

BENCHMARKING COMPARISON of Marketing Communication of Universities in Slovakia

Ľudmila ČÁBYOVÁ - Jakub PTAČIN



doc. PhDr. Ľudmila Čábyová, PhD.
Fakulta masmediálnej komunikácie
Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave
Námestie J. Herdu 2
917 01 Trnava
Slovenská republika
ludmila.cabyova@gmail.com

She studied Marketing Communication at FMK UCM and has been working there for 12 years. She completed her postgraduate studies at Technical University in Zvolen with a doctoral degree in cross-sectoral economics. She ranks among the top first graduates from the faculty ever and was the first among the graduates the UCM awarded the Docent Degree (associate professor) in Media Studies. She focuses her scientific, educational and research activities on two main areas, the area of Media Marketing and the area of Educational Institutions Marketing. As her most important publications might be regarded a monograph Benchmarking in marketing communication (2009) and Marketing a marketing communication media (2013). Nowadays, she works as the Associate Dean for Accreditation and Extramural Studies at FMK.



Mgr. Jakub Ptačin
Fakulta masmediálnej komunikácie
Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave
Námestie J. Herdu 2
917 01 Trnava
Slovenská republika
jakub.ptacin@gmail.com

He graduated from FMK UCM in Trnava with a master's degree in Marketing Communication. He works as a designer and a consultant to a wide range of clients. In the past he used to work for companies such as Adobe, Sygic or Etarget. He is the founder and statutory representative of Backspace civic association which carried out conference projects Unicamp, Honest conference, By Design Conference, a project providing office room for non-profit organizations QuickKancel, a bike sharing project KOLOKOLO, the Design Walks Project or a project redesigning state web portals To sa nedá. The invention of start-up application Foretaster brought him to Silicon Valley by the end of 2012. He has been a postgraduate student doing his PhD in FMK UCM in Trnava since 2013.

ABSTRACT:

The authors submit the paper with the aim of introducing the benchmarking practicable in the university conditions. The paper pays special attention to theoretical definitions of benchmarking and it focuses on problems and weaknesses of marketing communication strategies applied by Slovak universities. Therefore, the main goal of the paper is to determine the most significant criteria of benchmarking comparison in the field of marketing communication implemented by selected Slovak universities. As a research result, the authors present and discuss an improvement proposal model. After carrying out a benchmark comparison applied to marketing communication at selected universities in Slovakia, they provide us with findings of the study about the use of marketing communication. Relying on the benchmarking results, they suggest recommendations for the improvement in exploitation of marketing communication in the field of higher education in the Slovak territory.

KEY WORDS:

benchmarking, benchmarking communication, universities in Slovakia, marketing and marketing communication of universities, benchmarking associates

Introduction

The paper analyzes current situation at universities in Slovakia as regards marketing communication and compares this type of communication at particular universities in order to find a present-day leader – benchmark. History of marketing communication is by no means a long-time concern of the universities, and thus usually includes only a mere searching for the most appropriate form of it. The second part of the work elaborates on the details of its development, which involves several factors. Contemporary demographic situation anticipates even stronger competition for a student not only between the Slovak universities themselves – besides this, it will be necessary to succeed in wider competition along with European and World universities. The number of university students increased four times as much since 1990.¹ However, on the account of universities engaged in marke-

1 ĽÁDEK, M. et al.: *Vysoké školstvo na Slovensku. Realita - problém - možné riešenia*. [online]. [2014-01-15]. Available at: <<http://www.eppp.sk>>.

ting communication, we shall not ignore a worldwide trend towards studying abroad. In the following years, it will be necessary to look for benchmarks among universities in the Central European and other European countries, in order to be capable to compete in constantly more and more open, liberal, and global struggle for a student. Many Slovak students now have enrolled on foreign studies, and vice versa, foreign students attend the Slovak universities. According to daily newspaper SME², in 2012 the figure was over 1200 students. This was substantially lower compared with neighbouring Austria, where it was over 75 000 students, more than a half of them from the countries out of the European Union. This may be potential source of students for the universities in the future, and possible inflow of money as well (since many of the foreign students are supposed to pay themselves). Addressing them, however, the universities embark on a struggle for student side by side with world-known ones and, naturally, the comparison with those on the top in global measure is inevitable.

The paper delineates the scope of benchmarking, and gives reasons for a benchmark comparison to be applied to universities and other educational institutions and organizations. Subsequently, it analyses the present status and searches for new possibilities and barriers of applying marketing communication at the Slovak universities. Selected universities have been compared on account of communication and marketing activities, and budgets related to them, and their internal staff assurance as well. After accomplishing and evaluating the processes of benchmarking, the authors discuss several observations and recommendations drawn upon the key strategies of marketing communication previously identified by the benchmark comparison.

Benchmarking theory and its implementation at universities

The term “benchmarking” follows the idea of “learning from the best ones”; or, “comparing ourselves with the best ones, and learning from them”. Since nowadays the method has been applied to various issues in various fields, there are quite a lot of benchmarking definitions available. We propose just a few of them that are generally accepted: “Benchmarking is a continuous and systematic comparison of the company’s own performance reflected in the productivity, quality, and production processes with companies and organizations that perform over standard.”³ “Benchmarking is a systematic and continuous comparison of products, services, methods, and characteristics of organization units, which leads to increasing the international competitiveness of companies. Benchmarking means systematic methods employed for the purpose of comparing ourselves with others and thus finding better ways and methods of doing business.”⁴

Although the general meaning of “benchmarking” refers to comparing our own activities or products with others, with the best ones, doing “benchmark”, just to be equally good is the main goal here. There is also a higher target: to prove to be the best in the business field, i.e. to become a new benchmark. However, it is not possible to succeed in achieving such a goal by means of mere comparison of the figures representing the performance outputs and by asking the questions: “How?” or “How much do I lag behind my direct competitors?” Actually, a benchmarking investigation seeks answers to these questions:

- “Why?”
- “Why is she/he the best one?”
- “What is her/his business management, her/his marketing strategy?” etc.

2 *Zahraničných študentov Slovensko neláka. Zákony im sťažujú život.* [online]. [2014-02-28]. Available at: <<http://www.sme.sk/c/6626357/zahraničných-studentov-slovensko-nelaka-zakony-im-stazuju-zivot.html>>.

3 DANIŠ, V.: *Benchmarking – efektívny nástroj podnikového manažmentu.* In *Hospodárske noviny*, 2003, Vol. 2, No. 35, p. 14.

4 *Development of benchmarking* [online]. [2014-01-12]. Available at: <<http://www.globalbenchmarking.ipk.fraunhofer.de/benchmarking/development-of-benchmarking/>>.

Answers to such questions, but especially to the question “How to become the best”, are expected from benchmarking, i.e. through the way of management; it is a very complex term, hard to be translated into any foreign language and thus typically adopted and used without any translations.

Within the theory of marketing communication, there are several different ways to identify the categories of benchmarking. For the purposes of the paper, we have decided to focus on the benchmarking classification proposed by Leibfreid⁵:

Internal benchmarking

Internal benchmarking is based on the comparison and analysis of the procedures and selected criteria that are used inside the organization. The main goal is to make a comparison of one business group in selected localities, to compare between the centres of profits and expenses, between different divisions, departments, teams, jobs, etc. The comparison of similar activities and functions within one firm or within a group of associated companies represents the intention to determine the qualitative level of specific work performances related to the said firm. Internal benchmarking leads us to improving the current work performances; it also offers a basis for any kind of external benchmarking projects. Internal benchmarking defines “the best practise” within the firm, because it is very common to perform the same kinds of jobs in several work positions or locations.

By using internal benchmarking, firms are able to learn from the experience of their own branch offices, departments and working groups. Internal benchmarking can help us to identify which part of the firm excels at implementing innovations and performance improvements. Therefore, internal benchmarking is suitable for a thorough background for external benchmarking.

Competition-oriented benchmarking

This particular kind of benchmarking focuses on comparing our own business with direct competitors. To achieve the best possible results, competition-oriented benchmarking is often performed by independent organizations. Although this type of benchmarking highly surpasses the internal benchmarking, it is also associated with a significant amount of troubles and difficulties. Firstly, it is quite problematic to establish a functional cooperation with direct competitors in order to work on a joint study. Secondly, there are always certain doubts concerning the possibility of violating the rights of our competitors or using some kinds of “unfair” methods. For these reasons, firms often use the services of external experts and consultants. Buying expertise, legitimacy, data and contacts of direct competitors may be less time-consuming and less expensive, but, on the other hand, relying on data gathered by external consultants significantly reduces the ability to learn, which is one the most important benefits of benchmarking.

Functional benchmarking

Analysing and comparing the work processes, procedures, outputs, functions (or similar characteristics) of one organization to those of another, while no direct competition between them currently exists. Functional (not determined by belonging to any particular market segment or industry sector) compares firms that do not operate with the same sector, so the cooperation and sharing the information are much easier comparing to the common practises of competition-oriented benchmarking.

Marketing and marketing communication of the universities in Slovakia

INTERNAL BENCHMARKING		COMPETITION-ORIENTED BENCHMARKING		FUNCTIONAL BENCHMARKING	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Relatively easy process of gathering data	Limited viewpoints	Comparability of products and processes	Difficult collection of data	Increasing the identification spectrum	Relatively high potential of finding an innovative solution
Good results for diversified companies	Internal prejudices	Relatively high acceptability	Danger of "copies"	Comparability	Relatively difficult transformation from the external surroundings to company's environment
		Definite positions in competition	Information relevant for business		Time-consuming analysis

Table 1: The comparison of different kinds of benchmarking⁶

Benchmarking is a useful tool for management improvement applicable to any domain. In the area of quality management, the tool is applicable also to the university conditions, predominantly for establishing the standards by comparing the quality of universities (e.g. criteria for assessment of the research, development, and artistic activities within the overall accreditation process, criteria for categorization of the universities, evaluation of the quality attributes of the universities by ARRA agency, etc.).

The National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) was among the first institutions that dealt with the issues of implementing the benchmarking processes in the environment of university education – in 1991, the institution worked on a project of benchmarking comparison that included 150 faculties and universities. The comparison of educational institutions was based on 40 criteria and 600 standards. The aim of the project was supporting the cooperation of the best universities and providing information related to more effective management of educational institutions. Therefore, the activities of NACUBO serve as an example of implementing the methods of external (competition-oriented) benchmarking.⁷

At present, the one of the best-known companies dealing with benchmarking comparison of quality of academic study fields is QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. The agency employs several teams of experts that have been able to establish the standards of existence and activity for academic fields of study (benchmark statements), as well as they have successfully defined the basic criteria for their comparison.⁸

European Centre for Strategic Management of Universities⁹ implements a successful project named Higher Education Governance in Europe. The project is based on a benchmarking comparison of 26 universities, where benchmarking is considered an effective tool for university improvement. It allows the universities involved to compare themselves with the rest, while searching for strong and weak points and defining the areas that need to be improved.

The scope of our study is a functional benchmarking, i.e. we compare a single part of the university management, namely marketing strategy and marketing communication of the university. In the following chapter, we analyse the present status of these issues in Slovakia, as well as possibilities and barriers related to marketing communication strategies implemented by selected Slovak universities.

Marketing and marketing communication at the universities have been developing more conspicuously in the last 10 years. One of the starting points was the increased number of universities within the years 1998 and 2006. Comparable increase in the number of universities was after the WWII (1946-1959) – back then; 10 new universities were founded in Slovakia.¹⁰

Besides this, several other factors contributed to the trend of development:

- Liberalization of the higher education area leading to an increased number of private universities in Slovakia, which resulted in intensified struggle for a student.
- Variety of interesting study branches and change of labour market demands for specialised graduates.
- Change of the funding system and system of grants used by the government.
- Competitiveness between the local universities and the universities located in the neighbouring countries (or, increasingly, those located in distant countries as well).

In our interview with Miroslav Beblavý, a member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic who addresses the issue of higher education, states that the situation is slowly changing for the better. This change happens mainly due to *increased competition, demographic changes, and changes in the mechanisms of funding the universities*. Nowadays, the universities are more careful while paying direct attention to the applicants interested in certain study courses, they rely on specifically targeted, marketing-oriented texts. However, according to M. Beblavý, the broader concept of marketing and integrated marketing communication activities (definite target groups, strategic design, etc.), is yet to be sufficiently realized in Slovakia.

We assume that the major reason for this situation is financial – low budgets for marketing activities of the universities and missing marketing departments or personnel responsible for marketing in a given institution. Therefore, marketing of universities in Slovakia does not reach the level of communication comparable with universities abroad yet. It is a consequence of differences and inequalities in both governance and funding of higher education (tuition system) and budget allocation inside a given university intended for this sort of activity. Another way of making decisions about how much of the university's money can be used to marketing and marketing communication activities is basing the budget on a number of newly admitted students. This figure, however, may be misrepresenting, since communication of the university can be aimed deliberately at public in general – graduates, companies or associations (looking for potential sponsors and donors) and, last but not least, at current students and employees. Type of university funding is a factor which is very important, and which affects not only the quality of marketing, but also related expenses. The primary goal of privately owned and funded universities, along with their educational purposes, is to make profit. To achieve this aim, they deliberately employ certain communication strategies and tuition fees.

Abroad, there are some examples of companies/organizations interested in close cooperation with universities, and later on, they are able to recruit chosen graduates that will later help them to gain more profit as their own employees. They are personally committed to attract the most talented applicants who enrol at particular university, and, after graduating, they recruit them to their own business. Related costs or rather investments of these companies usually do not come from a budget allocated to marketing activities, they use their HR budgets, i.e. human resources budget instead.¹¹ This kind of partnership, the commercial subjects entering the marketing and marketing communication by establishing successful partnerships with higher education institutions or universities has virtually no existence in Slovakia. However, the very first examples seem to be the technology and IT companies, companies involved in automotive industry or the companies committed to highly specific departments of technical universities.

6 ČÁBYOVÁ, L.: *Benchmarkingové porovnanie v oblasti marketingovej komunikácie*. 1st issue. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2009, p. 22.

7 *About NACUBO*. [online]. [2014-03-09]. Available at: <http://www.nacubo.org/About_NACUBO.html>.

8 *QAA*. [online]. [2014-03-09]. Available at: <<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/research/Pages/default.aspx>>.

9 ZÁVADA, J. et al.: *Ranking of universities*. [online]. [2014-02-10]. Available at: <http://www.csvs.cz/projekty/2006_kvalita/>.

10 ŘÁDEK, M. et al.: *Vysoké školstvo na Slovensku. Realita - problém - možné riešenia*. [online]. [2014-01-15]. Available at: <<http://www.eppp.sk>>.

11 REINHART, C.: *The relationship between marketing & human resources*. [online]. [2014-02-10]. Available at: <<http://small-business.chron.com/relationship-between-marketing-human-resources-10287.html>>.

To illustrate the situation, we can draw on the research by Lipman Hearne Company carried out in 212 institutions (universities, art academies, research institutes). According to published results¹², in the USA an average marketing spending of small institutions (up to 2,000 students) was \$ 500,000, for larger ones (up to 6000 students) it was \$ 800,000.¹³ Another possible indicator of such spending is the amount of money spent on each enrolled student, but these differ too much, as we know that for a prestigious university it is much easier to attract the students than for an ordinary one.

Anyway, these sums are incomparable with those expended for marketing activities by the Slovak universities. The market space in the Slovak area of higher education is considerably influenced by lower living standard and low average income, and, naturally, that results in lower expenses invested in advertising and media communication. Just because of this, we cannot compare the relevant figures to those calculated abroad.

The primary barriers of marketing communication that are clearly observable in the Slovak educational area are:

- low budgets for marketing communication;
- absence of marketing concepts and strategies;
- insufficiently targeted marketing and missing verification of investment efficiency;
- inadequate staffing.

Unfortunately, we cannot expect a significant increase of budgets in favour of marketing yet. Therefore, we suggest that *increased efficiency of investments and controlled, carefully measured spending* are the only ways to make capital out of this difficult financial situation.

Thanks to the development of information and communication technologies that are available for the majority of potential study applicants, the universities are capable of targeting their communication at specific groups. Collaboration with an external subject (e.g. advertising agency) could be a proper way of developing marketing strategy and communication suitable for the university, but these activities have to be funded in accordance with clearly defined and measurable objectives.

We have decided to study activities of the universities in Slovakia related to marketing communication by benchmarking comparison method. This comparison data allow us to identify the leaders among universities engaged in the field in question in order to discuss practical recommendations and further possibilities related to the strategy of marketing communication applied by the benchmark.

Benchmark comparison of marketing communication

Research methodology

Benchmark Index methodology was applied to procedure and evaluation of the research we carried out. Procedure of benchmark comparison can be divided into the following six steps¹⁴:

1. Suggestion of criteria for benchmarking comparison of marketing communication strategies at Slovak universities.

Comparison criteria were defined after the preliminary survey in cooperation with responsible persons working at particular universities; or rather, these persons defined the basic criteria as the indicators signifi-

¹² *Wondering what works? The changing marketing mix in higher education.* Released on 1st July, 2010. [online]. [2014-02-10]. Available at: <http://www.lipmanhearne.com/Libraries/Resources_Documents/2010_LHI-CASE_Marketing_Spend_Report.pdf/>.

¹³ SCARBOROUGH, E.: *How much are other colleges spending on marketing.* Released on 18th January, 2012. [online]. [2014-02-10]. Available at: <<http://simpsonscarborough.com/2012/01/how-much-are-other-colleges-spending-on-marketing/>>.

¹⁴ ČÁBYOVÁ, E.: *Benchmarkingové porovnanie v oblasti marketingovej komunikácie.* 1st issue. Trnava: FMK UCM, 2009, p. 77-81.

ing the characteristics of marketing communication with parallel at other universities by themselves. Afterwards, these criteria were substantiated into questions and properly organized in the questionnaire.

Criteria specifications:

- Strategy of marketing communication (communication plan, target groups, budget, human resources, image monitoring).
- External Public Relations (PR techniques, event marketing, faculty's website, social media usage, design manual and CI).
- Internal Public Relations (meetings, teambuilding activities, internal and crisis communication).
- Advertising (promoting materials, advertising spots, advertisements).

2. Questionnaire preparation

The second step of the procedure was devoted to creating an electronic questionnaire designed to accommodate the defined comparison criteria. The questionnaire responses were created in scales.

3. Designation of benchmarking partners

Basic research sample consisted of faculties addressing to identical target group. It was found on the basis of survey data completed by Faculty of Mass Media Communication during Open days (years 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012), grounded on potential undergraduates' responses to the question: "Which faculty are you going to enrol at?" Following the results, we have selected 25 competing faculties; 22 of them accepted to undergo a benchmark comparison. Nine other faculties were interested to embark on (marked with starlet).

Benchmarking partners:

- Faculty of management of UK in Bratislava
- Faculty of Mass Media Communication of UCM in Trnava
- Greek-Catholic theological faculty of University of Prešov in Prešov *
- Faculty of Health Care and Social Work of Trnava University in Trnava
- Faculty of Management of University of Prešov in Prešov
- Faculty of Wood Sciences and Technology of Technical University in Zvolen *
- Faculty of Humanities of University of Žilina in Žilina
- Faculty of Special Engineering of University of Žilina in Žilina *
- Faculty of Electrical Engineering of University of Žilina in Žilina *
- Faculty of Social Sciences of UCM in Trnava
- Faculty of Philosophy of UCM in Trnava
- Institute of Physiotherapy, Balneology and Medical Rehabilitation of UCM in Trnava
- Faculty of Pedagogy UKF in Nitra
- Faculty of Pedagogy of Trnava University in Trnava
- Faculty of Law of Trnava University in Trnava
- Faculty of National Economy of University of Economics in Bratislava
- Faculty of Mass Media of Pan European University in Bratislava
- Faculty of Materials Science and Technology of Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (Trnava)
- Faculty of Philosophy KU in Ružomberok
- Faculty of Philosophy of Prešov University in Prešov
- Faculty of Philosophy of UK in Bratislava
- Faculty of Philosophy of UKF in Nitra
- Film and Television Faculty of Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava
- Faculty of Commerce of University of Economics in Bratislava
- Faculty of Health of Catholic University in Ružomberok *
- Faculty of Theology of KU in Ružomberok *
- Banking Institute /College of Banking in Banská Bystrica *
- Faculty of Pedagogy KU in Ružomberok *

- Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of UK in Bratislava
- Faculty of Economics of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica
- Faculty of Environmental and Manufacturing Technology of Technical University in Zvolen*

4. Research enquiry execution

We carried out the survey questioning via electronic media in August and September 2012. This phase of benchmarking comparison was accomplished by filling the questionnaire and collecting the data. Each one who agreed to cooperate became a benchmarking partner and was asked to fill the questionnaire. The attendance of a specialist in benchmarking and marketing communication was necessary in order to explain the unfamiliar terms present in the questionnaire. Respondents were notified of the importance to respond frankly and truthfully.

5. Research survey evaluation and decision on a benchmark

Individual responses of the questionnaires were evaluated by a method of quantitative comparison using Saaty matrix to calculate the weight of each criterion. Saaty matrix is symmetric, i.e. with the same number of lines and columns. This form provides for mutual comparison of every criteria inserted in the matrix. The matrix diagonal input consists of figures 1, in case the criteria are identical and hence equal. The number of criteria is four, which draws upon the number of aspects observed through benchmarking of educational institutions. Our selected criteria in the matrix marked f_1, \dots, f_4 stand for the following activities: f_1 (marketing communication strategy), f_2 (external PR), f_3 (internal PR), f_4 (advertising).

Formula selected to calculate S_i :

$$S_i = \prod_{j=1}^k s_{ij}, \quad j = 1, 2, \dots, k$$

Where: k – number of specific criteria,
 s_{ij} – specific criteria.

Formula to calculate R_i : $R_i = (S_i)^{1/k}$

Where: k – number of specific criteria.
$$v_i = \frac{R_i}{\sum_{i=1}^k R_i}, \quad i = 1, 2, \dots, k$$

Subsequently, a pair-size comparison of individual criteria was designed on the basis of specified scale. These values account for a personal viewpoint of an author and a multi-criteria model created by means of brainstorming with individual partners of the project, i.e. representatives of individual educational institutions.

Calculation of individual criteria weight:

Basic criteria (marketing communication tools)

		f_1	f_2	f_3	f_4	S_i	R_i	V_i
	f_1	1	4	4	4	64	2.828	0.55527
	f_2	1/4	1	3	2	1.5	1.107	0.21736
	f_3	1/4	1/3	1	1/2	0.04125	0.451	0.8855
S=	f_4	1/4	1/2	2	1	0.25	0.707	0.13882
						5.093		1

WEIGHTS OF INDIVIDUAL CRITERIA:		
f_1	marketing communication strategy	0,55527
f_2	external PR	0,21736
f_3	internal PR	0,08855
f_4	advertising	0,13882

Marketing communication strategy

		f_1	f_2	f_3	f_4	f_5	S_i	R_i	V_i
	f_1	1	3	3	4	4	144	2,702	0,418
	f_2	1/3	1	3	4	4	15,84	1,738	0,269
	f_3	1/3	1/3	1	5	4	2,178	1,168	0,181
S=	f_4	1/4	1/4	1/5	1	1/2	0,006	0,359	0,056
	f_5	1/4	1/4	1/4	2	1	0,031	0,499	0,076
								6,466	1

WEIGHTS OF INDIVIDUAL CRITERIA:		
f_1	employ of marketing communication	0,418
f_2	target groups	0,269
f_3	marketing communication budget	0,181
f_4	responsibility for implementation of marketing communication	0,056
f_5	existing design for implementation of marketing communication	0,076

External PR

		f_1	f_2	f_3	f_4	f_5	f_6	S_i	R_i	V_i
	f_1	1	1,3	1,2	4	3	2	3,96	1,258	0,184
	f_2	3	1	4	1,3	3	4	47,52	1,906	0,278
	f_3	2	1,4	1	1,3	2	4	1,32	1,047	0,153
S=	f_4	1,4	3	3	1	3	3	20,25	1,653	0,241
	f_5	1,3	1,3	1,2	1,3	1	2	0,036	0,574	0,084
	f_6	1,2	1,4	1,4	1,3	1,2	1	0,005	0,413	0,060
									6,851	1

WEIGHTS OF INDIVIDUAL CRITERIA:		
f_1	Faculty image	0,184
f_2	external PR employ	0,278
f_3	event marketing employ	0,153
f_4	Faculty web site	0,241
f_5	communication via social media	0,084
f_6	design manual	0,060

		f_1	f_2	S_1	R_1	V_1
	f_1	1	1/2	0,5	0,25	0,059
S=	f_2	2	1	2	4	0,941
					4,25	1

WEIGHTS OF INDIVIDUAL CRITERIA:		
f_1	promoting materials	0,059
f_2	advertising in media	0,941

6. Questionnaire outcomes

The following part of the study shows graphical design of the questionnaire-based results.

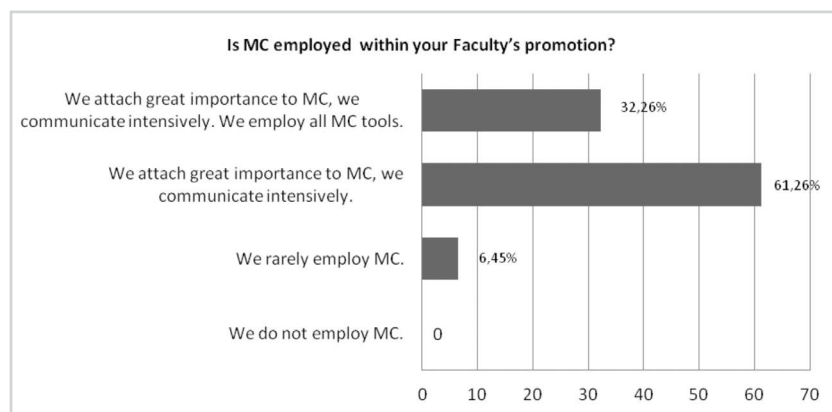


Figure 1: Employing of marketing communication

Slovak universities acknowledge the importance and value of using marketing communication. Although more than 74 % of them communicate intensively, the barriers, which prevent the universities from exploring all possibilities of marketing communication, are still clearly visible. The most significant barriers relate to high expenses associated with marketing communication, but they are also highly influenced by the management of universities – in many cases, marketing communication is not considered important.

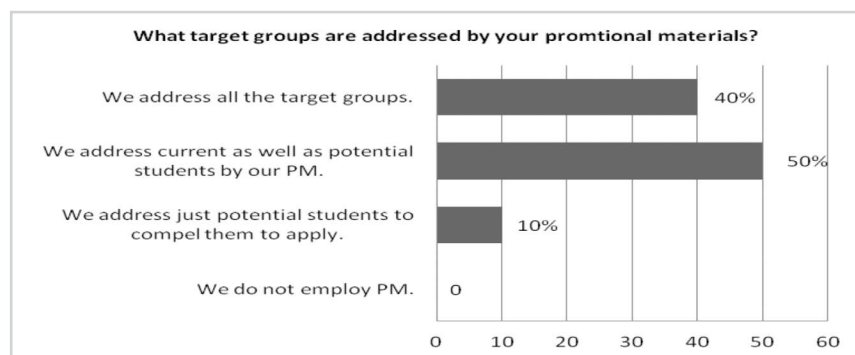


Figure 2: Target group

The results shown in Figure 2 are very positive. More than 90 % of schools communicate with present and potential students. Furthermore, 40 % of them also widen their communication activities to address to the other target groups. The most important secondary target groups include their own graduates, media, the representatives of towns, regions, experts from social sector and, of course, the already existing and potential sponsors. The most intensive promotion activities aim at potential students. The main goal of all mentioned activities is to strengthen the image of the school and motivate the potential students to apply for the study. Word-of-mouth advertising seems to be a very important decision factor. The most common ways of communication with potential students via social networks and web pages, as well as through advertisements in media, billboard campaigns or event marketing (e.g. open days, higher education fairs).

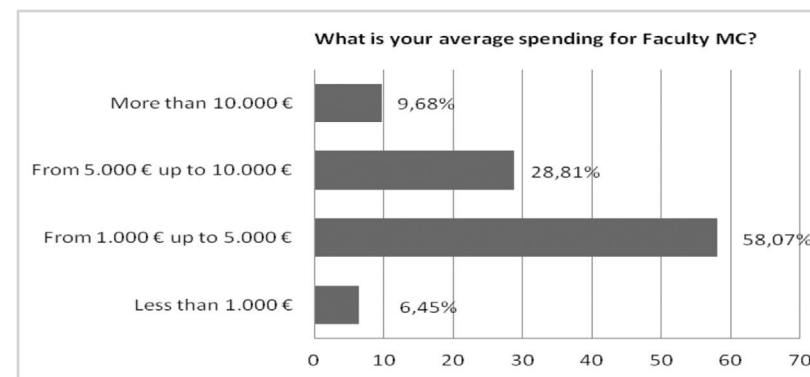


Figure 3: Budget allocated to Marketing Communication

The results of Figure 3 verify our assumption that the most significant barriers of marketing communication include the limited budget for advertising campaigns and other communication techniques. The price of advertising space in media is very high, so more than 90 % of schools cannot afford to communicate via Slovak nationwide media.

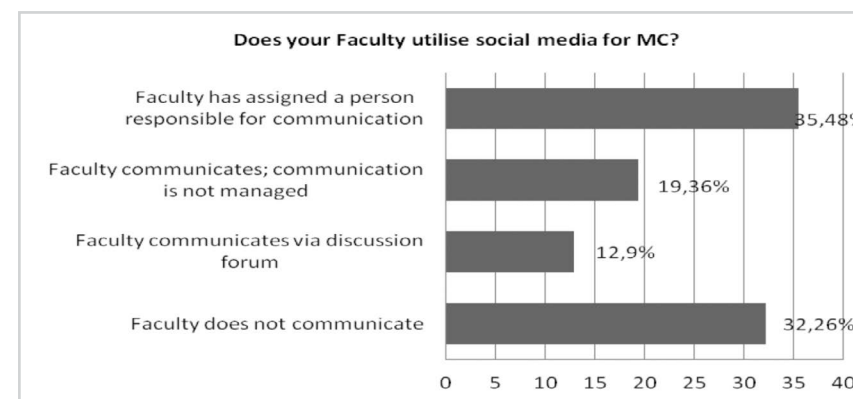


Figure 4: Communication via social media

In the case of universities, communicating via social networks is very popular. The most-used social network is Facebook. However, the quality level of social networking is very diverse. Most schools communicate through their own profiles, but the feedback is insufficient and lacks effectiveness.

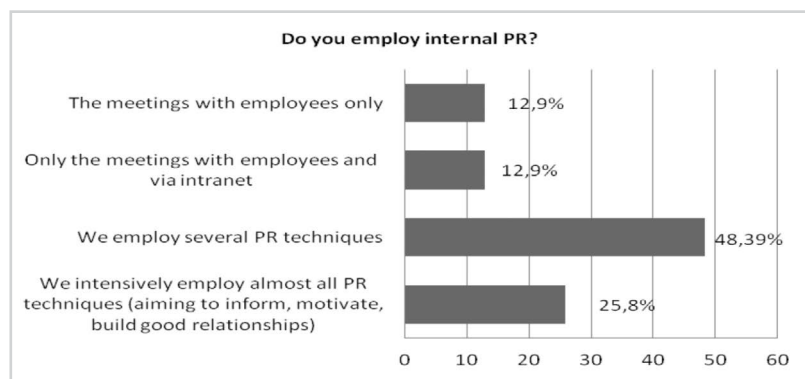


Figure 5: Employment of internal PR

While attending to their communication activities, the schools tend to focus more on external PR than internal PR. Internal PR is more infrequent, the schools often forget that their present students and pedagogues are those who publicly represent the school's image and thus their opinions can influence the other target groups. The figure states that almost 26% of schools use internal PR only in a small scale – by organising meetings of their employees and via internet communication.

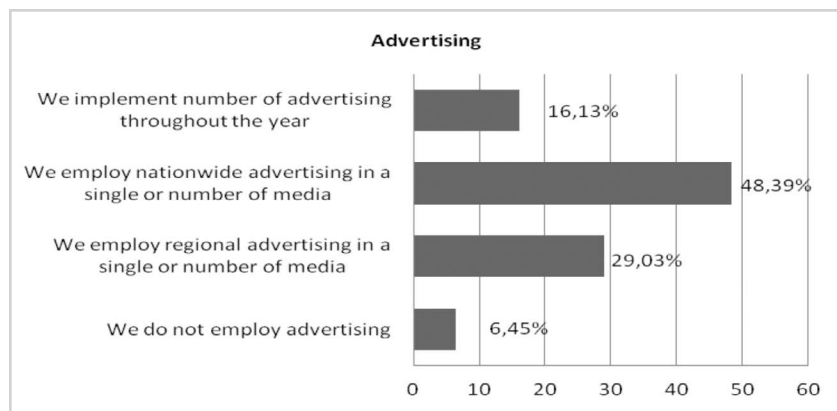


Figure 6: Advertising

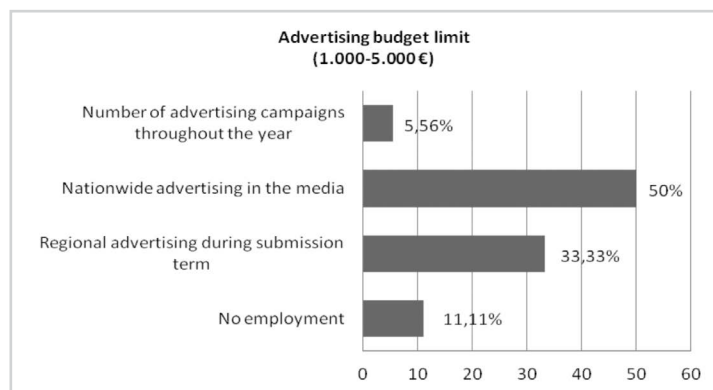


Figure 7: Advertising budget limit (1.000-5.000)

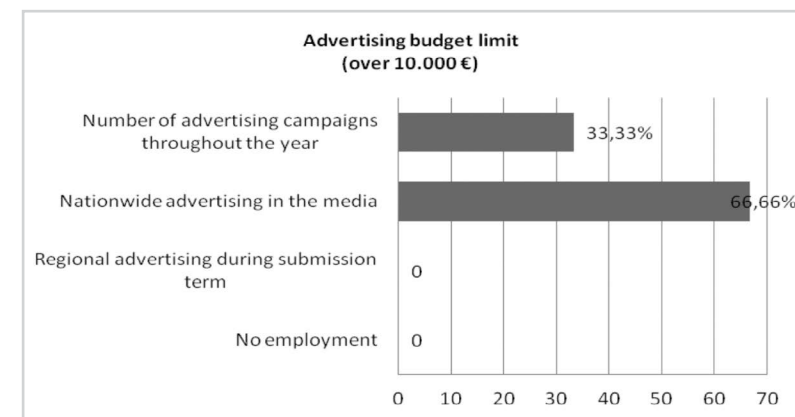


Figure 8: Advertising budget limit (over 10.000 €)

Considering the communication techniques used by the universities, the advertising belongs to the most expensive of them. The cost of a newspaper ad typical for Slovak nationwide print media vary from around 5000 to 10 000 € per one whole page (depending on the exact page the advertisement is placed on). This is also the reason why approximately 1/3 of schools place their advertisements only in regional newspapers (Figure 6). Private universities or universities that provide the most attractive study programmes with many students are the only ones that can afford to place their advertisements in nationwide media. All faculties which can afford to invest more than 10 000 € in advertising communicate through nationwide media (Figure 8). One of the most interesting results seems to be the fact that even 50 % of faculties which invest less than 5000 € in their own propagation use both regional and nationwide advertising (Figure 7). Universities also use advertisements placed in print and electronic media to present publicly the project financed by structural funds. The finances used on this type of propagation are included in budgets for implementation of said projects.

7. Designation of a benchmark and research summary

In the final phase of benchmarking, the marketing communication benchmark was designated together with other scoring Faculties.

- Faculty of Commerce of EU in Bratislava 13,12
- Faculty of Mass Media Communication of UCM in Trnava 12,57
- Faculty of Mass Media PVŠ in Bratislava 11,43
- Faculty of Philosophy of Prešov University in Prešov 11,3
- Faculty of National Economy of EU in Bratislava 10,3
- Faculty of Social Sciences of UCM in Trnava 10,19

Faculty of Health Care and Social Work of TU in Trnava, Faculty of Management of PU in Prešov, Faculty of Humanities of ŽU in Žilina, Faculty of Philosophy of UCM in Trnava,

Research summary:

- The Faculty of Commerce of EU in Bratislava became a benchmark of marketing communication, the second place took up the Faculty of Mass Media Communication of UCM in Trnava, and the third one was the Faculty of Mass Media of PVŠ in Bratislava.
- 61 % of the faculties communicate intensively, 32 % employ all means of MC.
- 50 % of the faculties aim their communication activities at the current and potential undergraduates, and 40 % at all target groups.
- 58 % of the faculties spent for MC max.5.000 €, 25 % max. 10 000 €,

- In 74 % of the faculties, the person responsible for implementation of MC does this as a minor activity.
- 64 % of the faculties search for image status among the students, 25 % extent to the external areas.
- All the faculties employ PR techniques, 77 % use more than one PR technique.
- 97 % of the faculties make events.
- All the faculties have their own web site.
- 44 % of the faculties do not communicate via social media.
- All the faculties have their promotion materials created.
- 94 % of the faculties employ advertising variably,
- 26 % of the faculties employ PR techniques aiming to communicate (meetings only, communication via intranet only.)
- 74 % of the faculties have their design manual elaborated.

The primary objective of benchmarking is designation of a benchmark aiming for better. Hence, every educational institution is notified of one basic question and two suggestions, which we will try to find answers for, in the following recommendations:

- HOW TO BECOME BETTER?
- FOLLOW A BENCHMARK!
- LEARN FROM A BENCHMARK!

The following recommendations draw on the marketing communication strategy of a benchmark. For basic barriers to their implementation, we may consider low budgets for the marketing communication activities, lack of determination and unrealised merits of individual communication techniques, and poor creativity in promoting the universities.

- Employ all the means of marketing communication.
- Address all target groups by promotional activities.
- Verify the image status also in external areas.
- If possible, invest more than 10 000 € in marketing communication yearly.
- Create job positions for marketing management.
- Elaborate a detailed communication design.
- Engage in PR activities, event marketing, address all target groups, including employees!
- Update your web site regularly; maintain interactive communication, e.g. via Facebook.
- Employ advertising; make your promoting materials attractive, including those in electronic form, available through your web site. Respect your design manual.

Summary

The results of benchmarking comparison suggest that the universities acknowledge the importance of marketing communication and they know the differences between particular propagation techniques. PR and advertising are the most frequently used techniques. The intensity and impact of advertising campaigns are influenced by the amounts of money universities are willing to invest in promoting their own study programmes. However, the financial support provided by Slovakia's state budget does not take into account the need for implementing the strategies of marketing communication.

Universities placed at the top of our result list do not have problems with the numbers of their students. On the contrary, they offer attractive study programmes, their graduates do not have any problems entering their professional lives. The first two places in our survey are held by faculties that are able to implement marketing communication strategies, mainly thanks to financial resources such as tuition fees for external study. The third place belongs to faculty that is a part of privately funded university.

Situation in Slovakia is slowly getting better, and growing number of universities start to realize the importance of marketing communication. Putting themselves through comparison with the best one, i.e. the benchmark, not only in the Slovak territory but also in the Europe, they are challenged to move forward. Competition for students does not allow for any other option. Comparison with a benchmark will help other universities advance their own marketing communication. Benchmark itself should not forget to go ahead with improvement and select a benchmark from the Central Europe or other European universities to find the space for progress.

Budget allocated to the marketing activities yet accounts for very little percentage of the university funds. They are often treated as unnecessary or additional expenses, but rather they are an investment. If allocated properly and strategically planned, the effect will come soon. University will be then compelling for great number of capable applicants who score not just in studies, but also after graduation. With creative work, they build up a reputation of the university, hence it is easier and cheaper for them to attract new clever enrollees interested to study right there.

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