

Marketing Communications Mix of Universities - Communication With Students in an Increasing Competitive University Environment

Schüller David, Rašticová Martina

Abstract

In this period of increasing competition among universities and demographic decline in the Czech Republic, every manager working within the academic sphere must focus on optimizing the marketing activities of tertiary education. The aim of this study is to analyze the methods and styles of marketing communications universities and their faculties use when communicating with prospective students. The paper identifies procedures which help to optimize the choice, combination and connection of elements and activities of the marketing communications mix in relation with prospective students. A semi-structured interview and questionnaire method were used to achieve the research objective. The study concludes by discussing the research outcomes. Also, practical recommendations are discussed and interpreted and proposals are presented for further research into the marketing strategy of Czech universities and their faculties.

Key words: higher-education institutions, marketing communications, marketing communication mix.

1. INTRODUCTION

Philip Kotler, Professor of marketing at Northwestern University, defines marketing as “a social and management process in which individuals and groups satisfy their needs and wants through creation, supply, and exchange of valuable products with others”, (Kotler, Saunders, Armstrong, & Wong, 2007). It is a good characteristic of the strategy and tools used by marketing.

At present marketing is used in many different areas of business and public sphere. Because of the diversity of such areas, authors dealing with such issues feel that a different marketing concept should be found for each of them.

Marketing specific for universities is the subject of research of a number of authors. Hammond, Harmon, and Webster focus on strategic marketing related to the performance of a university placing an emphasis on marketing planning, (Hammond, Harmon, & Webster, 2007). (Hemsley-Brown, & Oplatka, 2006) are concerned with university marketing in a broader sense systematically analyzing different views found in the literature about such issues, (Hayez, 2007) deals with the future of university marketing. He emphasises the importance of integrating strategic planning and marketing and more detailed processing of an integrated marketing communication and forming a successful university brand.

Many research papers point out the ever increasing competition among universities and the necessity of improving the marketing processes in order to achieve better communication between universities and their interest groups. (Ivy, 2008), for example, concentrates on addressing students stressing the fact that this interest group should be regarded in a more comprehen-

sive aspect establishing marketing-mix model consisting of seven factors. He also concludes that the classic four-factor model is not sufficiently efficient at universities encouraging further research in this area. (Ho, & Hung, 2008) specify a suitable marketing mix and strategies for institutions of the tertiary education. Their work focuses mainly on the market segmentation. Stemming from their own research, they identified five main groups of university candidates for whom they defined suitable marketing strategies.

Enhancing the identity, image, and brand of universities and their diversification is seen by experts as another key factor in winning new students. (Pelsmacker, Geuens, & Bergh, 2003) stress that an organization's identity is closely related to the brand, product, distribution, and communication towards stakeholders. This is in fact a certain way of presenting the firm. The university brand and identity is the subject of research conducted, for example, by (Goonawardana, & Hemsley-Brown, 2007) who concentrate on cooperation between the rector's office and individual faculties in creating a university brand. The university brand and identity is further investigated by (Lowrie, 2007). He describes how two diverse fields – university mission and marketing approach affect identity of these institutions. Russian authors (Saginova, & Belyansky, 2008) emphasise the importance of strategic marketing focused on innovations for further development of universities on the background of transforming Russian economy. They view the cooperation between the university and the private sector as a convenient innovation concept. (Chapleo, 2010) deals with the key factors which influence and form successful brand of a university. Among these factors, there is a clear vision, highlighting leading position, participation of employees on forming a successful brand etc.

Students are the main target group of services offered by universities. (Russell, 2005) tries to find which factors account for the satisfaction of domestic and international students being thus relevant for setting up suitable marketing communication. (Gruber, Fuß, Voss, & Gläser-Zikuda, 2010) have created a fifteen-dimensional model for measuring the satisfaction of students with the services offered by universities. Within a marketing context, (Ramachandran, 2010) investigates the way the management of a university tries to improve the services it offers to students pointing out the impact of a marketing management on communication with students.

Some authors focus on particular tools of the marketing communication mix. Web sites, for example, receive an enormous interest. (Castro et al., 2004) or (Hennicker, & Koch, 2000) are concerned with improving their content looking for a suitable rating method. The matter of improving the quality of websites and searching for suitable methods for assessment is dealt by (Vaughan, Farrow & Tims, 2006). (Panopoulou, Tambouris & Tarabanis, 2008) focus on defining framework for a website evaluation. (Hackett, & Parmanto, 2005) investigate accessibility of university websites to disadvantaged students. These authors conclude that the higher complexity of websites decreases their accessibility to disadvantaged students.

In the Czech Republic, (Světlík, 2009) deals with university marketing problems stressing the necessity of uniting all communication mix elements into a single process with unified management as an integrated approach to marketing communication enhances its efficiency delivering synergy.

At Brno University of Technology, marketing communications towards prospective students are studied by Eva Knebllová. Some of her results were the actual inspiration for the research

presented in this study, (Knebllová, 2009). Detailed knowledge and analysis of the information resources most frequently accessed by the prospective Brno University of Technology students is among the key factors of the university's marketing policy (see Figure 1).

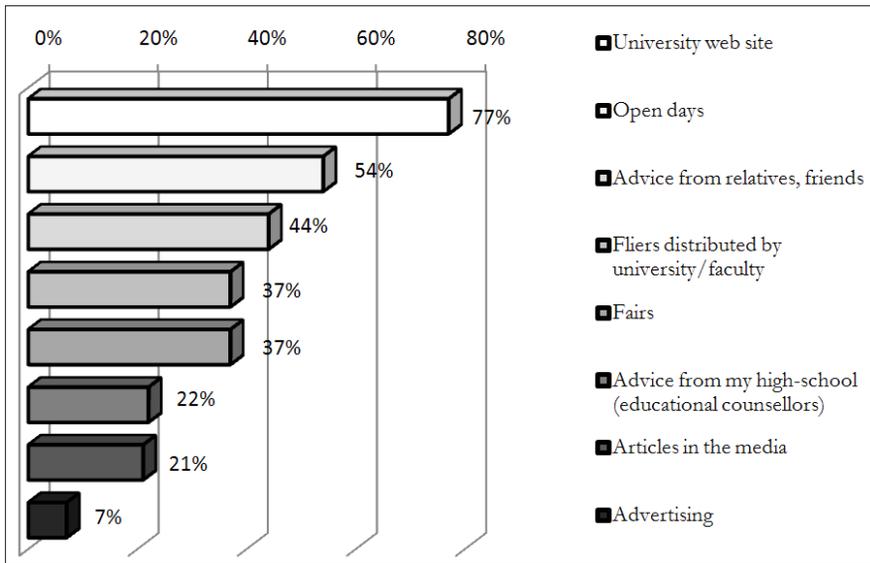


Fig. 1- Sources of information for prospective students. Source: taken from Knebllová, E. Results of an Internet Inquiry of Prospective Students conducted at Brno University of Technology, 2009, p. 14.

Figure 1 shows that there are also forms of direct contact other than a fair seen as essential by prospective students. These are open days in the first place, which play an important role in university promotion. In the interviews, the respondents further said that the above-mentioned roadshow was still a very efficient form of marketing communication pinpointing a target group. Here, moreover, prospective students may directly ask university representatives about the programmes offered by a particular university or faculty.

Figure 1 shows that information leaflets (37%) are another efficient form of university promotion. They are mostly used in combination with a direct form of marketing communication such as open days, fairs, roadshows, and knowledge contests. The advantage of a leaflet is that it provides prospective students with the gist of the relevant information in a clear way.

Advertisements in newspapers are only seen by the respondents as a marginal source of information (1.3%). Figure 1 tells us, moreover, that, generally, students do not think advertising an important source of information on study (7%). Universities should, therefore, think twice before choosing a particular form of advertising in terms of the costs involved and the precision of targeting.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The present study aims to investigate the forms and activities of the marketing communications mix used by universities and their faculties of a business character when communicating with prospective students. Next to analyse and identify the methods that will help optimize the selection and combination of particular elements and activities of marketing communications with prospective students. Emphasis is placed on issues related to the correct targeting of such activities, which is closely related to marketing communications. Finally, based on an analysis of the data collected, the study designs methods that can be used to optimize the marketing communications mix of a particular institution of higher-education.

3. METHODS USED

In the first phase of research done in the first half of 2010, a method of half-structured interview was used designed by the authors of the paper based on the experience from their previous research (see above). The inquiry covered 15 participants from 7 public higher-education institutions in the Czech Republic. These included Rectorate officers and staff of economic faculties in charge of marketing communications at these institutions. The aim was to investigate, in the first place, what forms of marketing communication are used by universities to address their prospective students.

In the second phase of research, which took place in the second half of 2010, a questionnaire enquiry was conducted. After a detailed analysis of international research papers published concerning this problem area (see the above list) and semi-structured interviews carried out by the authors, a questionnaire was set up to find out what source of information was used by prospective students to find out about study at the Faculty of Business and Management, next to identify the target group (the type of school from which the students come) and its needs (why they chose study at this particular faculty). A total of 581 respondents filled in the questionnaire when registering for the first year of study.

4. OUTCOMES OF THE FIRST PART OF RESEARCH – A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Based on previous research, the following questions were devised:

1. What forms of marketing communications does the university/faculty use when addressing prospective students?
2. What forms/events of marketing communications are the most important for the university/faculty in addressing prospective students?
3. In what way should the university/faculty develop its MC in the future?

4.1 What forms of marketing communications does the university/faculty use when addressing prospective students?

Based on the evaluation of the respondents' answers, the most frequent forms of marketing communications were assigned to individual elements of the today already classic market-

ing communication mix, (Kotler, Armstrong, Harker, & Brennan, 2009). With a possibility of assigning some forms to more than one element, as also evidenced by examples provided by Armstrong and Kotler, (Armstrong, & Kotler, 2003). The authors, however, think that it would be better if the names of the elements met the requirements and needs of higher-education institutions. Therefore, they propose changing them by renaming the sale support and personal sale communication elements to communication support and personal communication respectively.

Communication mix of a higher-education institution created as a result of the interviews:

1. Communication support

- Competitions – these include, for instance, knowledge contests or projects dealing with specific issues with students motivated by winning prizes. At the Brno University of Technology Faculty of Business and Management, this is, for example, a Business Point competition. This should motivate teams of secondary-school students to carry out projects on specified topics presenting them at the Faculty of Business and Management. The best projects are then rewarded by prizes of educative nature.
- Roadshows – this involves building long-term relations with secondary schools as partner schools. Representatives from a university visit secondary schools trying to provide them with best information possible on their university and faculty making the secondary students interested in studying at a higher-education institution familiar with all the study benefits.
- Presents – a collection of small souvenirs presenting a given university with an advertising motto, logo, etc.
- Educational fairs – during these events, representatives from universities pass information directly to prospective students encouraging them to study at a given institution.
- Educational events – may consist in universities preparing a series of lectures and seminars intended for prospective students. Every year, for instance, a summer school for secondary-schools female students is organised at the Brno University of Technology Faculty of Information Technology. This marketing activity aims to increase the interest in studying at the faculty of female students, (Honzík, 2010). In 2009, this event took place at the beginning of the academic year lasting one week. The secondary-school students participated in many interesting seminars and lectures on IT issues. The organiser included IBM and Microsoft so that the participants could learn about specific IT features from the practical point of view. At the end of the summer school, the students received a certificate.
- Open Days – prospective students may visit the faculty premises where they would like to study to meet their future teachers, see the lecture rooms, labs, and learn about other factors influencing the quality of study at a given higher-education institution.
- Fairs – these are mostly educational fairs of the Gaudeamus type in Prague and Brno or Akadémia in Bratislava.

2. Advertising

- Fliers – such as those offering degree programmes
- Radio commercials for open days and other events
- Billboards – promoting the university logo or large marketing events



- Advertising in the press – open days, degree programmes offered
- Posters – announcing competitions or shows
- Pictures on public transport vehicles – showing the university logo, offering courses, etc.
- Web presentations of the university and further advertising on the web – all events possible
- Video spots – for the school logo or product (study options)

3. Relations with the public

- Materials for prospective students (magazines, bulletins, etc.)
- University experts appearing in the media
- Annual reports
- Conferences attended by the public
- Research papers and other articles in the media
- Editing the university's own periodic for various target groups (such as first-year students).
At Brno University of Technology this is Brno University of Technology News.

4. Personal communications

- Fairs – Gaudeamus, Akadémia
- Roadshow – partner universities
- Direct presentation of the university during special events (such as Night of the Scientists)
- Open days

5. Direct sale

- E-mail – offers of courses
- E-shopping – selling university promotion material, specialised books

4.2 What marketing communications forms/events are the most important for the university/faculty in addressing prospective students?

The following were the most frequent answers in the interviews:

- Web presentations of the university and other forms of advertising on the web (banners)
- University ratings on the web
- Some else's recommendation
- Direct contact with students such as during open days, roadshows, fairs, various competitions.

4.3 In what way should the university/faculty develop its MC in the future?

This is what was mostly suggested in the interviews:

- All the marketing mix elements should be managed in a concerted way – preferring integrated approach
- New forms of marketing communications should be looked for – using the social networks in the first place and other web applications such as Facebook, Second Life, Twitter, and YouTube

- Forms should be extended of direct communication with prospective students – they should be personally approached
- The communication forms should be tailored to the wishes and interests of prospective students – courage is necessary to think of new, non-traditional ways of marketing communications. Night of the Scientists was among the most frequent events mentioned by the respondents followed by a university tent at large music festivals, Majáles (a student May celebration), various knowledge contests for prospective students, etc.

5. INTEGRATING MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS OF A HIGHER-EDUCATION INSTITUTION

Currently, for many reasons, marketing communications must be integrated in all fields and areas. Higher prices of the media, better communication skills of the target groups, move towards relationship marketing and others are among such reasons, (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Bergh, 2003).

A higher-education institution should provide prospective students with consistent information and the desired image of its identity. All communication activities should be well prepared and carried out in the necessary order by comprehensive management. The below simplified schema suggests how the marketing communication elements and activities of a higher-education institution can be integrated. The largest circle shows how the five marketing communication elements are interrelated. Individual elements depicted by mid-sized circles contain various communication activities as the smallest items.

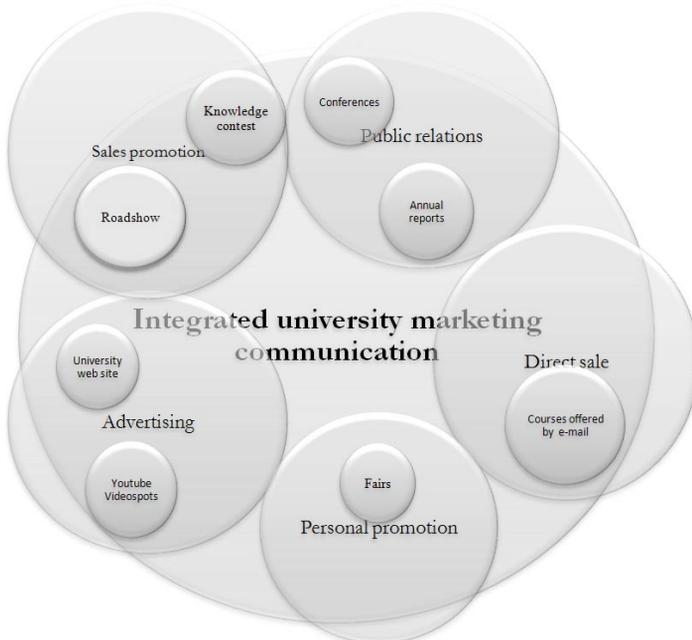


Fig. 2 - Integrated marketing communications of a university. Source: Created by the authors of the paper.

Marketing communication mix consists of a number of activities that are not easily arranged in a logic sequence achieving the highest synergic effect. Pickett and Vinten define synergic effect using the equation $2 + 2 = 5$, (Pickett, & Vinten, 2000). The authors stress that, using a certain number of elements within a whole will bring more efficiency than using the elements separately. This is why the entire process must be planned carefully. Integrated approach does not involve just combining all the items of a communication mix, but also interrelating all the activities within each communication element. The following figure demonstrates the achievement of a synergic effect by interconnecting selected activities of a higher-education institution within the university communication support element. Here the integration of individual marketing activities has the form of a funnel. Each circle then stands for a particular marketing communication activity. Once the needed interrelation of the communication activities is reached, a synergic effect takes place.

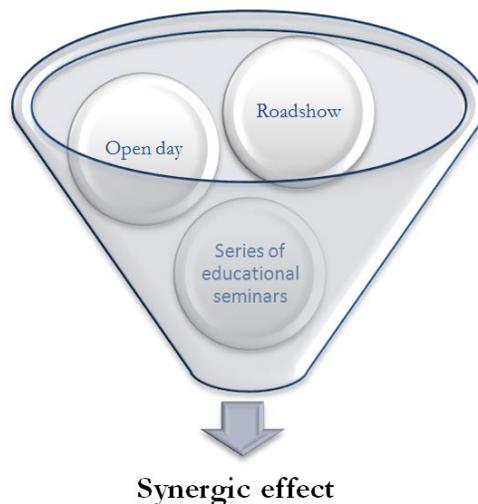


Fig. 3 - Synergic effect. Source: Created by the authors of the paper.

6. EFFICIENT TARGETING OF MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

Like in the commercial sphere, universities and faculties must use the tools of marketing communications in the most efficient way not only towards prospective students. The aim must be a maximum number of prospective students addressed given limited resources. If a university wishes to address a group of potential students in an efficient way, it should gain a more thorough understanding of such a target group. The information obtained will help achieve the correct focus for each activity of the communication mix selecting its proper intensity. In this way, the university can improve the planning of its activities making them more congruous and logically interconnected. By setting coefficients, the plan may indicate whether a marketing event should cover all the secondary schools or some school types such as gymnasiums should be given priority. The plan may also appoint a coordinator and other persons in charge of individual events. It is also good to list the funding and other resources needed for each activity.

The following example describes the first step chosen by the authors of the study for the needs of marketing communications at the Brno University of Technology Faculty of Business and Management.

7. RESULTS OF THE INQUIRY CONDUCTED AT THE BRNO UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

The analysis of the questionnaires was to find out about the information sources from which prospective students learned about the possibility of studying at the faculty, about the type of their previous education and reasons for choosing exactly the Brno University of Technology Faculty of Business and Management.

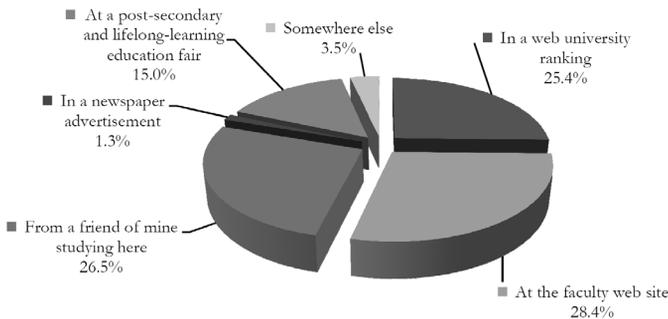


Fig. 4 - Where did you get information on study at the Faculty of Business and Management? Source: Created by the authors of the paper, N = 581.

Most of the students found the study information at the faculty website (28.4%). A friend studying at the Faculty of Business and Management was a second significant information source (26.5%). Important were also web university ratings (25.4%). Advertisements in newspapers, on the other hand, accounted for only 1.3% of the respondents.

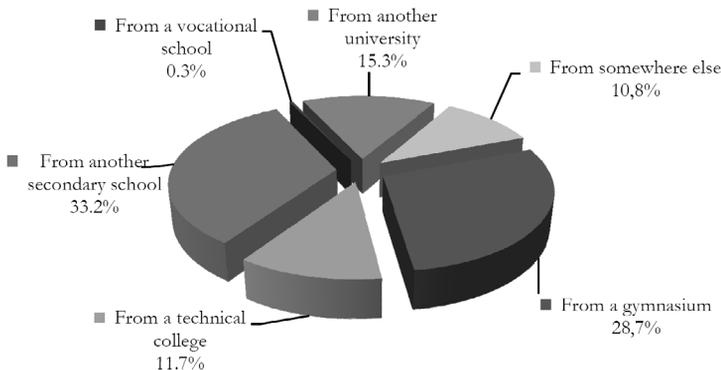


Fig. 5 - You come to the Faculty of Business and Management. Source: Created by the authors of the paper, N = 581.

The largest part chose the “from another secondary school” option (33.3%). 28.4% of the first-year students came from a gymnasium and 15.3% from another university. Only 0.4% came from a vocational school.

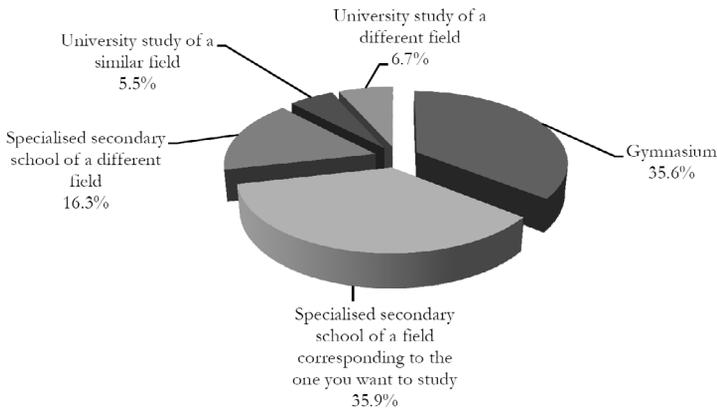


Fig. 6 - What is the nature of your previous education? Source: Created by the authors of the paper, N = 581.

Most prospective first-year students studied at secondary schools of a specialisation corresponding to the one they are interested in (36.1%). 35.4% respondents said that they had studied at a gymnasium. Secondary school of a different specialisation was completed by 16.4% of students. Only 5.5% of respondents said they had studied at a university of a similar nature.

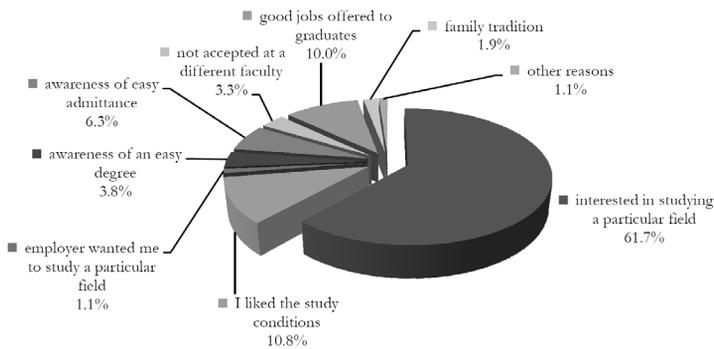


Fig. 7 - What was the main reason for your applying to the Faculty of Business and Management? Source: Created by the authors of the paper, N = 581.

Most of the students (62%) applied to the Faculty of Business and Management because they were interested in studying a particular field. 10.7 % of the students found the study conditions interesting. An exact 10% of the students applied to the faculty because of the good jobs offered to the graduates.

8. INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

One of the key factors of successful marketing communications at higher-education institutions is the choice of a correct communication form. From the answers to the first question of the inquiry, it is clear that the key role should be played by web promotion taking different forms such as a university's own website and university ratings.

Analyzing the interviews with representatives from universities, one can also find proposals of new forms of marketing communications – these include social networks in the first place such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and other web applications. Second Life popular at US universities may serve as an example. This is a 3D virtual world offering many promotion opportunities. In the Czech Republic, this environment is used, for example, by the Philosophical Faculty of Palacký University in Olomouc.

Direct contact with students is another type of marketing communication that needs to be further developed. From an inquiry among first-year students follows that prospective students very often visit fairs to get information on study opportunities at selected universities.

From the outcomes of the enquiry, it is also clear that recommendations by friends and relatives are very important for a potential student to gain information on study at a university. The overall image of a faculty, the students' and graduate's personal experience and, importantly, the quality of the education offered no doubt testify to the quality of each university and faculty and a good piece of advice from a close friend may influence the choice of a university.

Analyzing the questionnaires, one sees that it was the particular study field, the study conditions as well as good jobs offered to the graduates that were among the key factors influencing the decision to apply to the Faculty of Business and Management. For this reason, the authors of this study recommend stressing the benefits related to the study fields a university offers pointing out to prospective students the good study conditions and emphasizing the job opportunities for the graduates.

The outcomes of the inquiry also show that the marketing communications of a university must be directed towards the gymnasiums and economic colleges in the first place. This does not necessarily mean that other schools should be neglected, but the intensity of promotion should be adequate to the number of potential students at each school. The information gained is very important for planning marketing events where direct contact with students is involved. These are, for instance, roadshows, various knowledge contests as well as educational seminars for the secondary-school students.

9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When planning their marketing strategies, higher-education institutions and universities should consider applying integrated marketing communications. The initial step includes the creation of a university's own marketing mix, that is, the forms of communication with prospective students. The design of a marketing strategy should always be preceded by a detailed analysis of the most efficient sources of information on the study opportunities at a university or college. Also the target group should be explored in detail to find out about its needs, wishes, and expectations. Important are also statistical data on the fields of specialization of the secondary schools supply-

ing the most potential students to a particular college or university. The next step involves setting up a plan of marketing events that are mutually interrelated and form a logical pattern. Recommended is precisely defining the target group (using coefficients, for example, to indicate whether a particular marketing will cover all the secondary schools without discrimination or some school type will be given a priority), appoint a coordinator and other persons in charge of the entire event, and list further funding and other resources needed to implement the event as a whole.

For the needs of strategic planning, new ways of communication should be devised on a continual basis. The study results indicate that social networks (Facebook, Twitter) and other applications (such as YouTube) promise a huge potential of the communication between the universities and its potential students that has yet to be used to the full. Another area that should be taken into account is direct communication with prospective students, which should be strengthened, in other words, prospective students should be met in person. New creative forms of marketing communications also bring considerable benefits – Night of the Scientists, university promotion tent at large music festivals, various knowledge contests for prospective students, etc., which may highlight the efforts of a university.

Due to the long-term demographic decline in the Czech Republic, the protracted economic crisis, and the resulting fierce competition of higher-education institutions, a good marketing strategy of each university is one of the most important factors of its further existence. We believe that the present study will be an inspiration and perhaps a guideline, too, to a practical improvement of the communication strategies of the Czech universities. Taking into account the excellent geographic position of the Czech Republic (which is in the heart of Europe and the Schengen area), the growing globalization and the spreading multiculturalism of this country, we believe that the next phase of the marketing research should be aimed at a detailed analysis and the definition of marketing communications with both prospective domestic students and prospective international students. This research should be done at more universities in the Czech Republic to obtain relevant data. On the basis of the paper results authors suggest following general hypothesis for the future research purposes:

Hypothesis - There are significant differences in frequency of the use of various communication mix tools when students want to get necessary information about the university related to students' personnel expectations and needs.

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Contact information

Ing. David Schüller

Brno University of Technology, Faculty of Business and Management

Department of Management

Kolejní 2906/4, 612 00 Brno

Czech Republic

Tel: +420 608 780 401

E-mail: schuller@fbm.vutbr.cz

PhDr. Martina Rašticová, Ph.D.

Brno University of Technology, Faculty of Business and Management

Department of Management

Kolejní 2906/4, 612 00 Brno

Czech Republic

Tel:+420 54114 3750

E-mail: rasticova@fbm.vutbr.cz