

ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGIES OF OVERSEAS UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA WITH UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF SCOTLAND AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The study abroad market in China has been made a great deal with the development of China's reform and opening-up, and more and more overseas universities have been joining the market. In the age of digital, how overseas universities interact with Chinese audiences effectively through the digital marketing channels will greatly affect their influence in the Chinese market, as well as the number of admissions and the quality of admissions. This paper, through the study of the digital marketing strategy of University of the West of Scotland in China, provides suggestions for its further development of the digital marketing work in China, in addition, offers references for other overseas universities to learn the digital marketing development of the study abroad market in China.

Keywords: University of the West of Scotland, Study abroad, digital marketing

JEL code: M310

1. Introduction

With the deepening of China's reform and market economic reform, as well as the education reform, more and more Chinese students have chosen to study abroad after finishing their elementary education in China (see Yang, 2003). Study abroad booms has reached unprecedented prosperity while education agencies got rapid progress during this period, at the same time, more and more overseas universities have joined in the Chinese education market, to interact directly with Chinese education institutions and students in a variety of ways, such as by means of cooperation and promotion (see Mike, 2006).

With the growing competition in the Chinese study abroad market, growing number of overseas universities are increasing their marketing budgets for the market, such as establishing various digital marketing channels, aiming to gain a position among the study abroad market in China. According to Sina Weibo Business school project director Wang Min's introduction, Chinese students rely heavily on the digital channels when seeking information about study abroad, with 80% of their study abroad information is coming from the Internet (see 21Century, 2013), this evidence shows that the proper utilization of digital marketing channels plays an important role for overseas universities' brand awareness and brand image in the Chinese study abroad market. On the other hand, marketing expert Miguel Roberg has discovered that building the digital marketing channels in China does not necessarily guarantee the universities to improve their brand awareness and brand image in China. Universities are advised to change their approach to engage with the audience groups, namely, from the traditional communication channel to 1to1 interaction mode, in addition, to offer the audience with the information they are looking for (see Miguel, 2014).

This paper takes the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) as an example to find out the advantages and disadvantages of UWS digital marketing channels through the research and analysis of its digital marketing strategy in China, suggestions are provided for the further development of UWS's digital marketing in the Chinese study abroad market, in addition, provides references for other overseas universities to learn the digital marketing development of the study abroad market in China.

2. Introduction of the University of the West of Scotland

The university of the West of Scotland (UWS) is a comprehensive university, which is officially recognized as the top 5% of the world university in the 2017 Times Higher Education University rankings, as well as the Top 200 World Young University in the 2017 Times Higher Education Young Universities rankings. UWS offers a range of career-oriented undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes, with a variety of specialty disciplines and specialties, such as education programme and Civil Engineering programme, which ranked 4th and 5th the UK respectively. UWS is also the first university in Britain to be accredited by Cisco, Adobe and Microsoft. Currently, UWS has about 15,000 students, including 2,135 international students from more than 70 countries and regions in the world with about 300 Chinese students. The internationalization of students makes UWS a free, inclusive and diverse university, providing a real international learning and research environment for students, and 96% of high employment rate is also an important factor influencing students' choice of UWS (see UWS,2017).

3. Introduction and analysis of UWS digital marketing channels

In recent years, UWS has stepped up the construction and development of the digital marketing channels for study abroad market in China, such as combining its own resources and features, and creating a variety of digital marketing channels including Chinese official

website, Wechat service account, Weibo, Youku video, Tencent video, Baidu encyclopedia, etc., which helps UWS to reach its target audiences in the market to some extent. An analysis of its digital marketing channels, including the advantages and disadvantage of the channels are conducted as below:

3.1 Advantages of UWS digital marketing channels:

UWS's existing digital marketing channels offer the facilities for UWS to engage with the target audiences with an emphasis on the UWS Chinese official website and WeChat service account. The key advantages of these two digital marketing channels are as below:

3.1.1 UWS Chinese website:

3.1.1.1 Smart service for more audience groups

As the website name (www.uws.asia) indicates, the web site is to serve the Asian market with three languages, i.e. simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, and English. The language version for the first time visitor will be determined by the operating system of the visitor's device, in addition, the website provides the facility for the visitors to set their own preferences, subsequent access will automatically enter the selected version.

3.1.1.2 Concise layout with comprehensive resources

The layout and style of the website is defined as concise, fresh, conforms to UWS as the modern university. Meanwhile, the classification of content pages is set according to the principle of customer orientation, the link of the university profile, news list, tuition fee, scholarship, entry requirements, accommodation etc. are clearly displayed on the homepage of the website, which greatly help the visitors to navigate the information they need conveniently and efficiently. In addition, the website also provides a variety of support services via mobile phone, Wechat, QQ and Email. Most of the programme introduction pages are not only equipped with details information about the programmes in Chinese, but also with video introduction by the programme leaders, which could greatly enrich the professionalism of the introduction page. Last but not least, the video endorsements by the alumni, university staff as well as the chain of cooperation with Chinese colleges and universities websites help to increase the site's credibility among the Chinese audiences.

3.1.2 WeChat Service Account

3.1.2.1 Combined advantages of certificated Wechat service account and Micro-website

UWS has successfully launched the UWS Wechat service account with certification. One of the biggest advantages of a certificated account is about providing advanced functions for

UWS to engage with the audiences, however, the down side of this type of account is the number of messages to be published each month is limited to 4 messages (see Wechat,2017), which implies Wechat service account cannot assist UWS to promote itself in a timely manner. However, the integration of micro-website within Wechat account can effectively overcome this shortcoming as when visitors follow the account, messages from account as well as latest information about UWS from the official website are all available in one place for them to access.

3.1.2.2 Maximize the potential of QR-code

The traditional way to promote Wechat Account is to distribute or share the account's QR code in different settings, for example, a university may place the QR code within its marketing promotion materials and distribute the materials through different channels. It is proved to be an effective way to increase the account's followers by introducing the QR code within promotion materials, however, one drawback of single QR code is the difficulty to analyze the effectiveness of different marketing activities since followers come from different sources cannot be calculated accurately. UWS has developed a multi-QR code system to resolve this drawback, different QR codes will be set for different marketing activities, for example, UWS has designed different QR codes for various education fairs. For attendees of specific education fair, will receive customized information related to the fair after scanning the specific QR-code. This system can aid UWS has accurate control of the marketing effect of different channels. Another advantage of the system is that it enables UWS designated information to be displayed on mobile device user's screen once scanned. UWS has deployed this feature to develop different QR codes for different programme introduction page and combine all these QR codes in the university programme list brochure which has many advantages, for example, it can significantly reduce the waste of paper resources, and make it easier for readers to carry the brochure; it can also act as a powerful channel to attract more followers, as the first timer user of the QR code for accessing introduction page will be asked to follow the account beforehand. Another advantage of providing QR codes for programme introduction is high accuracy of the information, as the user will always access the latest information about the programme.

3.2 Disadvantages of UWS digital marketing channels:

UWS launched its Weibo account in July 2017. Compared with some active UK universities' Weibo, UWS has its own disadvantages, for example, the account is not yet certificated; number of followers is low and search results of UWS related information in Weibo is weak. In a word, UWS Weibo failed to be an effective marketing channel in China; On the other hand, the disadvantages of UWS Youku and Tencent video channels cannot be ignored. Although both video channels have released a lot of videos about UWS and the number of clicks are high, the improper categorization of the videos as well as low engagement activities

with fans, preventing UWS to make full use of the channels. In addition, UWS has not yet used the third-party digital marketing channels for promotion, such as Baidu promotion, WeChat moments advertising, and the utilization of blind advertising and word of mouth marketing are also weak.

4. The future digital marketing strategy of UWS in the Chinese study abroad market

Based on the analysis of UWS’ digital marketing in Chinese study abroad market, including advantages and disadvantages, UWS should be closely tied to the actual needs of the market in China, allocates the necessary resources to further optimize the digital marketing channels for the Chinese audiences (Figure 1).

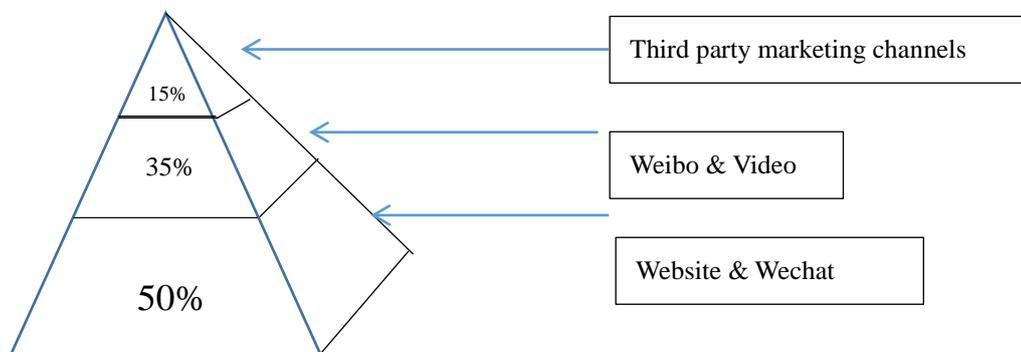


Figure 1. Percentage of resources allocation for different channels (Proposed)

4.1 Strengthen the advantages of official website and Wechat service account

UWS official website and Wechat service account, whether in its digital marketing channels portfolio, or compared with other overseas universities' Chinese websites and Wechat service account, both have unique advantages, the complementary relationship of these two channels help UWS to reach wider audience group, i.e. PC and mobile end. UWS is recommended to increase their input to both channels, expanding the service on a timely manner to meet the market demand, for example, introduce the alumni communication system, fan recommendation and award system, etc., to maintain and increase the influence of UWS among the target audiences.

4.2 Optimize Weibo and Video channels

Both Weibo and WeChat are defined as social media tools, but in essence, there is still a big difference between these two. Weibo is a platform for strong media and weak relationship, while WeChat is a platform for strong relationship with weak media (see Nie,2014). These

two channels are complementary to a certain extent. Therefore, UWS should explore the advantages of Weibo's strong media nature and enhance its influence and popularity while strengthening its Weibo account. On the other hand, Video marketing is also an indispensable marketing channel for UWS, thus the account creation, regular updates and promotion in the leading Chinese video websites are essential (see Hao & Education, 2017), in addition, video live broadcasting, as a more interactive way to engage with the audience, is becoming more and more popular with the decline of traffic fee as well as the increase of connection speed (see Yao, 2016), UWS is advised to organize the live broadcast of UWS on a regular basis, such as the information session about UWS application guide, UWS campus tour live broadcasting, etc., so as to make UWS has a better way to connect the audiences (see Jinhua, 2017).

4.3 Deploy the third party marketing channels to increase credibility of UWS in China

The marketing channels such as the official website, Wechat, Weibo, video channels and other marketing channels of UWS can provide official channels for the target audience to find out more about UWS, however, audience nowadays do not rely on one single source to make their choice (see M & M, 2017). With the deployment of the third-party marketing channels, such as blind advertising in the leading education platforms, it could effectively enhance the credibility of UWS in China. In addition, UWS should also allocate the resources to take care of discussions about UWS within the popular forums in China such as Baidu knowledge, Zhihu, Tianya etc., with the purpose of creating positive impact on the audiences. Last but not least, UWS is advised to utilize other third party promotion platforms, such as Baidu promotion and WeChat moments advertising to increase the search result ranking.

5. Conclusion

All in all, the establishment and development of digital marketing channels is no longer an option but the imperative for overseas universities if they want to stay competitive and grow in the Chinese study abroad market. The growth potential of the Chinese education market has been huge, and more and more Chinese people have been able to explore the world's most advanced education resources, and different universities from the world are keen to capture this attractive market. According to the study of UWS digital marketing strategy in China, it indicates overseas universities should offer differentiated digital marketing services to attract the target audiences as its core competence. To meet this goal, a well-organized digital marketing plan is needed based on the analysis of overseas universities' own digital marketing channels, including the advantages and disadvantages of them. Overseas universities are also expected to develop their digital marketing channels proactively based on the actual need of the market, and gradually, establish a better brand image and improve the quantity and quality of Chinese students for the universities.

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