



Soft Selling Strategy Expands University Market Reach via Social Media

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Abstract. General Background: The digital transformation has shifted higher education marketing toward social media-based communication strategies to reach prospective students more effectively. Specific Background: Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo (UMSIDA) utilizes its official social media account to implement soft selling techniques aimed at attracting Generation Z audiences. Knowledge Gap: Limited studies explicitly examine how universities apply soft selling strategies in social media-based educational marketing contexts. Aims: This study investigates how UMSIDA applies soft selling on social media to expand market reach and attract prospective students. Results: Using a qualitative descriptive approach with observation, interviews, and documentation, the findings show that UMSIDA employs testimonials, educational content, narratives, and visual storytelling to represent authentic campus life, fostering emotional connections, strengthening institutional reputation, and increasing digital engagement. Novelty: This study provides an empirical description of structured content production and storytelling integration within soft selling practices in higher education marketing. Implications: The findings suggest that coordinated collaboration between student admissions and digital content teams is essential to maintain message consistency and optimize marketing communication strategies in digital environments.

Keywords: Soft Selling, Social Media Marketing, Higher Education Marketing

1 Introduction

Higher education is no exception to the paradigm shift in communication and marketing tactics brought about by the digital revolution. Universities today need to be able to use social media to reach prospective students quickly, efficiently, and comprehensively, rather than relying solely on printed brochures and school visits.[1] . including in the field of higher education. Universities today need to be able to use social media to reach prospective students quickly, efficiently, and extensively, rather than relying solely on printed brochures and school visits. Because new student enrollment is closely related to academic sustainability, financial stability, and organizational reputation, it is very important for university administration. The number of new students indicates marketing performance and affects the institution's ability to survive and thrive.[2] In the face of increasingly fierce competition between institutions, especially private institutions, creative marketing techniques are needed that are in line with digital trends and suit the demographics of the younger generation, especially Generation Z.[3] . *Soft selling* techniques are a more intimate and non-intrusive method of communication

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R. Lomotey et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference on Communication and Digital Multimedia 2025 (ICCDM 2025)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 1020, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-589-8_13

used by Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo (UMSIDA), a private university that is active in digital promotion. In today's digital environment, social media has evolved into an important tool for connecting and influencing others.[4] , Social media marketing is a communication strategy that uses digital platforms to create and share value between businesses and consumers.[5] Therefore, to maintain its competitiveness, the university needs to use social media as a two-way communication medium to increase engagement and build deep emotional bonds with prospective students. Unfortunately, many educational institutions continue to use traditional one-way marketing techniques. This approach does not work for Generation Z, who are more narrative, emotional, and engaging.[6]

In situations like this, soft selling methods provide a more nuanced and non-intrusive communication style that emphasizes building lasting relationships.[7] By using narratives, testimonials, anecdotes, and instructional materials, this approach fosters audience preference and emotional attachment.[8] Soft selling is a term for indirect persuasion, where the audience is given subtle messages in an effort to build an emotional bond with the business.[9] . *Soft selling* is a term for indirect persuasion, where the audience is given subtle messages in an effort to build an emotional bond with the business.[10] . According to other previous research, narrative techniques can elicit strong emotional responses from viewers or customers of social media content, which can lead to market expansion and effective decision-making.[11] However, according to other research, the indirect influence of audio voices, which can cause misunderstandings among audiences, has a negative impact on soft selling. [12]

Social media is a participatory platform that enables institutions and target audiences to communicate in two directions. Based on previous research, social media has a significant and positive influence on market expansion, especially for private schools that need to attract Gen Z students who frequently use social media in their daily lives.[13] According to other previous studies, social media has a positive and significant impact on the ability of public and private higher education institutions to expand their markets.[14]

The big idea of integrated marketing communications, or IMC, highlights the need for consistent messaging across social media and other marketing platforms.[15] According to the middle-range theory of customer relationship management (CRM), building long-term connections through reciprocal exchanges in digital media[16] influences customer behavior or business reputation. Since there has been little research explicitly examining how universities utilize soft selling, the researcher employed this strategy to investigate how private universities, specifically Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo (Umsida), use soft selling to attract new students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo uses social media to employ soft selling techniques in an effort to successfully connect emotionally with prospective new students.

Research Questions

1. How effective is the implementation of soft selling strategies on social media by Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo in reaching prospective new students?
2. To what extent is the soft selling strategy on social media effective in expanding market reach and increasing prospective students' interest in Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo?

SDG Categories. Based on the introduction and problem formulation, this study focuses on the sustainable development goals pillar of economic development, which includes point 4, namely focusing on Quality Education.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Soft Selling in the Promotion of Private Higher Education Institutions

Soft selling is a form of marketing communication that is persuasive but not pushy. This tactic focuses on building trust, fostering long-term relationships, and providing value through a thoughtful and sentimental approach to goods or services.[17] Stories, instructions, or narrative experiences that align with the needs and values of potential clients are often used in soft selling to increase appeal.[18] Given the complexity and length of the purchasing decision, soft selling strategies are considered more suitable in the context of service marketing, including educational services [19].

2.2 Social Media as an Educational Promotion Channel

Social media is an online platform that enables the creation, sharing, and exchange of interactive information among users within an online community.[20] . One of the best marketing strategies to connect with Generation Z—the generation that will be attending school soon—is social networking.[21] This generation seeks knowledge from authentic, graphic, and interactive digital materials in addition to official websites.[22]

2.3 Interest of Prospective New Students

Interest is the motivation someone has to choose a product based on values and beliefs that are considered beneficial.[23] Interest is the motivation someone has to choose a product based on values and beliefs that are considered beneficial.[24] Perceptions of one's talents, the need for self-improvement, and future aspirations are examples of internal variables. Peers, home environment, and marketing tactics used by educational institutions are examples of external forces.[25].

3 Method

To obtain information that can explain the facts, phenomena, and actual conditions that occurred at the time of the study, this study used descriptive qualitative techniques, namely researching and investigating certain things within a specified period of time. In an effort to manage fluctuations in new student enrollment at Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo, the target of this study is new students. Through soft selling on UMSIDA social media, researchers will observe and follow the recruitment process for new students at Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo.[26] Descriptive qualitative research methodology is used in this study to answer the research questions. To explain the use of soft selling on UMSIDA's social media as an internal control effort that takes into account variations in the number of prospective new students, documents, and marketing strategies to attract prospective new students at Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo, the collected data will be reviewed and described descriptively.

Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo, a private university in Sidoarjo, was the location of the research. Its address is Jl. Mojopahit No. 666B, Celep Sidoarjo. This research was conducted

will take place between the completion of this thesis and the opening of the second wave of new student admissions in June 2025. To attract prospective new students to Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo, this project emphasizes the use of soft selling on UMSIDA 1912's social media. One of the main pillars used to measure the performance of a private university is the number of its students; therefore, the new student admission process often fails to meet certain targets.[27] .

Primary data is information collected directly from the original source through observation, interviews, and documentation.[28] Direct interviews with the Umsida new student admissions department were used to collect primary data. Information about the use of soft selling on Umsida 1912 social media was collected through interviews with Dr. Didik Hariyanto, M.Si, director of new student admissions at Umsida, and one of the prospective new students at Umsida. Information about the basic outline of the Umsida new student admission and recruitment process, job descriptions for each role, new student admission procedures, and shortcomings in the marketing strategy for recruiting new Umsida students were some of the findings from the interviews.

Researchers also conducted documentation and observation to obtain primary data. One method of data collection was observation, which involved directly observing the research topic. While documentation was a data collection technique that involved observing the marketing process carried out by the admissions team and SU as the content production team, observation aimed to obtain information about the application of soft selling on Umsida's social media for market expansion.

Secondary data is data that comes from third parties or from sources that have been published[29] Reference books, scientific journals, previous research, and other reading materials relevant to this topic are sources of secondary data. Triangulation is a method used in this study to assess data reliability. Data validity is tested by triangulation, which involves comparing data from several sources in different periods and in different ways. As a result, there are three types of triangulation: source, data collection method, and time. However, researchers used two triangulations in this investigation, namely:

Source Triangulation Data collected from various sources was verified through source triangulation. The director of student admissions, the head of the university secretariat, and prospective Umsida students were the subjects of data collection and testing for this study. As part of internal control efforts, data from both sources will be characterized and grouped to identify the results of the implementation of *soft selling* for Umsida.

Technical triangulation was used to verify the accuracy of the data by cross-referencing it with the same source using various methods, such as documentation, interviews, and observation.

This study uses the Miles and Huberman data analysis technique. The sequence and explanation of the data analysis techniques used in this study are as follows:

Data Reduction. Data reduction is one of the stages in the data organization process to meet the needs of researchers and facilitate information retrieval. To separate important data for storage and discard irrelevant data, researchers will organize the data

they have obtained. Reduced data makes it easier for researchers to proceed to the next stage because it is clearer and simpler.[30]

Data Presentation. Data presentation is carried out by presenting reduced data in the form of a brief narrative or similar format. Data presentation is carried out with the aim of making the material easier for readers to understand. The data in this study is presented by the researcher in the form of a brief description. [30]

Drawing Conclusions. Drawing conclusions is the final stage of qualitative research. The following facts can be supported by strong evidence, which can change the initial results. [30]

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Overview of Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo

Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo (UMSIDA), located in Sidoarjo Regency, East Java, is a private university managed by the Muhammadiyah Association. The Decree of the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia No. 070/D/O/2000, issued on April 10, 2000, became the basis for the establishment of Umsida. A number of Muhammadiyah universities in Sidoarjo merged to form Umsida. Umsida, which is part of the Muhammadiyah and Aisyiyah Higher Education Network (PTMA), uses higher education to fulfill its mission of *tajdid* and *da'wah*. "An Islamic university that excels in the development of science and technology based on Islamic values for the welfare of society" is the goal of the campus.

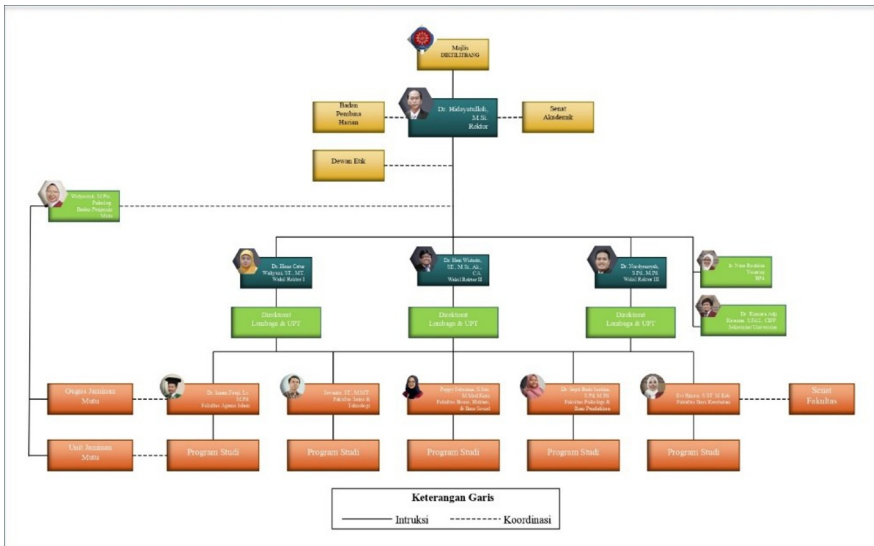


Fig. 1. Organizational Structure of Umsida

Based on observations, documentation, and interviews with Dr. Kumara Adji Kusuma, S.Fil.I., CIFP, Head of the University Secretariat and also the Public Relations Team of Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo, each position in the organizational structure shown in Fig. 1 has its own duties and responsibilities as shown in Table 1.

Fig. 2 further illustrates the organizational structure of the University Secretariat, which consists of Public Relations and Protocol, Branding and Digital Communication, and Secretariat units that support institutional communication and administrative coordination:

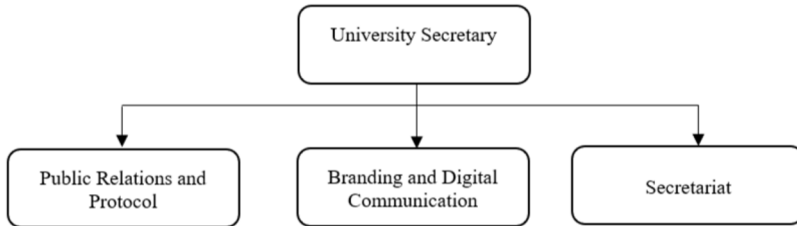


Fig. 2. Organizational Structure of the University Secretariat at Muhammadiyah University Sidoarjo

Table 1. Duties and Responsibilities of Each Position in the University Secretariat

Position	Duties & responsibilities
Head of University Secretariat	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Covering planning, organizing, implementing, controlling, evaluating, and reporting activities in their field of duty, as well as providing direction and guidance to staff. 2. Responsible for developing work plans and programs, coordinating activities between sections, providing technical advice, and evaluating the performance of subordinates. 3. Manager of the Public Relations and Protocol Team, Branding Team, and Secretariat
Public Relations and Protocol	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Handling Publications/News Releases 2. Coordinator of Calendar Production, Vandel/souvenirs/merchandise, Khazanah Magazine, Podcast 3. Corporate Communication 4. Crisis Management: Complaint Handling 5. Protocol/Event Support
Branding and Digital Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Audio-Visual Publications 2. News/Information/Updates Publication 3. Flyer/Banner/Signage Publications 4. Supporting Events
Secretariat	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recording the Rectorate's Agenda 2. Checking Secretariat and UMSIDA emails 3. Processing Rectorate Correspondence 4. Processing SPPD for the Rectorate and BPH (torat) 5. Conducting Rectorate and BPH Meetings 6. Front Office Development 7. SU Financial Management

4.2 UMSIDA *Marketing Content Production System*

The content marketing production system at Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo (UMSIDA) is based on the concept of strategic communication management and is methodically built using structured Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). A consistent and comprehensive brand story is essential for an efficient marketing strategy in the education services sector to effectively communicate the institution's values to its target audience in an emotional and educational manner.[31]. Through the pre-production phase, which involves research, scriptwriting, premise and plot construction, and strengthening visual concepts consistent with the Islamic and modern identity of the campus, the UMSIDA content production process illustrates this approach. Here, information serves as a means of documentation and a strategic communication tool that attempts to influence the way the general public views UMSIDA's reputation as a leading university. In addition, the production and post-production phases of this system demonstrate an understanding of digital branding and visual communication ideas. Carefully crafted content, imaginatively packaged and disseminated on the right channels to attract, retain, and engage a specific audience is the basis of effective content marketing. Each step of production includes strategic substance that represents the institution's soft selling strategy in addition to being technically sound. The narrative incorporated into UMSIDA's video material shows how the school tells an engaging and motivating "story" for prospective students that includes student experiences, academic activities, Islamic principles, and academic achievements. Based on the idea of symmetrical two-way communication, this creation is an effort at brand interaction rather than simply recording actions.

Identification and Initial Planning. At this stage, Digital Communications collects data about university operations and decides whether the documentation will be used for reporting, branding, or program marketing. The university begins its progress by gathering detailed information about all institutional operations, from academic to non-academic sectors, using digital communication channels. According to [32], clarity of mission is important in education marketing because it influences media and message choices. Clarity of mission ensures that all communication efforts are aligned with the university's strategic goals and successfully reach the target audience because it has a direct impact on message packaging and media selection.

Script Writing and Narrative Development. Effective communication scripts cannot be prepared carelessly in the digital world, especially for material created by accounts associated with higher education institutions. Activity data refers to information about how audiences interact with previous content, such as engagement rates, clicks, or viewing duration; audience characteristics, such as who they are, what their interests are, and where they are active; and how their communication style is very important to ensure that the message created is truly conveyed and has an impact. Research should inform the content produced, including trend analysis, relevant keywords, and competitors. The idea of content mapping, which allows businesses to create messages that are relevant to specific target audiences, is embraced by this strategy.[33] Content mapping is a systematic approach that enables organizations to craft highly relevant and personalized messages for different segments of the target population. By mapping the type of content needed for each stage of the audience's journey (awareness, consideration, decision) and adapting it to their preferences, organizations can ensure

that every piece of copy they produce is not only informative but also engaging and achieves the desired communication goals. The complete sequence of this content development process is presented in Fig. 3, showing how initial identification, team formation, research, pre-production, production, post-production, distribution, and evaluation are arranged as one continuous workflow.

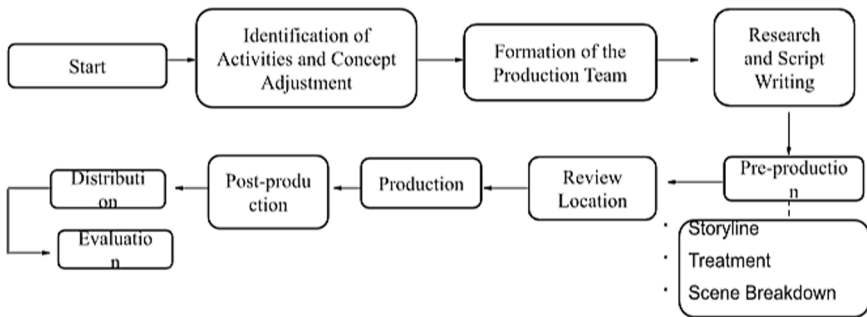


Fig. 3. Production Process Flow Diagram

Production and Field Supervision. When making a film or other visual media productions, a well-developed script serves as the primary foundation. All production components, such as lighting, sound, and visual design, will be derived from this script. In the context of UMSIDA, the main objective of combining these components is to create a depiction that is not only visually appealing but also resonates with the audience, in line with the principles and values that UMSIDA wishes to promote. Lighting on objects is only one aspect of lighting design; other objectives include creating atmosphere, emphasizing details, and focusing the audience's attention. Lighting may be bright and contemporary to show innovation or warm and uplifting to project a supportive image of UMSIDA. Meanwhile, sound design consists of background music, sound effects, and dialogue. The right sounds can heighten emotions, provide context, and enhance the viewing experience. For example, cheerful music can be used to showcase the achievements of UMSIDA students. Finally, visual design includes editing elements, artwork, mise-en-scène, and cinematography. Together, these visual components allow UMSIDA to convey its message nonverbally, ensuring that each scenario conveys the organization's vision and goals powerfully and convincingly.

Post-Production and Revision. This stage is crucial to ensure the highest quality visual communication. The desired visual message must be adapted for offline and online editing. This means that every visual piece, transition, and sequence must support the main narrative and communication objectives. Changing the music and visual effects is more important for enhancing the brand than fixing technical issues. Both are in line with UMSIDA's humanistic, religious, and educational brand style. While the music selection must be able to convey an atmosphere that supports knowledge and educational goals, the visual effects must further enhance the university's image as a place that focuses on faith and spiritual sensitivity. Each audio-visual element presents a cohesive, authentic, and sincere image of UMSIDA because of this coherence.

Distribution & Evaluation. Distributing materials through social media channels that best reflect the personality of the content created is the next crucial step. These platforms are not chosen randomly; for example, facts and brief insights may work better on Instagram, while rich visual content may perform better on TikTok or YouTube. The goal is to ensure information reaches the target audience when they are most engaged and open to such messages. The process does not end with distribution. The effectiveness of the material is assessed by examining public comments. Public comments (sentiment, questions, and answers), reach (number of people who viewed the material), and engagement rate (likes, shares, and saves) are among the metrics evaluated. Communication teams can determine what works, what needs improvement, and how to modify their approach to be more successful and relevant in the future by using data from this feedback as an important basis for future strategy adjustments.

The content marketing production system at Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo (UMSIDA) is a concrete implementation of an integrated communication strategy based on content marketing and institutional storytelling, as determined by interviews, observations, and documentation. Scriptwriters, videographers, editors, sound technicians, and the digital distribution team collaborate across roles as part of a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that methodically executes the content creation process from planning to review. Because it meets the needs of the target audience, the content created is well received by the public, which has an impact on Umsida's image. This strategy demonstrates a shift in the approach to educational promotion from a hard selling model to a soft selling model, which emphasizes narrative development, visualization of campus values, and image strengthening through social media. In addition to producing documentary material, UMSIDA also creates strategic content that can enhance its brand position in the eyes of prospective students by combining technical phases with emotional and visual marketing concepts. UMSIDA actively uses two-way communication to build public engagement and loyalty, as seen in its distribution methods that target well-known digital channels and its assessment system based on audience input. Thus, this content creation system serves as a key tool in the marketing strategy of higher education institutions based on values, relevance, and long-term partnerships, as well as a tool for recording activities.

5 Conclusion

Based on the results of observation, documentation, and interviews, it can be concluded that UMSIDA's soft selling strategy through social media can increase market share and foster a positive perception among the local community. Content such as student narratives, educational programs, and visual and emotional documentation of school activities have created a bridge between the institution and students, especially among Generation Z who prefer clear and interactive communication. By using this strategy, UMSIDA has been able to build emotional connections that influence enrollment decisions while increasing engagement and digital exposure. The communication strategy adopted represents a shift from traditional marketing techniques to a more flexible and beneficial approach in the long term. As a result, in the digital age, the branding strategy of higher education institutions must continue to combine the joint

development of a system for creating and distributing *soft-selling-based* marketing content.

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