STEM Student Enrollment in the Era of Distance Learning

What Worked and What Did Not during the Global Epidemic

Almost exactly a year ago, during the general admission procedure in the spring of 2020, the entire Hungarian higher education sector was "shocked" by the drastic decrease in the number of applications. Last year, about 20.000 fewer people tried to enter universities than in the previous year, a decrease of 18%. Moreover, not only was the fall outstanding compared to the 2019 data, but there have also never been such a few applicants in the last two decades.

Among the larger institutions, the capital's Eötvös Loránd University was the least affected, while rural and especially technical training institutions were often able to record a decrease of several thousands in the number of applicants. In looking for the rationale behind the data, educational researchers came up with a few explanations, but it is most likely that the difficulty of obtaining the advanced level graduation exam required by the 2020 admissions process was the main obstacle for students.

After the enrollment data became final in September, it was clear to all leadership of institutions that there is something needed to be done. But what could be done in a pandemic situation caused by the COVID-19 virus, when direct contact with potential students was hindered, cumbersome, and often impossible for several reasons?

It is a trivial statement for professionals familiar with the world of marketing communication, but perhaps it is not superfluous to point out here that today no communication interface can compete with social media in terms of value for money or achievement. The targetability of the target groups, the simplification of the messages, the fast and varied production of the content, the possibility of responding to the constantly changing needs are all directed the advertiser to these "rented", "paid" and "deserved" (unowned) types of surfaces.

Advertiser? Rather, it should be called an information transmitter or a partner that communicates with the recipient. Today, there is no longer "just" advertising, but the so-called information noise bridging should also be a goal. We get to our own target audience – or the answer we are looking for – when we say or look for it where and when the partners are present together. And the digital space, online and social media are the optimal platforms for this. There is the phone in our hands, the laptop in our lap, the PC in front of us on the desk. This needs to be addressed accordingly. There is no poster, no paid print,

or TV commercial that can reach and drive your target audience with the same level of accuracy as a social media content tailored to your target audience. Content created for this entry level was supported by a faculty "landing page" interface focusing on enrollment.

However, the enrollment campaign revealed several important facts. Because, like everything, a campaign has its uniqueness. In the enrollment campaign of Kandó Kálmán Faculty it became clear from the measurement of the target group, and then the initial statistics was further strengthened by the re-measurements, that all tools in each topic can only be supportive in addition to personal visit, personal contact and relationship maintenance! That is, the goal should be to reach secondary schools, students, their parents and teachers (the main target groups) directly, to learn about and meet their needs on the topic. The reception of the faculty member who directly addressed the schools produced outstandingly good results. And the school was able to convey the message of the institution to the stakeholders through its own, already established communication channels. Thus, the message reached the target group through a channel that was considered authentic on the topic and at the same time up to date. It is also recommended that current students be returned to their former high school for a professional class / teacher training class / online in a closed group for graduate classes for personal, peer-to-peer discourse. These are the most worthwhile solutions!

As a result of our holistic social media campaign the number of website users increased by 20% compared to the same period last year, and the bounce rate decreased by 18%. The number of visitors to https://felveteli.kvk.uni-obuda.hu increased the most, which is probably the results from clicks on e-mails sent to schools visited in person.

The social media campaign is obviously not for itself; we want to support its effectiveness with a few numbers. The success of the institutions' enrollment campaign and the popularity of each course can best be characterized by the number of first-place applications at this stage of the admission process. The final measure will obviously be the number of candidates, but this is not yet known.

If we compare this year's and last year's application data of our own and our primary competitors, after last year's deep flight, there is a kind of correction in the total number of applications. Overall, 7.2% more students applied for a technical field this year than in 2020. In comparison, the 17.3% increase of Kandó is nationally outstanding. Let us notice that the Kandó campaign was the most successful of the Hungarian institutions providing "hardcore" technical training this year!

Findings and suggestions

(1) In the light of the above, it seems inevitable to rethink the online presence of the faculties and the institution as a whole, and to build a much more conscious enrollment marketing strategy.

(2) Restrained and predictable costs, well-targeted audience, economically viable content, delivery of own messages. This can be provided to the university and its faculties by social media through a constant and regular, planned and conscious presence.

(3) No matter how virtualized our world is, the role of personal, ongoing networking and liaison (!) with high schools is key.