

# Comparative Analysis of the Web Marketing Strategies implemented by the Higher Education Institutions

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*Abstract:* - Our paper emphasizes the analysis of the web marketing strategies implemented on four Romanian universities and four European universities websites. We reveal the main components of the online communication strategies focused on web marketing tools and social networks, in order to outline the cultural differences referring to web marketing approaches in different countries from the European Union. We consider that our paper has significant implications on the higher education e-strategies as it provides a high visibility of the academic institutions in the online environment which is appreciated by the main target represented by the students.

*Key-Words:* - communication, higher education, online marketing, social networks

## 1. Introduction

The changes in the higher education institutions in the previous years, changes that concern the number of students, the structure of the labor market, the variety of the specializations offered now or even the strong competition both of the public institutions and especially the private ones, had effects on the way the activity of the educational marketing is seen today. Starting with the 90's and up to the present, there is a growing interest in the Romanian education system to graduate high school, most of the young people today choosing to follow a faculty. More than that, once with the 90's, the presence on the Romanian market of the private universities is more and more increased, as they attract a high number of students by means of the educational offer and their conditions. Under these circumstances, the educational marketing at the level of the higher education institutions plays, without any doubt, an essential role in the attraction of a higher and higher number of students. In the same time, the competition of the private institutions represents an alarm signal for the public universities. Any marketing activity, as well conceived as it would be, needs an activity of solid communication, that could ensure the visibility of the product and also determine the target public to action (in general, the acquisition of the product).

If we analyze the importance of communication in the higher education institutions, it plays an important role in making the difference (considering

the larger and larger market of the higher education institutions and the strong competition coming from the private universities). The aspect concerning the moment of communication should be discussed. A frequent mistake is to direct communication strictly towards the promotion of the educational offer and consequently, to develop the communication activity mostly in the recruitment period of the new students, MBA students or PhD students. In order to be more efficient, beside the message creation, communication must consider first the target public it has. According to it, the message will be created and the communication channels will be chosen. Within the higher education institutions, the two large categories of target public are represented by:

- The internal public: students, MBA students, PhD students, academic staff, auxiliary academic staff
- The external public: the future students (usually the pupils of the XII th grade), their parents (family), the school inspectorate, other universities, research centers, the business environment, mass-media, the non-profit associations with impact in the domain, the local, regional or national administration.

With more than 1,6 billion of users in 2009, the Internet is certainly one of the elements that deeply marked the way in which communication campaigns are made. Flexibility, the high number of users, the world extension and low costs it presupposes,

determined a strong development of the online means of communication in the last years.

## 2. Online marketing in the higher education institutions

The quick expansion of the Internet in the previous years, as well as its opportunities led to the expansion of the marketing classical activities and the online area. Often known as e-marketing, i-marketing or web marketing, the online marketing represents the marketing component that aims the development of the product policies, price, distribution and promotion by means of the Internet. When the online marketing methods within the higher education institutions are to be applied, we can successfully appeal to methods such as: e-mail marketing, the creation of a web page and a forum, blogging or even the use of some online social networks. No matter what method would be chosen, a very important element is represented by the adaptation of the message to the aimed public and the channel by means of which it will be transmitted (the conception of a message that will be communicated by means of a blog will be less formal than the message transmitted on the web page of the institution).

**The web page.** It is vital for the institutions to create a 'virtual self', pleasant from an esthetic point of view, easy to use, to contain all the information that is interesting for students and not only because the web page has become a critical communication instrument. An advantage offered by such an 'online identity' is that the information can be easily changed and brought to day. In the same time, the information can be thus, easily disseminated, avoiding the necessary effort in the case of some printed materials. The web page can also present the faculty virtually by means of some image galleries, the effect being even stronger than the presentation of the images within the printed materials of promotion. Thus, we can create virtual tours of the faculty or even the live transmission of some images with activities developed in the institution. The faculties can use the web page to communicate with the other interested actors, besides providing the information of interest for students or the one that has in view the general presentation of the institution. Therefore, the site may contain information, images or articles to support communication with the business environment that could be interested in the future graduates, supervising their evolution. In the same time, the web page may represent a way to promote the academic activities organized in the faculty (symposiums, conferences, debates, etc.).

As an instrument of the online marketing, the web page can be useful in marketing survey oriented towards students. Online questionnaires can be easily applied when the students' opinion is wanted, concerning certain decisions that regard them

personally. Other important aspects that mustn't be neglected in the communication by means of the web page are both the emphasis of the education quality and the quality – cost report or the employment possibilities after graduation.

**The blog.** The blog, shortening of the Web Log expression, appeared in 1994 as an online form of a personal journal. In the case of the higher education institutions, the blogs may represent a means of communication of the interest information for students and not only. The blog may also support communication for the promotion of the educational offer, having the advantage that besides the information provided by the faculty and presented on the blog, the bloggers can read different commentaries, thus, helping them to create a clearer image of the institution. Analyzing the blog from the benefits' point of view in the communication with the future and present students, this type of communication could help creating a closer relation between students and faculty due to reasons such as:

- The language used on blogs is usually informal, specific to the virtual communication, a language to which students can react with interest because of the age category.
- Due to their style, the students can express personal opinions regarding the information on the blog, making commentaries about it.

The online presence of a higher education institution by means of the blog helps creating a positive image in the students' mind because they can perceive this type of communication much closer to the communication they use frequently between them.

**The online social networks.** The development of communication by means of the Internet led to online social networks, online communities that allow the creation and development of some relations with other members of the community. Considering that more than 65% of those who use the Internet are spending now their time surfing the online social networks, as well as the fact that most of those who have a profile within a social network are young persons (18-25 years, the choice of using the social networks in the online marketing strategy within the higher education institutions comes natural. The same as with the blogs, the advantage of using the social networks in the communication with the future and present students is given by the informal language that is used. More than that, a faculty profile within such a network could support an image of an institution that is close to the student, that understands his needs and can communicate using the same language. On the other hand, the social networks can be used by the higher education institutions in order to cultivate and maintain the relations with Alumni. This type of relation between faculty and its students or alumni also represents a point of support in being aware of belonging to a certain institution or identifying himself with it, an

important aspect for the faculty in the communication strategy of the image.

**The e-mail.** The electronic mail or the e-mail represents one of the most accessible instruments that can be used in the online marketing due to the accessibility and easiness to get to the target public. Other advantages of using the e-mail would be the low costs it presupposes, the message reaches the public in a very short time, the e-mail offering the possibility to personalize the message, using images, colors or even different characters for the text.

### 3. Comparative analysis of online marketing within the communication strategy of higher education institutions from Romania and abroad

In view to realize the comparative analysis of the online marketing implementation in the higher education institutions from Romania and abroad, we choose four Romanian universities and four universities from other European countries. The criterion used in the selection of this sample was their tradition in providing high quality educational services, their awareness and quality in research processes.

Having in view the peculiarities of the higher education institutions, their online marketing strategies are focused more on the image building, the presentation of the academic offer and the communication with the target public. In these conditions, the online environment isn't employed only for the promotion of the academic offer but especially on the building of relationships with the target public. The online marketing features that we analyzed were:

- the web page – how is it conceived, what information must be delivered, how these information is revealed, etc.
- the social networks – if the institution has a profile in the social networks, what information it contains, what is the attitude of the visitors' profile

The reasons for choosing these elements are represented by the fact that just few universities implemented in their online marketing strategies tools like the blog or the forum. In what concerns the e-mail marketing, an approach including this tool wasn't difficult to apply.

#### 3.1 The online marketing strategies implemented in the Romanian higher education institutions

The sample of Romanian higher education institutions contains "Babes Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi, University of Bucharest and West University of Timisoara.

##### 3.1.1 "Babes Bolyai" University from Cluj Napoca

Analyzing the web page of "Babes Bolyai" University of Cluj Napoca from the structure point of view, we can affirm that it can be easily used in view to find the necessary information, being focused on utility. In what concerns the communication with the public target, the website provides for the interested persons information regarding the decisions made in the university (Senate resolutions, the archive of newsletters, information referring to public acquisitions, etc.), fact that reveals transparency in communication.

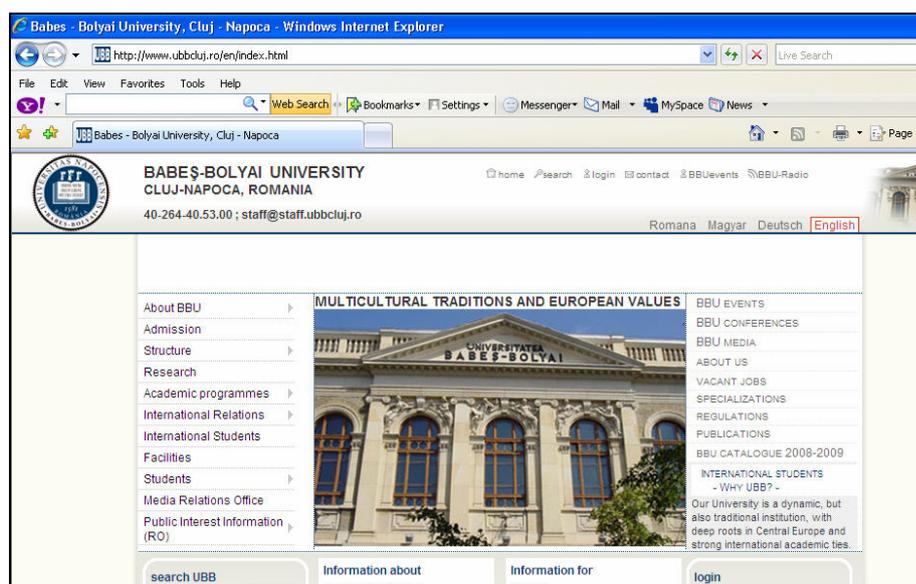


Figure no. 1 - "Babes Bolyai" University website home page

In view to facilitate the communication with the persons from other countries, the website can be accessed in four languages (Romanian, English,

German and Hungarian). An interesting aspect regarding the communication strategy is the possibility to access a online radio station dedicated

to the university's students. Analyzing the "Babes Bolyai" University presence in the online social networks, we observe the existence of a profile in Facebook network, even if it wasn't officially recognized. It was created in order to build discussions groups between the students and the graduates. The profile has more 700 members, which denotes the students' interest in the use of this platform for a better communication.

**3.1.2 "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi**  
 In what concerns the university website, we remark the same transparency in the information presentation. The data is well structured in specific menus, facilitating the access of the web page visitors. An important aspect consists of the translation of the website content in 6 languages: Romanian, English, Russian, French, Japanese and German.

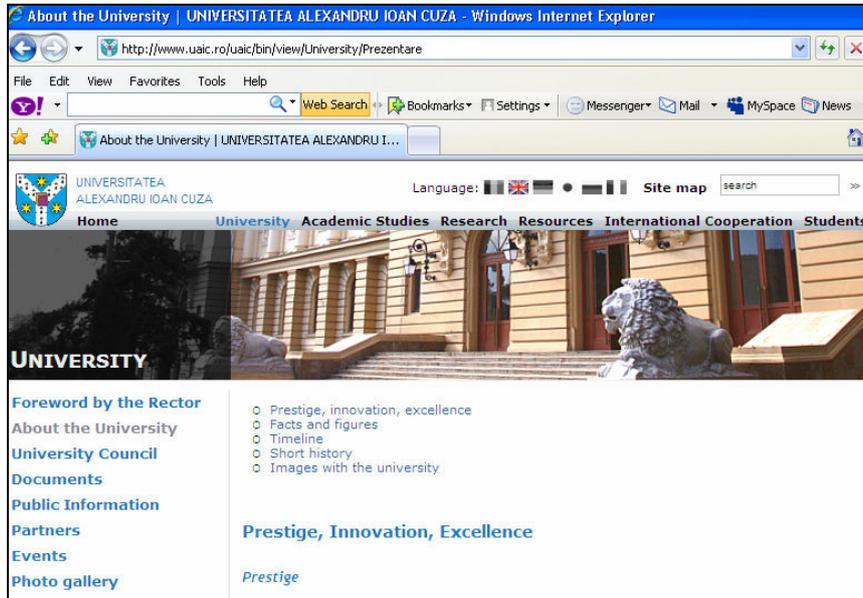


Figure no. 2 - "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University website home page

The web designer of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University website implemented a forum in order to facilitate the open communication among members, the discussions being based on different topics such as academic regulations and information about bourses and university residences. The activity of the university within the social networks can't be considered representative until now. Even if we can find a profile in Facebook network, this one has a

low awareness, few members and very little information concerning the university.

**3.1.3 University of Bucharest**

Even if the information provided by Bucharest University website are useful, well presented and easy to find, the esthetic aspect of the web page is little bit neglected. The website design is simple and the images, useful for covering the message, are few and not representative.



Figure no. 3 – Bucharest University website home page

A strength in the website building process is represented by the existence of a section which offers the opportunity to post complaints and messages by filling online questionnaires. In the same time, we consider that the communication is mainly focused on the direction of future students and actual students, emphasizing the promotion of the university academic offer. Regarding the university presence in the virtual networks, we didn't find a profile. Nevertheless, there are such profiles within different faculties, which are part of Bucharest University

### 3.1.4 West University of Timisoara

The first thing that a West University of Timisoara website visitor observes is the way in which the

home page was created. The design is very attractive and the relevant information is well structured in the menus.

The communication reflects the same transparency that we remarked in the analysis of the other universities websites. The website content is available in three languages: Romanian, English and German. Regarding the communication by the means of the online social networks, there are three profiles in Facebook, but the awareness degree of each of them is not high. In the same time, the information referring the university is not targeted very well, which reveal the fact that the profiles aren't designed by the institution.



Figure no. 4 – West University of Timisoara website home page

## 3.2 The online marketing strategies implemented in four European representative higher education institutions

In view to analyze the online marketing approach adopted by the European universities, we included in our research sample four European universities having a high notoriety on the academic services offer.

### 3.2.1 University Paris-Sorbonne – Paris IV, France

Even if from the esthetic point of view, the web page of this university is relative simple, without features which capture the attention, the information organization succeeds in balancing the online communication strategy.



Figure no. 5 – Paris-Sorbonne – Paris IV University website home page

The online communication facilitated by this website tools mainly focuses both on the actual and future students and on the mass-media. From the students' perspective, we remark the existence of a web portal exclusively designed for their needs which promote an informal and targeted communication. The students can subscribe to the University website and can receive periodical newsletters with relevant information. The section dedicated to mass-media contains press releases and news e-journals regarding the university activities and its implication in the academic community. The Paris-Sorbonne – Paris IV university profile in the social networks counts more than 1.000 active

members and provides an open communication among students and graduates.

### 3.2.2 Nottingham Trent University, Great Britain

The openness towards communication of Nottingham Trent University is revealed while a visitor accesses its webpage for the first time. The web design, without being spectacular, captures the attention by the multimedia presentation which highlights the university news. Another strength of the communication strategy is the way to present the relevant information, every message being accompanied by an image associated to a specific theme.

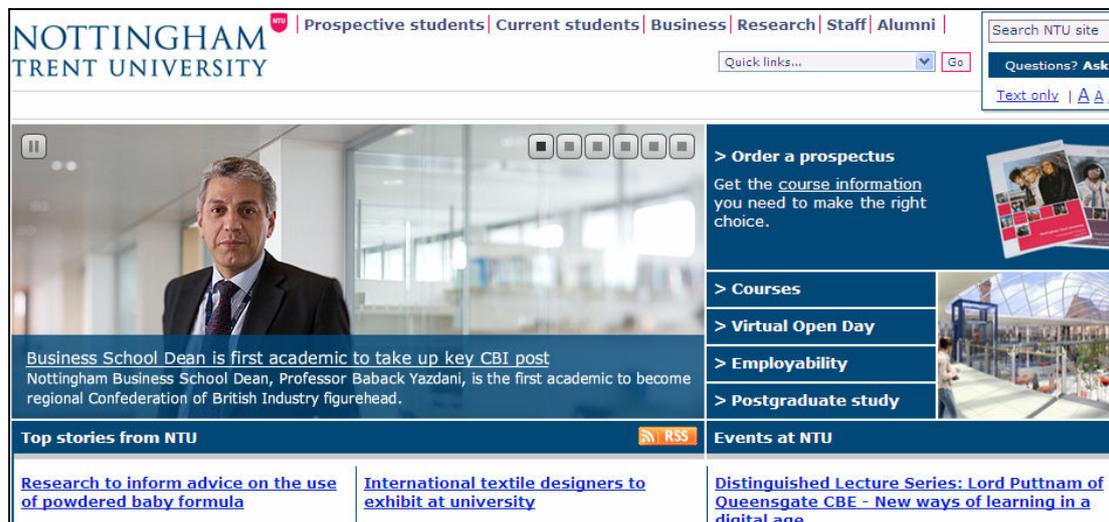


Figure no. 6 – Nottingham Trent University website home page

The communication strategy is focused on graduated, actual and future students; in this way. For the actual and future students, it is based on the emphasis of the opportunities linked to job careers and the possibility to study in a famous academic center. In the same time, the students can communicate their complaints to the academic staff in order to receive a feedback from them. One of the most important elements of the differentiation strategy of Nottingham

Trent University refers to the possibility to pay online the scholar fees – it's similar to online payments made by the customers on e-shops. If we take into account the involvement of Nottingham Trent University in the social networks, we remark six profiles created on Facebook, Twitter, Bebo, Flickr, Myspace and Youtube, the home page allowing a fast access to each of them.

### 3.2.3 University of Bologna, Italy

Even if the main menu is similar to other universities' website, the information is targeted in view to facilitate the site surfing. A peculiarity of the online communication of this university consists of the insertion of a hyperlink to a blog dedicated to the students which are involved in mobility programs as Erasmus, Leonardo, etc.

Another relevant aspect concerning the online marketing strategy is represented by the e-shop which allows the acquisition of products personalized with university's logo. The presence in the social network is well represented as it counts more than 1.000 persons involved in discussions linked to different topics.

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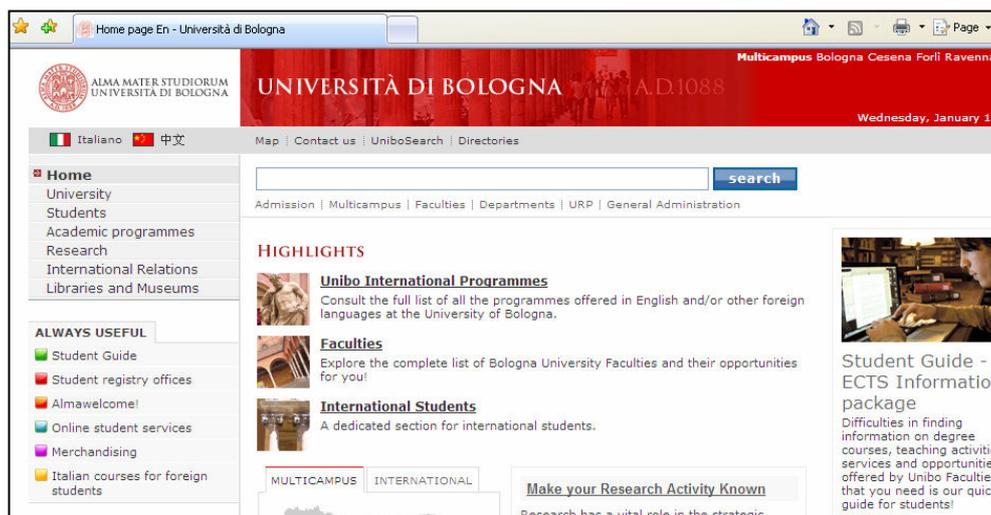


Figure no. 7 –University of Bologna website home page

### 3.2.4 University of Wien, Austria

The menu of Wien University website is very simple but in the same time very clear as it provides quick links to the main topics: studies, research, organization, services, library catalogue and webmail. In view to facilitate the online communication, the home page offers useful hyperlinks to newsletter section or mass media and press releases section.

An interesting aspect refers to the opportunities provide by the insertion of online services as e-

library or consulting services. The Guided Tours, which are available in both German and English, provide an insight into the interiors of the oldest university in the German-speaking cultural area.

We must also outline the hyperlink to Academic Business Incubator INiTS, which provides a lot of opportunities for the students.

The university is involved in three profiles in Facebook social networks, all of them being characterized by a lot of users (students, graduates or HR representatives of the companies).

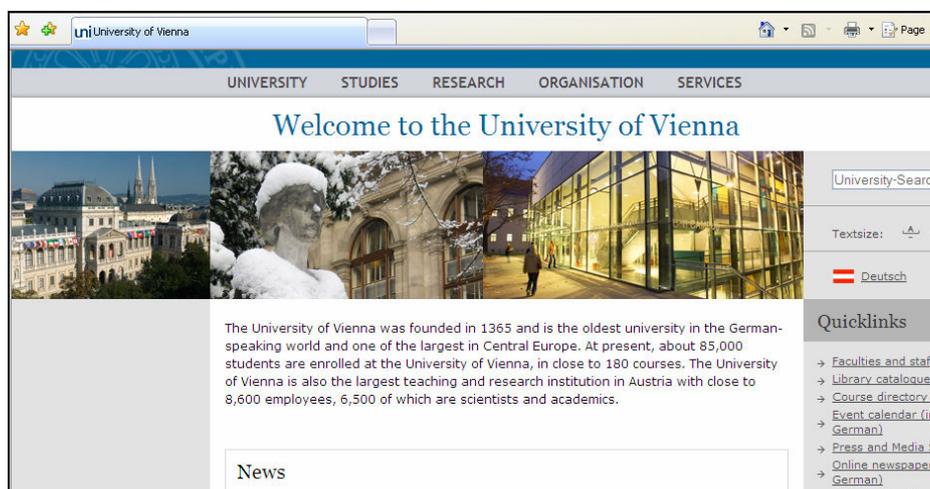


Figure no. 8 – University of Wien website home page

## 4. Conclusions regarding the comparative approach of higher education institutions online communication strategies

The higher penetration rate of Internet provides numerous opportunities both for the companies and the academic institutions. Our survey had as purpose

the identification of the differences between Romanian universities online communication strategies and the universities of other four European countries (Great Britain, France, Italy and Austria).

Even if the survey was applied to eight universities, the results can be considered appropriate as they accomplish the objectives in the online communication strategy approach. The main menus

presented in the home page of each university from the sample provides relevant information about the students, organization, international relations, admission, press releases, research section and specific quick links. The communication strategies are focused both on the actual students and the future ones and are built in order to maintain long term relationships. The importance of the involvement in social networks within the online communication strategies is higher in the universities from the European countries, but we outline the Romanian universities orientation towards this target public. Our research reveals that few universities use the blog or forum in the communication strategies, although their advantages are emphasized in the business practice. In the same time, the personalized e-mail is frequently employed in the relationships between universities and their public target, especially in newsletters. We highlight the fact that the notorious universities from Western Europe develops real marketing strategies in the communication with the students or other stakeholders, providing different facilities like the possibility to pay online the academic fees, e-shops or presenting them internship offers or job opportunities. In our opinion, as a result of the consolidation of the partnerships between Romanian and other European countries universities and taking into account the online communication models, we are sure that the Romanian universities will reach the performances of the online communication strategies implemented in the notorious universities from Western and Central Europe.

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