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THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN THE MARKETING STRATEGIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN POLAND

***Анотація.** У статті представлено фон, на якому відбувались системні зміни у вищій освіті Польщі з 1990 року. Особливий акцент зроблено на створенні абсолютно нового, відмінного від колишніх парадигм, ринку освітніх послуг. Охарактеризовано попит на освітні послуги з 2013/2014 навчального року з урахуванням конкуренції між ВНЗ і необхідності маркетингового управління, вихідним пунктом якого є, в першу чергу, стратегія розвитку та маркетингова стратегія ВНЗ. Охарактеризовано Інтернет як елемент маркетингової діяльності польських ВНЗ. Представлено результати досліджень, що стосуються ролі Інтернету в маркетингових стратегіях ВНЗ в Польщі.*

***Ключові слова:** маркетинг ВНЗ, стратегія, управління ВНЗ, маркетингова стратегія, інтернет-маркетинг, вища освіта.*

***Аннотация.** В статье представлен фон, на котором происходили системные изменения в высшем образовании Польши с 1990 года. Особый акцент сделан на создании абсолютно нового, отличного от прежних парадигм, рынка образовательных услуг. Охарактеризован спрос на образовательные услуги с 2013/2014 учебного года с учетом конкуренции между вузами и необходимости маркетингового управления, исходным пунктом которого является, в первую очередь, стратегия развития и маркетинговая стратегия вуза. Охарактеризован Интернет как элемент маркетинговой деятельности польских вузов. Представлены результаты исследований, касающихся роли Интернета в маркетинговых стратегиях вузов Польши.*

***Ключевые слова:** маркетинг вузов, стратегия, управление вузом, маркетинговая стратегия, интернет-маркетинг, высшее образование.*

***Annotation.** The article presents the background of the systemic changes that the higher education in Poland has been subjected to since 1990. Special emphasis is placed on the fact of creation of an entirely new market of educational services, different from the previously known paradigms. Next, the demand for educational services since the academic year 2013/2014 is characterised, where the competition between higher education schools as well as the need for marketing management, the latter based on the development strategy and the individual marketing strategy of a given school, are highlighted. The Internet is considered an element of marketing activities undertaken by the Polish higher education institutions. Additionally, the*

research results including the results regarding the role of the Internet in the marketing strategies of these institutions are presented

Keywords: *marketing of higher education institutions, strategy, higher education school management, marketing strategy, e-marketing, higher education.*

The changes experienced in Poland since 1989 have impacted the state and the society in each and every sphere of functioning. The political transformation has set new directions in the field of economy, administration, healthcare, and also education, at all levels. The aim of this article is to touch upon several aspects of the transformation of the Polish higher education system.

The Law on Higher Education, act of 12 Sept. 1990 (Official Journal of Laws no. 65, item 385, as amended) rendered the possibility of autonomous functioning for the Polish science, thereby fostering its development by, among others, providing for the following: the 2-cycle study system, the establishment of non-public higher education institutions, the creation of new fields of study, fees for fulltime studies (in case of non-public higher education institutions only), as well as different courses of study, i.e., full-time, evening, extramural and remote studies (all types of higher education schools).

By granting the specific rights, the act set new directions for the market of educational services, a new entity in the Polish reality. The term is discussed at length in the works of, e.g., A. Pabian, A. J. Falzagić, H. Hall and M. J. Armstrong. Exposing the higher education sector to the forces of a free market economy is a debatable issue, both with respect to its interaction with the broadly defined economic and organisational processes, as well as for purely axiological reasons. At this point, numerous questions arise, e.g., in what ways will the balancing of the forces of demand and supply influence the offer of the market and, more importantly, the quality of the services rendered? The Polish experience of the past 25 years may constitute an interesting research material in that respect.

The demand for educational services in the 90's of the 20th century was clearly on the increase, mainly due to two significant factors, i.e., the commonly shared opinion that higher education graduates stand better chances of getting a well-paid job as well as the demographic peak of the generation born in the 70's.

An ample amount of potential students as well as favourable market trends led to a situation in which a large number of higher education schools resulted in stronger competition which, according to A. Pabian, in its purely theoretical aspect, constitutes an opposite of monopoly. Market structures are discussed in detail in the works of, among others, D. Begg, S. Fischer, R. Dornbusch as well as E. V. Bowden and J. H. Bowden. In 1994, according to the data presented by the Central Statistical Office, there were 36 non-public higher education schools, whereas in 2014 their number was 306, out of the overall number of 438 higher education institutions. The data regarding the numbers of students and graduates of higher education schools in Poland, including foreign students, are presented in Table 1. The analysis of these data, focusing in particular on the number of students, reveals the demand for educational services relating to the

sphere of higher education in academic years 1990/1991 – 2013/2014, its continuously growing dynamics up till the academic year 2005/2006, when the number of students was almost 484 % higher than in 1990/1991 [1].

Table 1*

Number of students and graduates of higher education institutions in Poland
(including foreigners)

Academic year	Students	Graduates*
1990/1991	403 824	56 078
1991/1992	428 159	59 046
1992/1993	495 729	61 424
1993/1994	584 009	64 201
1994/1995	682 200	70 295
1995/1996	794 642	89 027
1996/1997	927 480	115 868
1997/1998	1 091 841	146 318
1998/1999	1 273 955	174 771
1999/2000	1 431 871	215 423
2000/2001	1 584 804	303 966
2001/2002	1 718 747	342 138
2002/2003	1 800 548	366 141
2003/2004	1 858 680	384 029
2004/2005	1 926 122	391 465
2005/2006	1 953 832	393 968
2006/2007	1 941 445	410 107
2007/2008	1 937 404	420 942
2008/2009	1 927 762	439 749
2009/2010	1 900 014	478 916
2010/2011	1 841 251	497 533
2011/2012	1 764 060	485 246
2012/2013	1 676 927	455 206
2013/2014	1 549 877	
* the data till 2000 concern calendar years		

* Source: [1, p. 29]

The upward tendency sketched along these lines lay at the foundations of the market of educational services which, having reached its peak, started to shrink. In the context of supply shaped by a large number of students from years 2005/2006, this situation prompted a significant intensification of the rivalry between the market forces as defined by M. Porter.

As it stems from the above presented considerations, ever since 1990, Polish higher education institutions have been forced to face the free market reality and adjust to its rules, predominantly the rules of conduct in the field of the broadly-defined marketing, including the idea of organisation marketing management (see, among others, Ph. Kotler, E. Skawińska, W. Waszkiewicz) based on the marketing strategy approved by the respective governing bodies (see H. Mruk, M. Baker, D. Aaker).

The terminology relating to the strategy of organisation appeared in the literature as well as in the management practice in the 60's of the 20th century. According to S. P. Robbins and D. A. DeCenzo, the representatives of the so-called planning school, the organisation strategy consists in working out of ways of systematic review of environmental dynamics, appraisal of the strong and weak sides, as well as identification of opportunities for gaining competitive advantage [2, p. 144]. The term «strategy» may also be understood to result from a response to environmental changes, i.e., a stream of specific decisions motivated by these changes [3]. According to H. Mintzberg, cited here, it requires a constant revision of the questions: «Who we are?» and «Who do we want to be as an organisation?»

The creation and implementation of a higher education institution in the context of environmental changes is not only a rational decision forced by the ever stronger competition, but also a statutory duty set out in the amended Act of 18 March 2011 *on amendments to the act – Law on higher education, act on the academic degrees and the academic title, the academic degrees and the academic title in the field of art and amendments to other selected acts* (Official Journal of Laws no. 84, item 455, as amended). Pursuant to this act, «the Rector of a higher education institution prepares and implements its development strategy in the form approved by way of a resolution passed by this institution's collegiate body set out in the Statute. The resolution may specify the funds, including the funds from the institution's development fund, to be allocated for the implementation of the strategy» [4]. The analysis of the literature leads A. Dziedziczak-Foltyn to conclude that despite the fact that there is a problem with the efficient and effective management of higher education institutions, issues relating to the strategies of higher education schools (in Poland – author's note) are rarely explored by researchers and the information relating to them is scarce [5, p. 193].

The development strategy of higher education institutions has been discussed in the works of, among others, J. Jasiczak, C. Kochalski, M. Spała, K. Leja, B. R. Clark and A. Dziedziczak-Foltyn. In the period from 2013 to 2014, A. Piotrowska-Piątek carried out extensive research in the field of development strategies of higher education institutions [6]. Back in the early

90's of the 20th century, S. P. Robbins and D. A. DeCenzo, already mentioned here, pointed out that due to the high cost of obtaining higher education, the presence of competitive companies offering alternative educational services as well as cuts in the federal university spending, American universities had implemented systemic actions in order to analyse their own targets and identify the niches in which «they would be able to survive, function and implement effective strategies» [3, p. 44].

The marketing strategies of higher education institutions in Poland have been discussed in the works of A. Pabian, M. Pluta-Olearnik, and I. Seredocha, among others. According to Seredocha, «the major factors shaping the marketing strategy (of a higher education institution – author's note) are the following: the competitive status of the institution, its mission, strategic targets, resources, its students' needs and lifestyle, phases in the life cycle of the offered fields of study, as well as the general macroeconomic conditions» [7, p. 22].

In that sense, the marketing activity planning should make use of all available tools, the Internet having undoubtedly been the locus of attention in the past couple of years. Nowadays, online marketing strategies are widely discussed, yet several years ago this relatively extensive interest was far from obvious. Before the year 2000, this topic was taken up in the publications of, among others, R. Brady, E. Forrest, R. Mizerski, M. Castells, S. Collin, W. Hanson, R. Levine, J. Strauss, R. Frost, T. Vassos, J. H. Ellsworth, M. V. Elseworth, including the Polish authors, e.g., J. Wielki, A. Sznajder, A. Bajdak, P. Guziur, M. Strzyżewska, L. Kiełtyka.

The era of e-marketing is said to have started in the 90's of the 20th century. At that time, e-mail and the hypertext World Wide Web (announced officially by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991) laid foundations for the development of the Web in its current dimension. The dynamic expansion of the Internet has been coupled its commercialisation, and market mechanisms have generated the marketing potential of this (currently the most important) medium [8, pp. 196-200]. The phenomenon of development and usefulness of online marketing underlies its model of communication. Whereas the traditional media adhere to the *one-to-many* model, the Internet allows two alternatives, i.e., *one-to-one* and *many-to-many* [9]. These models, described in detail by D. L. Hoffman and T. P. Nowak in the mid-90's, mark the two developmental stages of the Internet, i.e., WEB 1.0 and WEB 2.0.

It is, among other things, the interactivity, availability 24/7, personalised messages, precise targeting, unlimited capacity of messages, user activity (*pull*-type medium, in contrast to the traditional, *push*-type media) and the social dimension of the Internet (endless conversations, connections through the Social Media) that make it a useful tool for marketing purposes. It would be interesting, although methodologically difficult, to analyse the development of online marketing in the specific countries. On assumption that the development of e-marketing is to some extent conditioned on e-advertisement, such an analysis of the Polish market has already been carried out [10].

The Internet has changed the face of marketing for good by evolving from a supplementary medium to the dominating one for many sectors, including the market of higher education services (although the author is not familiar with any research carried out in this area). The data regarding the role of the Internet in the marketing strategies of higher education institutions in Poland presented herein constitute part of a larger research enterprise carried out in the period from November to December 2013 within the confines of an original project entitled «The role of the Internet in the marketing activity of higher education institutions in Poland».

The aim of the research was to specify the role and the meaning of the Internet in the marketing activity of non-public higher education institutions in Poland. It was carried out in the form of a survey questionnaire. The questions used were of an open-ended or semi-open-ended type. The questionnaire was directed to employees responsible for the marketing activity of a given school. The respondents were mostly managers, rectors' proxies or marketing specialists, i.e., personnel formally appointed to represent the school outside as well as to supervise and cooperate in the creation of the marketing activities. Among the subjects, there were both public and non-public higher education schools. Table 2 shows the sample distribution with respect to the school type.

Table 2*

Sample distribution with respect to school type

Type of higher education institution	No. of higher schools CSO 2011	Research sample
Universities	19	4
Higher schools of technology	25	5
Higher schools of agriculture	7	2
Higher schools of economics	77	17
Higher schools of pedagogy	17	4
Higher marine schools	2	1
Medical universities	9	2
Academies of physical education	6	1
Higher schools of art	23	5
Higher schools of theology	14	3
State higher vocational schools	36	8
Other higher education schools	218	48
Total	453	100

Source: Author's presentation based on the data of the Polish Central Statistical Office

Given the turbulent changes affecting the sphere of the so-called digitisation of marketing, the research devoted to the perception and use of the Internet for the marketing-related purposes by higher education institutions is instrumental to their marketing strategy. Though not representative, the research may serve as a probe in the discussion regarding the general marketing orientation of the specific schools. The majority of the subjects interviewed (73 %) claim that the Web, as a medium, contributes in a significant way to the creation of the school's image. Still, the results of the research presented in what follows reveal that some respondents have divergent expectations as to the use of the Web for marketing purposes. A great number of them point out that online marketing activity is cheaper in comparison with the traditional media. The opinions obtained are relative and hint at the fact that the e-marketing of higher education institutions is at an early stage of development. Similar opinions, characteristic of such early stages of online activity have also been uttered in with respect to other market sectors where this sort of activity is selective and rarely encountered. 69 % of the subjects agree with the claim that the Internet allows to reach precisely the target group of potential students in the market segments currently served by a given school, 23 % disagree with it, and 8 % find it difficult to assess. Although the percentage of positive answers is high, one can observe a discrepancy between the online technical targeting capabilities and the segmentation process itself. As for the latter, the medium is no longer of key importance. Rather, it is the market know-how as well as the recognition of the clients' (students') needs that seem critical.

According to the vast majority of the respondents (95 % and 97 %, respectively), the Internet allows quick access to information on the market of educational services and it is conducive to the improvement of the quality of student service. As the survey results regarding the prospects for using the Web in order to strengthen the positive, interactive relations with the students, between the students and the school, as well as to recognise the students' needs more effectively show, the use of the Web for marketing purposes by the Polish higher education institutions is still at the level of WEB 1.0. The Internet is not perceived as a tool for obtaining detailed information concerning the current as well as the future, potential students (23 % – yes, 29 % – no, 48 % – difficult to say). The respondents confirm that the Web is useful for introducing new elements of the educational offer to the market as well as in the sale of such services. The details of the survey are presented in Table 3.

As regards the use of the Web for marketing purposes, the results obtained indicate that it is treated as an object rather than the subject. At this point, it seems necessary to extend the scope of the research so as to encompass the strategic perspective.

Table 3*

The role of the Internet in the marketing activity of Polish higher education institutions

Specification	Agree	Disagree	Difficult to say	Total
	[%]	[%]	[%]	[%]
The Internet as a medium contributes significantly to creating the school's image	73	21	6	100
Marketing activity on the Internet is cheaper than using the traditional media	94	2	4	100
The Internet allows to reach precisely the target group of potential students in the market segments currently served by a given school	69	23	8	100
The Internet allows to reach new market segments	58	19	23	100
The Internet allows to access information concerning the market of educational services quickly	95	2	3	100
The use of the Internet contributes to improving the quality of student service	97	1	2	100
The Internet allows to tighten positive, interactive relations with students	44	20	36	100
The Internet renders better recognition of students' needs possible	9	67	24	100
The Internet strengthens the bond between the school and its students	51	22	27	100
The Internet allows to gain information regarding current and potential students	23	29	48	100
The Internet supports the introduction of new elements of schools' educational offers to the market	87	2	11	100
The Internet supports the sale of educational services	94	0	6	100

Source: Author's presentation based on author's own research

83 % of the respondents agree and 15 % partially agree with the statement that the strategy of online marketing activity constitutes part and parcel of each and every marketing plan of a higher education institution. The obtained results indicate that higher education institutions perceive the Web as an important tool for marketing communication and, as such, it cherishes a firm position in all sorts of key documents. E-marketing activities are also entirely (57 % of the respondents) or partially (35 % of the respondents) integrated with the remaining elements of the marketing strategy. According to yet another opinion, shared entirely by 79 % and partially by 21 % of the interviewees, the Internet as a medium significantly supports the marketing activity of higher education schools. Although the awareness of the marketing potential of the Web is at a high level, respondents seem to be less optimistic as to its actual implementation, i.e., only 36 % argue decisively that that it provides a unique opportunity to gain competitive advantage (59% agree partially with this claim, and 5 % are indifferent).

Particularly noteworthy is the attitude of higher education institutions to marketing activities in the Social Media. 91 % of the respondents fully agree and 9 % partially agree with the claim that activity in this sphere substantially supports its overall marketing activity. This is expected given the recent trends in e-marketing, i.e., the assumption that WEB 2.0, unlike other web services like WEB 1.0, creates the prospects for a relatively little invasive marketing communication by involving the users and building communities through social web services, the issue that deserves to be researched thoroughly.

Almost all the respondents (98 %) confirm that the World Wide Web service is the rudimentary tool for running e-marketing activity, which may be interesting given the availability of a whole spectrum of other tools for marketing activity on the Internet. It seems though that most higher education institutions, while planning its strategic actions, restrict themselves to the WWW and the Social Media. This is shown by the fact that only 21 % of the subjects agree with the claim that their school is planning to extend the scope of marketing activities on the Internet. Though 71 % partially agree with it and 6 % stay indifferent, the distribution of scores seems to reflect a rather passive approach to the idea of developing e-marketing and the conviction that «the minimum target» has already been achieved.

This state of affairs may only be improved through the continuous education of marketers in the field of online marketing activities, as may be deduced from the respondents' opinion on the state of knowledge required to carry out effective marketing activities on the Internet. In that respect, 38, 57 and 5 % of the respondents, respectively, agree fully, partially or otherwise partially disagree with the claim that the abovementioned state of knowledge is sufficient. The details of the survey are presented in Table 4.

Table 4*

The role of the Internet in strategic marketing activities of higher education institutions in Poland

Specification	Definitely Yes	Partly Yes	Neither Yes nor No	Partly No	Definitely No	Total
The strategy of online marketing activities constitutes part and parcel of each and every marketing plan of a higher education institution	83	15	2	0	0	100
E-marketing activities are integrated with the remaining elements of the school's marketing campaign	57	35	5	3	0	100
The Internet as a medium substantially supports the marketing activity of the school	79	21	0	0	0	100
The Internet creates a unique opportunity for the school to gain competitive advantage	36	59	5	0	0	100
The activity of the school in the sphere of the Social Media substantially supports its marketing activity	91	9	0	0	0	100
The WWW service is the basic tool for running e-marketing activities	98	2	0	0	0	100
The school is planning to extend the scope of its marketing activity on the Internet in a successive manner	21	71	6	2	0	100
We have sufficient knowledge to carry out effective marketing activity on the Internet	38	57	0	5	0	100

Source: Author's presentation based on author's own research

The Law on Higher Education of 1990, enacted at the threshold of the political transformation in Poland, established new rules of functioning for higher education institutions, both in the administrative sense and in the economic dimension. Ever since the introduction of free market rules, they have been forced to function on a par with business enterprises in the sense that they have continuously had to adjust themselves to the environmental changes as well as struggle to gain competitive advantage. This, in turn, has stimulated the academic circles to implement the rules of strategic management and, in

consequence, create and put into effect the strategy aiming at gaining the competitive advantage, anyway.

The market-oriented actions included in the marketing strategy have thus become the rudimentary aspect of activity of higher education institutions focused on satisfying their clients' – students' needs in the best way possible. One of the rudimentary marketing tools nowadays is the Internet. As the research results indicate, it is a crucial element of the marketing activity of higher education institutions and it is high on the marketing strategy priority list. Unfortunately, the approach to e-marketing in higher education schools does not keep pace with its dynamic development and, as such, it is couched in the reality of WEB 1.0. The school WWW service remains the major marketing tool, though it should be observed that there are expectations as to the extension of the scope of the online marketing activity. In that respect, more detailed research is needed to examine the prospects for the application of a wide spectrum of numerous other instruments of e-marketing, with special emphasis on the activity in the sphere of the Social Media and mobile marketing.

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