Search-centric approach to sustainability of academic marketing

Abstract. Organisations are looking for the way of optimising the effects of marketing with respect to their sustainability. Three of the most important characteristics of sustainability concept include friendliness to the environment, long-term positive economic effects and respect to the customer by means of non-aggressive marketing based on principles of social responsibility. In this article, the author aims at introducing the concept of search-centric marketing as the marketing approach reflecting changes in consumer behaviour on one hand and the desire for sustainability on the other hand. A cyclic induced effect of sustainability of marketing activities is introduced showing the mutual dependence of addressing a higher number of potential students, higher quality of students and increased level of brand recognition and awareness of a university. The evidence is provided regarding the importance of reaching top results in search engines for relevant keywords to increase effects of marketing activities, improve conversion rate and avoid wasting of resources.

Keywords: Academic Marketing; Marketing Communication; Search-centric Marketing; Search Engine Marketing; Search Engine Optimisation; Sustainable Marketing

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, people have realised that it is important to ensure long-term sustainability of development. As Zaremba-Warnke (2013) notes, in the second half of the twentieth century it became certain that continuing current, narrowly understood economic development will not ensure a stable improvement of economic, ecological and social conditions, both for present and future generations. This approach is in contrast to focusing solely on short-term objectives in terms of maximising consumption benefits and economic parameters of business. Ensuring sustainability has positive long-term effects for organisations; Varadarajan (2015) proves the connection between sustainable innovations and competitive advantage. The concept of sustainability has various forms: sustainable development, sustainable consumption, sustainable management or sustainable marketing.

Sustainable marketing can be defined as an approach to marketing management that is oriented not only on maximising economic benefits for an organisation through stimulation of demand and intensive product placement but on the effect of sustainability of marketing activities as well. Zaremba-Warnke (2013) further defines sustainable marketing as a process of satisfying consumers and society’s needs through planning and making conceptions, prices, promotions and distributions of ideas, goods and services in a way that both satisfies the counterparties and is sustainable at the same time.

Several important components or characteristics of sustainable marketing can be identified:

- effects of activities should exhibit higher durability;
- measures should respect the environment;
- instruments are not to be aggressive towards consumers.

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The author of this article aims at introducing the concept of search-centric marketing as a new approach to sustainable marketing activities have been developed as follows:

- to prove a link between the implementation of e-marketing and sustainability of marketing activities;
- to analyse changing consumer behaviour as a driver for search-centric marketing;
- to define search-centric marketing and create a conceptual model of its functioning.

To achieve defined primary and partial objectives, the following methodology was applied. Firstly, the available scientific resources regarding sustainable marketing and changing trends in consumer behaviour as the effect of the new or digital economy have been collected. Information was analysed and enriched by the framework of academic marketing. By applying methods of analysis, critical evaluation, reasoning, generalisation and modelling, the author has created supporting argumentation to indicate e-marketing as a concept allowing sustainability of marketing activities. Further, an in-depth analysis of the tertiary education market in the Slovak Republic has been carried out and trends towards an increase in the number of university students and the relevant causes have been evaluated. Based on these findings, the author's model of search-centric marketing as an approach taking into account changing consumer behaviour and the efforts of organisations on economic, social and environmental sustainability has been introduced. This model is considered to be a contribution to the theory of scientific research.

Quality-oriented approach to academic marketing

Universities and faculties compete on the market with potential students to persuade them to select their study programme. The intensity of competition is reflected not only in the market of students. Universities also focus on other segments/markets: business sector, staff, teachers, graduates, public opinion makers and sponsors. Each of them requires a different approach to exploit its potential. Also, there is a number of stakeholders in such markets. In order to gain customers, universities need to apply marketing tools intensively. A systematic application of marketing management to management processes enables them to define product quality, market position and implement measures to obtain the desired market share. Academic, university marketing or educational marketing are terms that reflect the specifics of the academic environment and their impact on marketing activities. The content and structure of marketing activities of the university is quite complex and, according to Svetlik (2011), it contains components such as the strategic direction of the school – a definition of opportunities and threats of the digital economy, which has a major influence on the requirements of its intelligent growth is currently the sector of the digital economy, which has a major influence on the realisation of marketing activities in companies (Zak, 2015) [23]. One part of electronic marketing tools represents marketing on the Internet. Its tools are non-demanding regarding the budget; they are quickly implementable, and their results are well measurable. The amount and variability of electronic marketing activities is perceived as synonymous with the term e-marketing.

Electronic marketing is characterised by both high added value and efficiency. The research of carried out by Doracak and Delina (2011) has shown the existence of a high correlation between the use of electronic marketing tools and selected categories of economic efficiency of enterprises [8]. The work done by Pilik (2008) was devoted to the analysis of electronic marketing as one of the four current marketing trends [17]. The authors interested in the contribution of electronic marketing to the enhancement of competitiveness of enterprises. As Zak notes, the driving force behind the development of knowledge society and a requirement of its intelligent growth is currently the sector of the digital economy, which has a major influence on the realisation of marketing activities in companies (Zak, 2015) [23]. One part of electronic marketing tools represents marketing on the Internet. Its tools are non-demanding regarding the budget; they are quickly implementable, and their results are well measurable. The amount and variability of electronic marketing tools calls for their consistent categorisation. Miklosik (2013) proposed to categorise them into two groups:

- activities and marketing tools related to the preparation of electronic presence
- activities and marketing tools associated with attracting visitors and reaching target audience through the prepared presentation tools and applications [14].

Tools related to the preparation of electronic presence include all the tools, techniques and procedures connected with website preparation, deployment or presentation, successful utilisation of electronic settlements and presentations of the product and/or organizations. Activities and marketing tools associated with attracting visitors and reaching target audiences through a prepared presentation tools and applications include, in particular, preparation, implementation and monitoring of communication campaigns. Their aim is to bring visitors/potential customers to various forms of electronic presence of the organisation. One of the most important components of electronic mar-
Changing consumer behaviour determining marketing activities

It is crucial for organisations to reflect changes in the environment and respond to them. As Knoskova (2015) notes, to survive and prosper, organisations need to embed the processes and mechanisms to discover the major technology and consumer trends and respond to them through new growth areas [13]. In the digital era, consumers change the way they access, digest and consume information and media. The trend of multiscreen appears to have been one of the most apparent changes in consumer behaviour over the past few years. Consumers often use more «screens» to access information or to consume content. Televisions, computers, laptops, tablets or smartphones are considered to be «screens». Consumers often use various devices in parallel. For instance, while watching TV, they use the smartphone to access social media, check new messages or chat with friends. Another kind of multiscreen is the sequential use of screens. In the process of looking for information, consumer starts the work on one device (e.g. the smartphone), continues on a second device (e.g. the tablet) and finishes the process on a third device (e.g. the notebook). Such changes in consumer behaviour have been proved by an extensive study by Google (2012). Some of its results that impact the perception of marketing activities by organisations include the following:

- 77% of TV viewers use another device at the same time in a typical day;
- smartphones are the most common starting place for online activities;
- 90% of consumers use multiple screens sequentially to accomplish a task over time;
- consumers rely on search to move between devices (Table 1).

Search is the most convenient and frequent way for moving between devices and continuing the process. This process can be an important part of a buying decision-making process and thus it is necessary for any organisation to address the issue of gaining top positions in search results and not to lose potential customers. The importance and effects of marketing in search engines for universities and educational institutions were confirmed by studies conducted in academic marketing. Ayu and Elgharabawy (2013) investigated the relationship between the accessibility of websites and positioning in the search results of institutions providing higher education [1].

An empirical study of the British organization Jisc (2009), which is engaged in promoting digital marketing solutions for educational institutions in the UK, proved the existence of positive effects of the implementation of measures in the field of search engine optimisation tools in the form of increasing traffic of participating educational and research institutions’ websites.

For an efficient application of marketing it is thus crucial to reflect these changes. A model of search-centric marketing which creates prerequisites of sustainability of marketing activities will be introduced in the results part of this article.

Results

Analysis of environment – market with tertiary education in the Slovak Republic

Over the recent years, a continuously increasing intensity of competition in the market of higher education in the Slovak Republic can be observed. Universities have to expend considerable effort to convey their benefits to potential customers (future students). Several reasons can be identified as the cause for

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<th>Tab. 1: Search as the most important way to continue work on a second device</th>
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<td><strong>Way of moving to device / Activity</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Search again on the second device</td>
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<tr>
<td>Directly navigating to the destination site</td>
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<td>Via email / sending a link to himself</td>
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Source: Google (2012) [10]
this situation. On the one hand, there is a growth in the number of universities and their faculties, and therefore a natural thickening of the market takes place, on the other hand, the impact of a lower birth rate can be felt, which is reflected in the population curve, thereby reducing the total number of potential candidates for higher education. These two trends act synergistically and the overall effect is a quite striking increase in the intensity of the competitive struggle. Universities need to respond to the situation and use tools that enable them to effectively reach and convince potential students. Marketing provides a wide range of tools that can be systematically applied to achieve marketing and business objectives. With the development of electronic devices, communication and digitisation, there is a growing importance of electronic instruments in the marketing mix. Despite the fact that their practical usage has been verified and their methods are used intensively in the commercial sector, universities are often conservative and inflexible when it comes to their application.

The efforts for maximising a number of students are affected by the specifics of the market of higher education in the Slovak Republic – the existence of normatives for students. Students still have quite a significant weight to secure funding from the state budget. In the proposed methodology for the allocation of funds from the state budget for 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2015), it is foreseen that the majority of funds shall be paid in the form of wage subsidies and insurance with regard to the subsidy for carrying out study programs. Students and graduates are the most important component of the subsidy, weighting 85% in the overall criterion mix. The number of students is taken into account when setting the amount of subsidies on goods and services as well. Universities, both in Slovakia and other countries, have a limited budget and are unable to invest such an amount of funds in marketing that would enable a comprehensive coverage of all activities. Universities, and especially their faculties, therefore have to use a highly selective approach to the processes of marketing management. Among the available tools, they shall concentrate on those which produce the greatest positive effects. Therefore, in these institutions marketing is often limited to the implementation of selected activities of marketing communication. Within it, the school focuses only on certain activities, mainly in the field of public relations. This perception of marketing is characteristic for most entities in the market.

As it was justified in the first part of this article, the quality of educational process should be the crucial element, which can become the cornerstone of sustainable academic marketing. If a certain university manages to induce the cyclical effect of marketing activities (Figure 1), it will be able to continuously maintain the level of effects of marketing by gradually decreasing investments in marketing and marketing communications. The ultimate aim and effect of this spiral of marketing activities is to ensure long-term sustainability of marketing activities and thus to strengthen the market position and to increase the competitiveness of the university. It will be able to survive in the highly intensive competitive market, gain more students, reach, engage and attract customers and stakeholders from other market segments.

Search centric approach to marketing

As the effect of proven changes in behaviour of potential students/customers, faculties need to incorporate the search-centric approach to their marketing activities. To do that, a conceptual model of search-centric marketing has been developed (Figure 2).

This model shows that the placement in search results on relevant keywords determines the success and sustainability of marketing activities regardless of the type of marketing activities and the tools applied. Having analysed the changes relevant to the marketing of educational institutions, we identified the following:

- Potential and current students rely on search when looking for information regarding their future or current studies. This fact is in coherence with changing perception of media communication of Slovak youth (Vrabec, Petranova, & Solik, 2014) [21].
- Top placement in search results for relevant keywords enables a faculty to reach them in a targeted and non-aggressive manner and to maintain its position in decision-making process.
- Search is a connecting bridge between different types of marketing activities; it connects well offline and online activities.
- Even various forms of traditional (offline) advertising are significantly weakened in their effect, if the approached potential customer will not be able to find relevant information (e.g. from a radio spot using a full-text search).
- It is urged to assume that a website was regarded to be a neuralgic point of marketing activities over the last ten years; now it is the position in search results which determines the success and sustainability of marketing activities.

Fig. 1: Cyclic induced effect of sustainability of marketing activities

Source: Processed by the author

Fig. 2: Search-centric model for sustainable marketing

Source: Processed by the author
The components of the presented model include:

- A faculty or university launches a communication campaign using any kind of media mix that may include TV, radio, billboard, print, offline or online PR, website banners, social media advertising, etc. Potential or current customers are exposed to it, e.g. 1% of them is addressed by the communication (connector \( A \)).

- Several steps in the decision-making process precede the final decision. A potential student is looking for information resources. Typically, such a person starts the search for information online. Most frequently, even if he/she recognises the communicated website, he uses full text search to research more on the advertised topic (connector \( B \)).

- If a certain organisation has managed to reach top positions in the search results page for the used keywords, the person is targeted to the desired website containing relevant information, e.g. the faculty homepage, any product website or a landing page (connector \( C \)).

It is apparent from this model that the application of this search-centric approach in an organisation means that it will not waste its resources. If there is some potential customer addressed by marketing activities, the organisation is able to effectively involve him in the decision-making process and, by doing this, to significantly increase the conversion rate.

To apply the search-centric approach to marketing, universities and faculties should take the following steps in their implementation process:

1) to analyse marketing targets and consider their long-term sustainability;
2) to recognize the importance of obtaining positions in search results that need to be achieved at the same time as the effect of any marketing activity;
3) to define keywords that shall be relevant for a certain institution and are connected to both its general position and information regarding the faculty and its educational programmes and the planned marketing/communication campaign at the same time;
4) to determine which search engines are relevant to the entity and its target audience;
5) to include search engine marketing into the planned schedule of activities.

Decide how to reach the positions, based on the schedule (use PPC for immediate positions or SEO for long-term organic positions or their combination):

1) to implement a marketing program or a campaign and measures to ensure a good position in search engines;
2) to continually measure success and key performance indicators of marketing activities;
3) to make necessary changes and secure continuous improvement based on the results of controlling.

Conclusions

The contribution of this research to the theory and practice of sustainable marketing and marketing communication concept can be summarised as following:

- The importance of electronic marketing and namely search engine marketing in the conception of sustainability has been proved by highlighting its effects in economic sustainability and responsible, non-aggressive approach to customers.
- Based on the analysis of the current trends in consumer behaviour in the digital era, the model of search-centric approach to marketing has been introduced as the fundamental prerequisite for sustainability of marketing activities.

According to the information mentioned above, we have fulfilled several objectives. This work is important not only for academic marketing institutions; its results can also be applied to other segments as well. Adopting the principles of search-centric marketing can help any organisation increase effects of its marketing activities and campaigns, and ensure longer sustainability of its marketing efforts. Further development of research problems as the extension to the presented research results can be seen in conducting a deeper analysis of the situation relevant to the implementation of search-centric marketing. This can be done by creating a framework for measuring search engine rankings and performance and determining the effects of the presence in search engines on other outputs of marketing itself and marketing communication of faculties and universities.

References