organisations have also come to realise that whilst reputations can be built using social media, they can quickly be devastated by negative feedback.

Whilst some researchers are critical of the use of SNS for direct marketing (Dury, 2008; Odden, 2009), it has been proven to be important in raising brand awareness and image. Dury (2008) argues that whilst some believe marketing has no place in social media because it is a business activity rather than a social one, the face of marketing has now changed and whilst social media marketing is felt by many to be unacceptable, marketers must rise to the challenge. Odden (2009) argues that people join SNS to interact with others who have shared interests, not to be bombarded with advertisements. However, the commercial sector has successfully used SNS to sell products to a wide audience and Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi (2012) described how several retailers have used social media to listen to their fan base in order to design offers or products which match their clients' needs. Gap, for example, invited customers to debate their new logo online and after reviewing feedback decided to revert to their original logo at their fans' request. Other sectors are following suit with social media at a slower pace with varying degrees of success.

By its very nature social media marketing centres its target audience during the design of marketing campaigns (Smith and Zook, 2011). This begins with analysing data on the intended audience; this information informs the design and delivery of the marketing campaign to ensure it is highly relevant to the target audience. In a study of young female students, Logan et al (2012) discovered that

advertising via SNS is more effective when it is entertaining rather than informative and Wang (2012) found that brands targeting younger audiences had higher engagement on SNS. Blanchard (2011) believes that campaigns which encourage engagement and raise awareness are better received on SNS than those which are simply trying to sell products. Overall, this demonstrates that whilst direct marketing may not be appreciated by the younger generation, across the typical age range for university students, social media does hold potential for engagement and interaction which can increase brand awareness and image.

Social media can also act as a communications tool which provides instant feedback (Blanchard, 2011). Evans (2011) stresses the importance of not only listening to customers but also taking the opportunity to respond to any negative comments to resolve issues and Clapperton (2009) gives examples of organisations that turned around relationships with disgruntled customers who became brand advocates.

## 5 USE OF SM TO RAISE BRAND AWARENESS

Commercial organisations quickly adopted SNS to reach their customer base and many have used social media to raise brand awareness and increase engagement with their customers. Li and Bernoff (2008) believe the key to using social media successfully lies in building a strong relationship and raising brand awareness amongst customers. Booth and Matic (2011) discovered that socialising a brand meant organisations were able to engage one on one with their customers in order to build communities and brand advocates. Consumers are using social media to make themselves heard by the organisations they want to do business with and Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi (2012) agree that social media marketing has been shown to be particularly successful in raising awareness. Mangold and Faulds (2009) said that as social media enables companies to communicate with their customers and for customers to talk to one another this enables communities to be built up around a brand. Whilst this can help raise brand awareness and reputation if the discussions are spreading positive messages, social media can damage an organisation's brand if participants are making negative comments or giving poor feedback. Aula (2010) gives three examples of organisations who

suffered due to messages which were quickly spread via social media and ultimately picked up on by mass media so that the stories were publicised worldwide on television and in tabloid newspapers. In the case of United Airlines an unhappy customer posted a video of himself singing a song entitled "United Breaks Guitars" this quickly went viral and the video received millions of views on YouTube. The negative publicity resulted in loss of income for the organisation. This demonstrates the potential threat to both the reputation and business of companies which can quickly be damaged in the social media arena.

Sharp (2011) demonstrated how an organisation can prevent damage to their online reputation by listening to the conversations that are taking place and reacting appropriately. Responding to comments made on social media meant that they were able to demonstrate their excellent customer service by resolving issues quickly.

Bruhn et al. (2012) studied three industry sectors to see how social media compared to traditional media in terms of raising brand awareness and whilst traditional media was felt to be more influential in shaping brand awareness, social media was more effective in enhancing image. Sharp (2011) noted how a healthcare clinic in Cleveland was able to successfully use social media to promote its services and in doing so to raise awareness by the positive WOM spread by clients. Some sectors felt using SNS was less appropriate and banks in particular shied away from it as they felt customers did not wish to interact with them in this way, although they did not rule out its potential for the future (Mitic and Kapoulas, 2012).

Wang (2012) gives a good example of a Singapore university adopting social media to increase engagement with their students using a competition as the incentive. Students were asked to like the page and post a comment (thus increasing likes and engagement). They then had to share this comment on their own page and encourage friends to like it, further increasing engagement and awareness. The student who received the most "likes" won an iPad.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The initial literature review has shown that SNS such as Twitter and Facebook are being used by organisations to raise brand awareness and improve their image with customers. The area of social media is somewhat broad and previous studies have not

delved into higher education specifically with regard to how it is being used to raise brand awareness.

A new study by Schultz and Peltier (2013) suggests that social media so far has been used to market to existing customers who are already engaged with a brand and the findings imply that it is now time to examine ways in which social media can be used to build engagement with new customers rather than using it to increase sales in the short term. Although its use in the commercial sector has been fairly well documented and it has been recognised as a vital tool in marketing strategy, this concurs with the findings that it is usually in the short term.

The authors found little evidence to suggest that higher education is currently using social media effectively to engage with students, increase brand awareness and enhance image. Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) stress the importance of brand management for universities and believe that in this highly competitive time those that have an “established reputation” are most likely to survive. They do, however, conclude that this is an area which is not yet managed effectively in UK institutions and the author feels this is an area that merits further research. Frydenberg, (2013) believes that social media “holds promise... for engaging students...” whilst Kalpana and Anandan (2013) found that engagement with students can be increased if the content considers the needs of the target audience. This suggests that universities need to discover exactly what students want to see posted on social media by their institutions.

The next stage of this research project will focus on the strategic development of using social media technology to raise university’s brand awareness. Case study approach will be adopted and a range of case studies will be carefully chosen.

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