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## Internet Marketing as a Diversity Management Tool in Education

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**Abstract:**

*The paper reveals opportunities of Internet marketing as a state-of-the-art diversity management tool at universities and other educational organizations. In contemporary information society, Internet marketing is becoming a technology making it possible to draw the attention of customers using educational services to academic programs provided by the higher education establishment, enabling to promote those programs, and giving an opportunity to attract prospective students from various social groups to the higher education establishment.*

*Internet marketing helps a higher education establishment to enter the electronic market, to analyze corporate websites of partner universities, as well as to study education demands put forward by the users of social networks.*

*The paper provides convincing evidence of opinion polls on the popularity of online communities in social networks with young people today.*

*The surveys highlighted the choice of the student youth, as well as the opportunity to use social networks for self-presentation and promotion of the university and its educational services.*

*Strategies and technologies of Internet marketing can help the authorities of a higher education establishment to meet diverse needs of different demographic clusters, as well as to shape heterogeneous information in education.*

**Keywords:** *Information society, Internet marketing, diversity management, heterogeneous information educational environment of the university, social networks.*

**JEL Classification:** M30, M31, L86.

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## **1. Introduction**

During the recent decades, the world is experiencing the transition from "industrial society" to "information society" characterized by highly advanced information and telecommunication technologies and their intensive use by citizens, businesses, and public authorities. Formation of such new type of social structure as information society brings information and knowledge to the forefront of social and economic development. It reflects both individual needs and the needs of social groups the individual belongs to. All these factors increase the importance of diversity management at educational organizations.

Diversity management is understood by the authors as the concept and strategy of managing an educational organization aimed at recognition and respect for differences between individuals and groups, cultivating tolerance in teachers and learners, as well as oriented at identity, self-actualization for educators and customers of educational services coming from different social groups, being a development factor of an educational organization and a resource for achieving competitive advantage.

Internet marketing is an effective tool that can help expose diverse preferences of educational services' customers. Diversity is realized in two contexts: first, a rich choice of platforms provided by developers through which anyone can express their personality by means of a specific product and receive an appraisal of their work from interested network users; second, no ideological, gender or age restrictions for participants in a certain project. Consequently, practically all modern educational organizations are represented on the Internet in one or several resources: a website, a blog, a community in social networks, etc. However, creating a network resource and filling it in with information content does not mean an automatic boost of the image of an educational organization, interaction with customers of educational services, increased public awareness or upward trend in the popularity of provided academic programs. It is Internet marketing that is aimed at efficiently solving those tasks.

Changing factors of the external environment determined introduction of new educational institution management components aimed at organizing vital functions in information society, applying foundations of strategic and tactic planning, oriented at innovative development. Education now tends to be considered a specific type of social production. There emerges the notion of "educational service" meaning a specific form of public benefit, which is determined not only by the needs of the state, but also by the demands of the learning process participants. Modern higher education establishments are forced to look for an effective strategy of their development in two markets: the labor market and the market for educational services. Internet marketing is arising as one of the major technologies paving the way to promote an educational organization.

With all diversity of different viewpoints on the essence of Internet marketing, the authors share the opinion of H. Wallon, R. Zazzo, and A. Leone viewing Internet marketing as "an array of techniques on the Internet aimed at drawing attention to the product of an organization, popularization of that product on the Net and its effective promotion with the purpose of selling". Here, "product" is meant as a market offer (real or virtual type) made by the organization, as well as a collection of patterns and ideas comprising its brand and reflecting its mission.

The use of Internet marketing as a technology of interaction with the customer is not something new for Russian theory and practice. The analysis of thesis research made in Russia in 2000-2017 showed that at the beginning of the specified period, the marketing potential of the Net was the focus of researchers (O. Obukhov, T. Kalyuzhnova, T. Khuzyashev, A. Gubanov, O. Kobelev) mostly from the point of its use at industrial plants, social and economic facilities, to develop electronic commerce.

Dissertation studies started to appear on the issues of using Internet marketing in the market for educational services. The researcher M. Khodimchuk as early as in 2002 worked out a pattern of generation and realization of an Internet marketing strategy of a higher education establishment while entering the electronic market. It included the study of the electronic market, analysis of corporate websites of competitor higher education establishments from the marketing mix position, isolation of key success factors of the Internet strategy, concept definition of the strategy of a higher education establishment in the electronic market, determining main realization stages for the strategy of a higher education establishment in the electronic market.

Of special importance is the research by N. Stefanova not only pointing out the economic and managerial character of Internet marketing but also revealing an equally significant social aspect. The researcher redetermined the notion of Internet marketing of a higher education establishment noting that Internet marketing of an educational organization represents social and governance process, because during that process such tasks are solved as meeting society's needs for educational services (social aspect) and manufacturing management, selling those services (managerial aspect), including development, creation, management, promotion and realization of effective marketing behavior through the Net.

Today, there are thousands of all kinds of social networks and services existing on the Internet: communication, news, professional, graphic, blogs, vlogs, and many others (Pevzner *et al.*, 2015; 2016; 2017; Avdeeva, *et al.*, 2017; Gladilina, *et al.*, 2017). The total audience of social platforms exceeds one billion users and by some estimates will overtake the audience of search engines in the nearest future.

In the academic literature, research of virtual network communities is oriented at solving the following tasks: detecting features, structural properties of virtual communities and their differences from other forms of communication on the

Internet (H. Rheingold, C. Porter, A. Blanchard, P. Dourish, A. Smith, B. Wellman, S. Krishnamurthy, A. Mitra, R. Schwartz, S. Wilson, L. Peterson, R. Bagozzi, L. Pearo and others) developing a classification of virtual communities (B. Butler, J. Preece, A. Armstrong, J. Hagel and others) exposing the Internet users' motivation for joining virtual communities (C. Ridings, J. House, H. Rheingold, S. Utz, J. Horrigan and others).

Up to now, scholarly research of the potential of social networks as the marketing environment and the characteristic features of educational marketing in social networks is practically out of the picture in Russia. As a result, several new problematic issues arise, previously inefficiently covered in academic literature. Among them, the following questions can be mentioned: how can one employ the opportunities of social networks and virtual communities started on those platforms to attract potential customers of educational services from different social groups? How can the authorities of a higher education institution effectively use Internet marketing to achieve competitive advantage?

The search for answers to these and other questions makes the present study relevant and demanded both by pedagogical science and territorial communities. The authors draw on the assumption that the use of Internet marketing as a diversity management tool will assist in attracting potential customers of educational services from various social groups and ultimate shaping of the heterogeneous educational environment.

For this reason, the aim of the present study is to develop the strategy of Internet marketing as a diversity management tool oriented at the analysis of education demand formed by potential customers of educational services and promotion of educational products using virtual societies in social networks.

## **2. Methods**

The methodological framework of the study comprises information and marketing approaches as foundational ones for the scientific justification of the information educational environment as a diversity management tool. The information approach implies the application of information and communication technologies in the organization of successful interaction of subjects, real and online (Donina, 2011).

The information approach allows describing the diversity management process by means of the information educational environment in terms of information society (source, receiver, information channel, feedback, etc.). In the context of the present study, the information approach provided the scientific justification of the use of information technologies for organizing, planning, and managing interaction among the subjects in social networks. Based on the information approach, managerial decisions on different levels can be taken regarding the educational system, educational organization, learning process.

The second approach to the study of the problem of diversity management by means of the information educational environment is the marketing approach. Marketing in education is a philosophy allowing a strong competitive stand due to meeting educational needs (Donina, 2014; Shaydorova *et al.*, 2017; Sheraizina *et al.*, 2017; Gorina 2016; Sultanova and Chechina 2016). Objects of marketing activities include educational services, the authority and status of the educational organization, the brand of the educational organization, educational products and services, the location of the educational organization, pedagogical and public ideas and values of the educational organization, etc.

The marketing approach acquires special significance while studying such means of communication among the subjects of the learning process as social networks. Internet marketing facilitates timely managerial decisions in view of the rapidly changing market situation.

In this way, the significant approaches comprising the methodology of diversity management research under the conditions of the information educational environment are the following: information (focuses on application of information technologies and acquiring information relevant for managerial decisions employing multitier information systems); marketing (determines the choice of managerial decisions and implementation of management methods in accordance with the situation in the market for educational services and the labor market). Employment of empirical methods is determined using involved observation, expert estimation, sociological surveys and questionnaires.

### **3. Results**

Interactive means of communication used in the electronic educational space, as well as the information and communicative sociality type of modern society contribute to the agility and openness of educational systems, as well as to the search and mastering of new ways in which academic activities can be implemented by higher education establishments.

Changes in the human communication medium; emergence of several services developed based on Web 2.0 technologies on the Net implying active users' participation in shaping the content; rapid socialization of the Net; new emerging types of management and marketing aimed at interaction with the users in the virtual space – these are the mainstream trends of the modern online environment.

During computerization of society and engagement of different social institutions in electronic communications, the Internet environment gradually turns into a global communication space. It represents a nonlinear array of connections and interactions happening among persons, groups of people, and social institutions as customers. Structural features of the Internet environment changed drastically for the recent 15 to 20 years. Scholars in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century stated that modern civilization was at

the threshold of the avalanche-type globalization of the Net which was assumed to start in 2005, and this opinion had been confirmed in practice. As of September 2002, the total amount of the Net users made about 9.6% of the total population of the Earth, while in January 2018, according to the "Global Digital 2018" report of "We Are Social" and "Hootsuite", the number of the Internet users in the world has reached 4.021 billion people, that is around 53% of the global population (7.6 bln) (We Are Social, 2018b).

At present, the Internet is irregularly distributed around the world. The highest level of penetration is registered in Northern Europe (94%), Western Europe (90%) and North America (88%). Percentagewise, the largest penetration of the Internet remains in developed countries – 81% as compared to 40% in developing countries and 15% in the least developed countries (We Are Social, 2018a). While speaking in December 2015 at the first Russian forum "Internet Economy", President of the Russian Federation V. Putin pointed out: "The Internet audience in Russia is the largest in Europe, over 80 million users, out of them, 62 million people go online on a daily basis".

At the beginning of 2018, more than half of Russians aged 16 and over (51.5%) were accessing the Internet from their smartphones. 16 million (13.2% of all 16+ population) use the Internet only in mobile gadgets. The highest number of "only mobile" users is among the youth up to the age of 30 (18.4%), as well as in the rural areas (16.4%) (Khalilov, 2015).

According to VCIOM, the number of Russians using the Internet practically every day increased from 5% in 2006 to 63% as of February 2018. The upsurge to 51% occurred from 2006 to 2015 due to the growing number of household computers, increased accessibility of the Internet, improved computer literacy of the population (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2018).

Starting with 2015, the number of "everyday" users is steadily increasing. At present, 45% of the surveyed Russians over 18 use at least one social network almost every day, 62% - at least once a week. About one third are completely out of social media (20% due to no Internet access, and another 10% do not own a single account). The maximum level of involvement in social networks is predictably demonstrated by the Russian youth: in the age group 18-24, 91% of respondents use social networks almost daily, in the age group 25-34 - 69%, while in the age group over 60, only 15% use social networks (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2018).

VK (previously called VKontakte) is one of the first social networks that appeared in Russia and expanded rapidly: in one year after the launch, it registered millions of accounts. According to Brand Analytics (May 2017), the core of the active audience for VK that makes 37% are the users aged 25-34. The second largest age group is

18-24 (25.7%). Instagram, a social network oriented solely at mobile traffic, is highly popular with the youth (Brand Analytics, 2017).

Group and page statistics in social networks allow learning a lot about the relevance of the web page and its content, as well as about the tools of audience involvement and capture necessary to achieve the aims stated by the community. Statistics by <https://allsocial.ru> show that there are 1,993 communities under the "Science and education" category functioning in the VK social network, out of them 897 are publics (public pages), and 2,482 communities under the "Society" category, 1,002 out of them are publics.

For the keyword "university" search, the VK social network finds 7,611 communities which represent different educational organizations, informal groups, virtual educational projects, sports organizations, artistic associations, communities promoting education abroad, etc. The large majority of communities are open groups. Among higher education establishments, the leading positions by the number of subscribers are taken by Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation (37,314 people), ITMO University (35,972 people), Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (35,741 people), Kazan Federal University (35,699 people).

Taking the above-mentioned into consideration, the authors conducted a study aimed at learning the potential of social networks while implementing Internet marketing in a higher education establishment. The target audience is young people aged 17-25, actual and potential students of Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University.

A questionnaire survey on the topic "Novgorod State University Internet resources" was held among 110 respondents aged 18-25. The questionnaire allowed finding out preferences of the student audience and their behavior in social networks, and also possibilities of using social networks for self-presentation and promotion of the university, as well as educational services and information it offers. The analysis of the responses found that the VK social network enjoyed the biggest popularity among respondents (99.1%).

By the criterion "respondents' visits frequency in social networks", the numbers were distributed as follows: 32.1% of respondents visited social networks 2 to 3 times a day; 55.71% of the surveyed "strived to stay there constantly". The great majority "came" to a social network with the main aim to chat (89.7%) learn the news (86.9%), at the same time 44.9% used social networks to study. The great majority (79.6%) answered the question, "Do you consider the Internet as a platform for getting education (online courses, distance learning, etc.)?" positively. Social networks help marketing experts listen to their target audience to understand what kind of content attracts them most, to spread marketing materials both directly from the brand and through reposting. As noted by D. Khalilov, "VK is the flagship of Russian SMM promotion, and it is here that the largest amount of successful cases is

realized" (Khalilov, 2015).

As the group pattern of communication is the most characteristic behavior for the users of social networks, the questionnaire offered to evaluate the content of the groups and personal pages to which respondents were subscribed, as well as to mention the number of groups they were members of and the ones they actively used. According to the results of the survey, 68.5% were members of more than 25 groups, yet 58.3% visited regularly only 3 to 5 groups, which testified to the need and possibility of deep targeting provided it was determined which particular groups were more relevant for the student audience.

The "targeted" approach to communication is a very significant advantage of the Internet at large (Okushova *et al.*, 2014). While surveying respondents' attitude to the official website of Novgorod State University, the authors found that 72% considered this particular resource ([www.novsu.ru](http://www.novsu.ru)) as the main source of information about the university; at the same time, 47.7% of the surveyed preferred to get the news through social networks, and 46.7% – through educational information. Overall, 73.9% of students highly estimated the website architecture, 87.9% thought that the website design of a higher education establishment played a major role in the perception of a university, 92.6% of the surveyed believed that design could help to create a user-friendly website of a higher education institution.

Answering questions about the usability and architecture of the Novgorod State University website, only 22.2% of the surveyed estimated it as "corresponding to the concept of a state-of-the-art website"; a bigger part of respondents (55.6%) noted that the website needed further revision, 22.2% called it old-style. The surveyed students do not see the VK informal public "Overheard at Novgorod State University" as a reliable source of information, that is why 60.2% are not subscribed to it, mentioning among the reasons: "no constructive information", "the community is downward there", "I don't like gossip", etc. At the same time, 40.7% of the surveyed are subscribed to this group, but many say that they visit it rarely.

However, 27.8% of the survey participants pointed out that they took interest in their teachers' social networks pages, because of the following reasons: "I am curious to look at them from a different angle", "I need to explain why I missed classes" or "I have to know the task".

#### **4. Conclusion**

The taken survey has demonstrated that social networks and virtual communities possess great potential for realization of Internet marketing of a higher education establishment from the point of the target audience activity level, considering their diversity, certain common interests, need for education and self-development, openness to communication with peers and teachers. Such potential can be effectively employed by the authorities of a higher education establishment to



actively attract prospective students from various social groups to the university, as well as to shape heterogeneous information educational environment in the higher education establishment.

### **Acknowledgments**

The article (publication) has been prepared with financial support from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation in the framework of state order, project No. 27.2617.2017/4.6.

The authors are grateful to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation for providing the grant "Formation and development of the pedagogical metatheory of diversity management in educational systems" (state order of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation No. 27.2617.2017/PC), under which the study of cultural diversity management strategies at a higher education establishment is conducted.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the efforts of teachers and students of Yaroslavl-the-Wise Novgorod State University who supported this research and contributed into the realization of its aims and tasks. The authors would like to express special gratitude to Director of the Novgorod State University Scientific Research Centre D. Kovalenko for administrative and financial support of the research.

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