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SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING OF LEADING RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES (CASE STUDY OF RUDN UNIVERSITY)

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Abstract

The extremely competitive market of education requires the leading world universities the implementation of open communication policy. It is important that Russian universities have communication practices in social media. Social media are the main channel for information sourcing by the student. We attempted to answer the questions: how effectively uses the opportunities for interacting with a youth audience. The aim of the study was to assess the dynamics of communication indicators of RUDN University in social media over the past 5 years, as well as to study effective communication practices implemented by the university at these web-platforms. The group of researchers from RUDN University regularly took measurements of brand communication performance indicators of leading universities of Russian and global educational ratings. We used open data from university communities in social media, calculated the index of engagement of audiences in communication with the brand and carried out a comparative analysis to identify and study the best practices. The results of the study made it possible to record the generally positive dynamics of the main indicators of the effectiveness of RUDN University's communications in social media. We assessed the dynamics of RUDN University's communications in social media over the past 5 years. The authors looked up the most successful communication practices implemented on the university's social media and made the guidelines for optimization of the organization's corporate and marketing communications in the segment for improvement of interaction with educational product consumers.

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1. Introduction

The era of the Internet came just a few decades ago, but it changed the world around us. These changes are everywhere from the numerous ordinary gadgets to the transformation of the communication model and new ethics (Styns & Van Fucht, 2008). These changes also affected the educational services market, which on the one hand is actively developing today due to distance program mode and on the other it is already unthinkable off-web as a marketing and corporate environment.

1.1. Internet as a marketing environment for a global university

The promotion of educational services on the Internet has become a common practice for global universities over the past 20 years. At first university websites and then communities in social networks became the platforms for interaction with potential clients: the applicants and their parents. You can find information about the university and the admission rules, the cost of education and the student residences, ask the issues exercising and even submit the documents on these platforms. Internet advertising tools found to be no less effective. Today, a successful university admissions campaign is not complete without contextual, banner and targeted advertising.

1.2. Internet as a corporate environment for a global university

During 20 years the Internet has become an environment for corporate communications. The promo sites have expanded with useful functionality and transformed into complex platforms that take into account the needs of their target audiences (Khalilov, 2017). It has become the standard practice for university websites to post information necessary for students and teachers. Timetables and grants, library and medical care, corporate mail and other technology services are just a few of the options that consolidate the portals of global universities for a corporate audience.

Social networks play a special role in the current model of corporate communications. They give much more freedom and opportunities for building dialogical communications. So, any student can initiate the creation of a community of his group for exchanging of educational information or express publicly his opinion about the educational process in the comments to some news in the official group of the university. If this student is a blogger with a loyal audience of hundreds of thousands subscribers, then this private opinion may well be transformed into a public one and affect the image and reputation of the university.

As a result today global universities are in a situation where

- the communication practice actively develops and uses new tools,
- the principles and nature of the brand's interaction with its audiences are changing.

2. Problem Statement

Obviously this situation requires from the leading universities of the planet to implement an open and active communication policy. At the same time, brand promotion is carried out in an integrated and systematic manner, incl. on social media platforms (sm) (Anholt, 2020).

- Communication sociability of universities is manifested in the readiness to interact with all target audience far almost any questions. Moreover, strategic plans and communication programs, financial and annual reports, scientific research and educational programs are available. The education by the world's leading experts is begun accessible, for example, through a system of free online courses. The university itself becomes achievable: the organization of a visit is one of the main options of university websites (Schroeder, 2016).
- The complexity of branding of a global university involves the variety of tools for end of communication purpose in education. Communication campaigns are losing their instrumental homogeneity. The promotion of the university is beginning to be seen as a complex of integrated mass communications combining various channels and tools including social media marketing (smm) to raise awareness and strengthen of the loyalty of target audiences (Belyakova, 2015).

2.1. Development of corporate standards based on successful practices

Various tactics of communication solutions have already been developed in traditional brand communications with target audiences and we have already the recommendations for certain communication campaigns. The new methods and tools of communication still need to be studied. Insofar as research in this area has mostly pilot character, so communicators often operate in a new environment through trial and error. In this regard, the formation of new knowledge is difficult, but the study of successful practices and analysis of bad experiences become the basis for the development of communication standards.

The experience of promotion of Russian universities in the global educational market is not great. Russian universities began to engage in communications purposefully only at the beginning of the XXI century (Galichin, 2015). Therefore they traditionally focused on the experience of foreign colleagues when building a brand communications system. However, social media marketing became an area in which everyone turned out to be newcomers, and global universities began to search optimal communication solutions to achieve their goals. To this day successful smm cases already exist in leading Russian universities. It is quite possible to rely on them for developing corporate standards (Logan, Fischer-Wright, & King, 2008).

2.2. Highness of dynamics of Internet communications including in the field of smm

At the same time, Internet communications are a very dynamic environment in which various changes are constantly and have high speed. Some of them are due to technological solutions or legislative proposal, but perhaps one of the key drivers of these transformations is the desire to improve communications with target audiences. However, smm practices are actively developing under our eyes whatever the reasons that generate new conditions or tools (Weber, 2010). They range from using augmented reality filters and holding large-scale challenges to creating new popular platforms such as TikTok, in which, for example, the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation is already actively working.

3. Research Questions

In 2015 not all the leading universities in Russia had social media accounts by contrast with the leading universities of global rankings. The modern students cannot imagine their being without social networks, photo and video hosting services, that show the studies of generations X and Z conducted in Russia and abroad (Adindex, 2017; Google..., 2017; MAGRAM MR, 2017). The Internet is the main channel of the information sourcing for the youth audience. From this point of view, full-value communications of educational brands today are unthinkable outside of social media platforms with the key audiences in terms of the age dynamics (Glagoleva, Zemskaya, & Kuznetsova, 2019). In this regard, we have made an attempt to answer the following questions:

3.1. Changes in the brand communications system of Russian universities over the past 5 years

This is crucially important. The competent use and optimization of the organization's communication resources is the key to successful admissions campaigns, effective corporate communications and a high assessment of the university with considering the requirements of the time and in a highly competitive market of educational services. After all, the reputation of the university is one of the prime factors of assessment in the methodology of such global rankings as QS and THE. Often, the applicants are headed for it under otherwise equal conditions when choosing a university for education.

3.2. Effective use of social media by global universities

In this regard, the direct communication with the youth audience has a particular significance. This communication is possible thanks to new media. (VCIOM, 2016) How reach the information to applicants and students, as well as to graduates? How create the loyalty to the university brand and strengthen the university's reputation? How create and recapture the unique atmosphere of alma mater, in which you would like to return constantly and remain in place the communication with her? Social networks, photo and video hosting give this opportunity. But how effectively use the opportunities of these platforms with the youth audience?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to assess the dynamics of the communication indicators of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) in social networks over the past 5 years, as well as to study effective communication practices implemented by the university at these web platforms. In this regard, we set the following tasks:

4.1. Conduct complex analysis of communication indicators of RUDN University in social networks

This will allow making the synchronous review of data on the basis of which it is possible to draw a conclusion about the effectiveness of the efforts being made at the moment. Also in the diachronic aspect it will allow to track negative and positive trends that are associated with the insufficiency of implemented

solutions or with the overcoming difficulties that existed at different times. For a total the data obtained make it possible to recalibrate the communication strategy of the university brand and to change the approaches for interaction with target audiences on social media platforms when such a need arises.

4.2. Elaborate recommendations for improvement of the effectiveness of social media communications

The analysis of communication indicators will become the basis for identifying the most successful smm cases implemented in RUDN University. This can form the basis for future positive changes. Studying them will allow:

- Enter upon the developing smm communication standards for a global university,
- Make a list of recommendations aimed at improving the efficiency of smm communications at RUDN University.

5. Research Methods

Over the past 5 years the group researchers from RUDN University have regularly measured the target indicators of the communication activities of leading universities brands in global educational rankings and leading universities in Russia including in new media. Amongst others for this, we used open data from the communities of universities in social networks, calculated the engagement index (ER) of audiences in communication with the brand. We made the benchmarking study to identify and research the most effective practices on the basis of data obtained.

6. Findings

The results of the study made it possible to note a generally positive dynamics of the main indicators of the effectiveness of communications of RUDN University. They also made it possible to realize that one of the ways to increase user engagement in communication with the university brand is the production of students' own content.

6.1. Expanding the presence of global universities on social media

Interaction with audiences on social networks has become a regular practice for leading Russian universities not so long ago. In 2015, not all universities among the participants of the strategic project for Russia in the field of higher education had accounts on the most popular platforms in social media (The Russian Academic Excellence Project – Project 5-100). Even if these “RepOffice” were created, the work with them was only at an early stage, so the number of subscribers and the engagement rates were extremely low. This was especially notably in comparing of the indicators of smm-activities of leading universities of the global rankings.

So, at the beginning of 2015, Saint Petersburg Electrotechnical University "LETI" and Lobachevsky State University of Nizhni Novgorod (UNN) didn't have accounts on Facebook, the largest international social network. These institutions are among the leading universities in Russia and they are participants in

the Project 5-100. Their system communications with target audiences on this social media site began to form only by the end of the year. Thus on November 2015 the account of LETI had 87 subscribers on Facebook, and UNN had 1023 users.

For example, during the same period, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had 735 173 Facebook followers, Michigan State University (MSU) had 408 221, Imperial College London had 110 340, Technische Universität München had 55 098, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) had 52 447 and National Taiwan University had 32 913 subscribers (Zemskaya, Glagoleva, & Kuznetsova, 2019).

Since then, the situation has changed slightly. On the one hand, by August 2020 there was a multiple expansion of subscribers in the groups of Russian universities as a percentage of compare with November 2015. So, the number of subscribers to the Facebook account is 1391 in the official community of LETI (growth by 1499%) and the UNN had 2139 users (growth by 109%). However, the total number of subscribers in the groups of Russian universities in Facebook is still not large.

The growth of subscribers is often less significant in percentage terms in the communities of leading universities in the global rankings, but in absolute numbers it seems impressive. For example, MIT has 1.3 million subscribers (increase by 77%), MSU has 485 618 (growth by 19%), Imperial College London has 182 882 (growth by 66%), Technische Universität München has 96 453 (growth by 75%), EPFL has 84 600 (growth by 61%), National Taiwan University has 108 855 (growth by 230%).

The number of sites in new media is also growing, where global universities have their official pages. So if in November 2015 Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (MGIMO) was present at 3 sites (Facebook, VKontakte and Youtube), today it has 5 such sites: Facebook, VKontakte, Youtube, Instagram and Twitter. In November 2015 Tsinghua University had official account only on Twitter with 2 071 followers. Today the university is well represented on social networks, it has official pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Youtube. However, not all universities follow this way. For example, National Taiwan University today has the official group only in Facebook and the channel on Youtube, as in 2015.

6.2. Expanding the presence of RUDN University in social networks

The modern students cannot imagine their existence outside of social networks, photo and video hosting. (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018) The perception of this fact has led to a qualitative change in the attitude of RUDN University to communication in social media. By November 2015 RUDN University had created and developed accounts on Facebook (7 870 subscribers), VKontakte (26 510 subscribers), Twitter (2 105 subscribers), and on the video hosting Youtube (1 423 subscribers). This was one of the best consolidated results of work with the brand of Russian university in social networks, which was achieved by daily updating of content using photo and video materials.

Now the smm-activities of RUDN University are spreading also to Instagram. The indicators of the effectiveness of work in social networks have also changed (Zemskaya et al., 2019). In August 2020, the official university account on Facebook has 47 458 subscribers (for comparison: in February 2019 there were 36 393 subscribers), on VKontakte – 50 032 (in February 2019 – 41 815 subscribers), on the English-speaking account in Twitter – 2 207 (in February 2019 – 1 761 subscribers), on Instagram – 21,4 thousand

subscribers (in February 2019 – 13,8 thousand), and on video hosting Youtube – 4,66 thousand (in February 2019 - 2 065 subscribers).

At the same time, annual and five-year indicators have significant positive dynamics. The growth in the number of subscribers on Facebook from February 2019 to August 2020 was 30%, on VKontakte - 20%, on Twitter - 25%, on Instagram - 55% and on Youtube - 126%.

In general, the total volume of subscribers' activity in communications with the brand has also noticeably increased. If in 2015 the number of likes per post ranged from 5 to 30, then at the beginning of 2019 these indicators have grown significantly. Thus, the middle number of likes per post was 58 on VKontakte in February 2019 and 66 in August 2020. This figure was 598,5 at the beginning of 2019 on Instagram and at mid 2020 was 745. At the same time, the middle number of comments or reposts per post over 5 years has changed insignificantly and remained in the same range from 1 to 10. However, ER remains stable. The ER stood 0,16 in February 2019 and in August 2020 for the VKontakte community 0.16, and was 4.4 and 3.5 for Instagram respectively.

6.3. Creation of communities by faculties, institutes, departments and students in social networks

Various structural departments of universities also embark on a course of creation their own accounts in social networks. So, the Institute of World Economy and Business (IWEB) and Faculty of Economics, of RUDN University have the communities in VKontakte and Instagram with respectively 839 and 603 subscribers in August 2020. The School of Integrated Communications of the Higher School of Economics has 2645 and 2239 subscribers respectively in VKontakte and Instagram in August 2020, as the Institute of Economics and the Management of Ural Federal University (UrFU) respectively has 2914 and 639 subscribers. The local communities in VKontakte created the Department of Advertising and Public Relations of North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) (623 subscribers in August 2020), the Department of Public Relations and Advertising of Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russian (391 subscribers in August 2020), the Department of Advertising and Public Relations of Ural State Pedagogical University (USPU) (334 subscribers in August 2020), Department of Advertising and Public Relations of the State University of Management (222 subscribers in August 2020), etc.

Various departments on Instagram are also active. Thus, the Department of Advertising and PR of St. Petersburg University of the Humanities and Social Sciences (SPbUHSS) (102 subscribers in August 2020), the Department of Advertising and PR of Altai State University (446 subscribers in August 2020), etc. have " RepOffice " on this web platform.

Some structural departments are present on several platforms. For example, the Department of Advertising and Business Communications of the IWEB RUDN University has formed communities in Facebook, VKontakte, Instagram and launched a Youtube channel.

These communities are used for the promotion of educational services and for internal corporate communications. On the one part, the department put in social networks information about educational programs, teachers and students, their successes and achievements, and on the other part there are the schedule, news, announcements, etc.

6.4. Audience involvement in content creation as a tool for successful smm practices

One of the ways for increasing user involvement in communication with the university brand is the production by students of their own content including in the UGC (User-Generated Content) format. Indeed, on the one hand, the interaction of the university brand with its audiences can be carried out within in terms of various competitions and challenges, quests and online shows in which students, applicants, etc. are involved as participants and invited guests. On the other hand, students can act as organizers and authors of a wide range of communication products: from video clips to educational programs. Moreover some of them may claim the status of events.

For example, third-year bachelor students in the course of "Technologies of PR-events" filmed a series of videos during the preparation of the XI International Scientific and Practical Conference "Advertising Vector-2017". Later the videos became viral. They were posted on the official pages of the IWEB RUDN University, of the organizer of the event on social networks Facebook, VKontakte and Instagram ahead of the conference, in April 2017. The changes in coverage indicators and social approval are clearly visible in monthly reports after the publication of the videos (Zemskaya et al., 2019). The audience coverage increased almost 10 times after posting videos in the IWEB RUDN University's community in VKontakte. The data are presented in Figure 1.

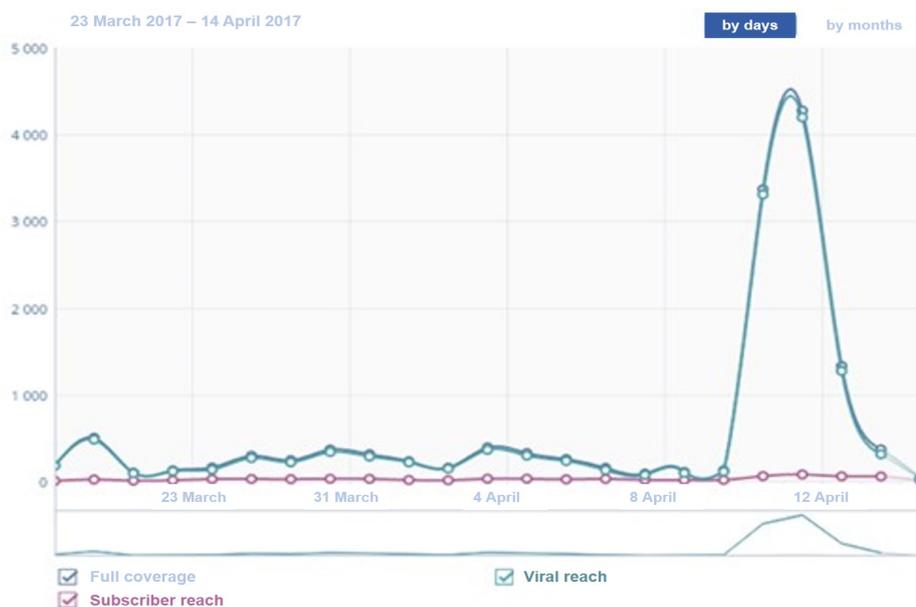


Figure 01. Coverage indicators of the target audience in the official account of the IWEB RUDN University in VKontakte in April 2017

A similar situation with likes was on the IWEB RUDN University account in Instagram, that Figure 2 illustrates. The videos were posted on this platform also.



Figure 02. Indicators of likes in the official account of IWEB RUDN University in Instagram in April 2017

The cooperation with students is quite productive in matters of creation of content for social networks. It is quite capable in the end to give a significant result, which will be reflected in quantitative and qualitative communication indicators of the university's activities and its departments on various sm-platforms (Gureeva, 2015). At the same time, the nature of the communications of the educational brand will correspond to the requirements and the spirit of the age.

7. Conclusion

Following the results of the study the authors assessed the dynamics of RUDN University communications in social networks over the past 5 years, studied the most successful communication practices implemented at the university's sm-platforms. This allows us to formulate a number of recommendations for optimizing the practices of corporate and marketing communications of the organization in the relevant segment for improvement of interaction with a specific target audience, which is the audience of consumers of the educational product.

7.1. Positive dynamics of performance level of Russian universities in social networks including RUDN University

In general, we can assess positively the activity of Russian universities in social networks, including RUDN University. Their presence is expanding on various sm-platforms, the number of subscribers in the official communities of universities is growing. New formats for content are being searched constantly and the gained experience is actively used. The system of brand communications in the leading Russian universities has already been formed and is working with a sufficient level of efficiency.

7.2. Improvement of the efficiency of brand communications of global universities in social networks

At the same time, the Internet is such substance in which the changes are constantly taking place. Therefore the improving of communication performance indicators is not only possible, but it is necessary. In this regard, the following recommendations can be included for optimizing the communication practices of global universities in general and RUDN University in particular for social networks, as well as for photo and video hosting:

- It is necessary to use a variety of formats and types of content, since monotony and similarity reduce attention and interest,
- It should take into account the high dynamics of changes in Internet communications, track current trends and not be afraid to experiment, since innovation is the key trend of the decade,
- Involvement of students in content production is desirable, since, on the one hand, it allows them to develop their professional competencies and, on the other hand, makes them part of the university live and of its brand.

In view of this Russian universities will be able to develop communication practices in social media. They can effectively interact with their target audiences on these platforms.

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