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An Evaluation of Tools Used in Marketing Communication with Higher Education Candidates. Findings of the 2011-2014 Gdynia Maritime University Survey

***Abstract.** Effective marketing communication is a crucial element of marketing efforts made by modern universities as they are facing changes to the higher education market. Emerging marketing innovations provide new opportunities to communicate with candidates. However, there remain the questions of how much use should be made of traditional forms of marketing communication and the role of a satisfied customer in motivating decisions to choose a particular university. A survey conducted by the Office of Promotions of the Gdynia Maritime University between 2011 and 2014 among higher education applicants shows that, despite the ongoing proliferation of marketing communication tools and the use of a variety of available information sources, candidates continue to recognize “word of mouth” as a relevant factor when making their choice of higher education institution. For applicants, trust built on consistent marketing messages is key to making a decision on selecting a specific institution.*

***Keywords:** marketing communication, integrity, entrepreneurial university*

Introduction

What increasingly more higher education institutions perceive today is the need to manage their marketing activities in the same way as market-oriented organizations will. To perform its role well, marketing – as an essential element of competitive behavior, particularly in the higher education services market –

has to keep pace and be properly aligned with changes in the rapidly evolving environment and in customers' expectations. A. Drapińska observes that "to be able to reconcile the academic ethos with the mechanisms that are at work in an efficient business organization [...] a university needs to have a vision of the organization put forth by its leadership and to get everyone on the staff involved in making the vision come true" [Drapieńska 2012: 41]. Hence, putting such mechanism in place requires all, faculty as well as administrative support personnel, to engage in, and contribute to, shaping the right organizational culture and institutional reputation. M. Geryk emphasizes that "a higher education institution that has not created a recognizable and positive image basically vanishes from society's perception." He also highlights the fact that "society regards higher education institutions as institutions of public trust" [Geryk 2010: 55]. True and accurate marketing communications are instrumental to building such trust. Therefore, the overarching principle that a university must abide by in communicating with its market environment is that of providing coherent and truthful information.

This observation was also reflected in the findings of the opinion poll run repeatedly and consistently in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University (Akademia Morska w Gdyni – AMG), involving all of the 17 555 applicants who signed up using the university's online enrolment service. Consequently, the survey can be recognized as exhaustive in terms of scope and reach. It was aimed at assessing the effects of marketing activities undertaken by the university on the respondents' choice of higher education institution and study program. What the survey focused upon were the sources of marketing communications that the applicants experienced the most, the marketing tools that the respondents think should be given preference by higher education institutions in communicating with potential candidates, as well as the respondents' motivations for the choice of AMG and the choice of a specific higher education program. The survey was conducted via the online enrolment system using a questionnaire form. The subsequent analysis of the findings demonstrated that most higher education candidates give a high priority to the coherence of information brought to them by an institution's marketing efforts. As a result, many of them seek confirmation or endorsement from current students or graduates of a specific institution. This means that they are highly responsive to the so called "word-of-mouth marketing" and tend to build their trust and make their choices based on information acquired through this channel.

This paper draws on 2011-2004 data provided in the reports on "The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG" that have been subjected to further in-depth analysis.

1. Marketing communication instruments (to be) employed by present-day higher education institutions

Marketing communications employed by higher education institutions have recently undergone an accelerated evolution that can be attributed to the availability of innovative marketing tools and widespread Internet connectivity on the one hand, and to changes in the role of the university itself on the other. T. Wawak observes that “educational services and research services provided by higher education institutions have become, in their subjection to the rules of the market, products similar to e.g. banking or insurance services” [Wawak 2012: 244]. In an unquestionably competitive academic education services market, it seems that higher education institutions have no choice but to play by the rules governing the market. M. Geryk points out that “your ability to stay on top of the changes, to instantly embrace and make the most of innovations, may well be what your future market position is critically contingent upon” [Geryk 2011: 70]. The rich variety of easy-to-use and easy-to-access marketing communication instruments that higher education institutions can and ought to utilize makes it possible to reach each and every target group while personalizing messages conveyed to individual recipients. Examples of marketing communication instruments available to higher education institutions are given in Table 1.

The fact that higher education institutions do make marketing efforts, deriving inspirations from the business domain, is indicative of their increasing openness and their gradual embracement of the idea of the entrepreneurial university. A. Drapińska describes the entrepreneurial university as exhibiting the following features:

- “a public role,
- close links with economy (e.g. emphasis placed on alumni careers, their employability, and the industrial applicability of research outcomes),
- a market-oriented approach to instruction and research (attention to customers and their needs, flexibility and responsiveness to the changing expectations of the market, reliance on flexible structures and efficient organization, market competitiveness based on the identification and understanding of customers’ needs, a determination to seek and implement solutions generating satisfaction and benefits on the part of buyers as well as on the part of the university itself and other stakeholders)” [Drapińska 2012: 37].

This outlook on institutions of higher learning clearly draws on the market-based mechanisms governing the operations of business organizations. It is essential not only to be present in the media wherever potential buyers of higher education services can be found but also to provide a service that will be appreciated by direct as well as indirect stakeholders (institutions, organizations and pri-

Table 1. Types and instruments of marketing communication dedicated to higher education institutions – examples

Type of marketing activity	Marketing communication tools	Examples / Description
PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR) – scheduled communications directed toward the inside of an organization as well as toward its environment	corporate identity	measures targeted at creating the right attitudes amongst staff as indicated by the organizational mission and vision (corporate culture) and at strengthening their identification with the organization – building a coherent image of the organization (the CI manual)
	media relations	managing the company’s presence in the media, influencing the way that relevant information is presented in the media
	article marketing	developing and circulating press articles, interviews, and press statements
	lobbying (influence marketing)	measures geared to obtaining the support of authorities, media, and other individuals and organizations that are critical to the higher education institution
	celebrity marketing	using a person of repute, e.g. an alumnus, to promote the image of a higher education institution
	word-of-mouth marketing	word of mouth that spreads through satisfied clients who share their opinions with others and recommend the services that they are content with
	social responsibility marketing	campaigns that aim to showcase an organization’s social responsibility
INTERNET MARKETING – any Web-based marketing activities or activities conducted via the Web	advertising graphics: static or moving pictures, films	banners, skyscrapers, boxes, buttons, floating ads (top layer), etc.
	search engine optimization (SEO)	activities aimed at increasing the visibility of a Website by raising its rank on search results pages
	search engine marketing	inserting ads in Web search engines, e.g. through sponsored links or SEO
	e-mail marketing	sending out electronic communications such as newsletters and promotional or informational e-mails
	social media marketing	using social networking sites to communicate with customers

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	crowdsourcing marketing	engaging Web communities in generating ideas for novel marketing solutions
	referral marketing	inducing clients to recommend a company to other potential customers
MOBILE MARKETING – marketing activities involving the use of mobile devices (smartphones, tablets, laptop computers, etc.)	QR codes	redirecting to a Website via codes placed on billboards, posters, flyers, etc.
	location based marketing	use of positioning and tracking tools for marketing purposes
	display advertising	special forms dedicated to mobile devices
	SMS / MMS messages	sending out advertising and informational content e.g. in text messages
OUTBOUND MARKETING (push marketing) – activities initiated by a higher education institution, targeted at individuals who may not expect to be contacted	direct marketing	posting dedicated messages to specific individuals, e.g. alumni
	traditional mail	deploying unaddressed or personalized admail campaigns, e.g. feedback on alumni delivered to secondary schools
INBOUND MARKETING (pull marketing) – activities geared to increasing the probability that an institution’s offer reaches potential customers and then encouraging them to make contact	content marketing	trade journal papers/articles, reports, market research findings, case studies, success stories, etc.
	permission marketing	delivering marketing content on the recipient’s permission to communicate opportunities and solicit interest in services being offered
EVENT MARKETING – organization of, or involvement in, all sorts of events	conferences and seminars	lectures, presentations, discussion panels, poster sessions
	trade show marketing	showcasing one’s products and services at trade fairs
	festivals, concerts, outdoor events such as picnics	science festivals, student culture days
	“loyalty” trips	trips organized by higher education institutions, such as a boat cruise (e.g. cruise on the <i>Dar Młodzieży</i>)
	sponsoring	sponsorship of events organized by third parties, such as e.g. science contests or quizzes

Table 1 – cont.

Type of marketing activity	Marketing communication tools	Examples / Description
ATL (above the line) – advertisements broadcast through the mass media	press advertising	inclusion in trade catalogs or publication of printed matter
	television advertising	interviews, event coverage, advertising spots
	radio advertising	sponsorships, advertising spots, interviews
	out of home marketing	outdoor advertisements on e.g. bulletin boards, billboards, citylights, etc.
	product placement	placing product information in radio or television programs so that it appeals to the audience's unconscious mind
BRAND MARKETING – initiatives aimed e.g. at increasing brand recognition	test-driven marketing	running regular tests to assess the effects of new forms of marketing
	rebranding	change of logo, product visualizations, and market positioning
	promotion marketing	temporary price promotions, e.g. a reduction or waiver of the enrolment fee
	quizzes and contests	enhancing interactivity through fun
	loyalty marketing	launching programs targeted at maintaining positive relationships with existing customers and acquiring new customers, e.g. a second major or degree program offered at a promotional price
	certification	involvement in independent contests and rankings
	customer experience management (CEM)	managing customer experience

Source: own based on *Dzialania marketingowe* [no date].

vately-held businesses where prospective alumni will find employment, alongside universities themselves as potential employers for young scholars).

The entrepreneurial university can be also seen, in M. Pluta-Olearnik's formulation, as one whose "objectives and values, as well as its actions and its evolution, embody all of these four attributes:

- economic orientedness
- market orientedness
- innovation orientedness
- managerial orientedness" [Pluta-Olearnik 2009: 23-37].

The author clarifies that each of these attributes can be embraced by an institution to a varying extent and with a different degree of commitment, and that economic performance should be regarded as the key objective for any "entrepreneurial" institution of higher learning. She also argues that the entrepreneurial university should pursue a strategy founded on innovation and continued, sustainable growth. Where market mechanisms have to be taken into account, she contends, is in making everyday decisions affecting its development trajectory. Further, the entrepreneurial university should have a state-of-the-art management system in place to ensure that its intellectual potential, as well as its other resources, are exploited effectively.

The changing role of the university, evolving from its traditional commitment to an educational and research mission toward an institution governed by the rules of the market and marketing concepts, entails redefining its image to build a new reputation as an entrepreneurial entity. This, however, does not really imply abandoning the historical heritage and departure from the academic ethos but, rather, adaptation to the challenges of the present and the future.

2. Coherence as a signpost for building the brand image of a modern higher education institution

The university brand can be perceived, under K. Pawłowski's definition, as "a sum-total of notions, emotions, facts, and experiences that a university generates in public awareness. To put it shortly, and to send an extremely important message to university leadership, a **brand is the sum-total of promises and trust**" [Pawłowski 2015]. Bringing together promises and trust is crucial, since it is on promises delivered that stakeholders build their trust toward an institution. Hence, coherence is what appears to be an essential element of all marketing activities. Under the definition [Słownik języka polskiego: no date], coherence stands for a seamless combination of things into an integral, cohesive and consistent whole.

When applied to university brand building, it points to two interdependent areas where it should be found: in external and internal policy.

Internal policy refers to a university as a complex organization composed of a number of units: faculties, departments, institutes, etc., and to relationships amongst these. A. Kulig and P. Lisiecki caution that “importantly, this kind of organization should not be a conglomerate of standalone departments [...] because efficiency is only possible where the component units fully collaborate” [Kulig, Lisiecki 2011: 275]. The awareness that a university image is created by joint effort is part of corporate culture – manifest in the behaviors of both faculty and administrative personnel. It should be borne in mind, too, that an image has tangible as well as intangible ingredients. Tangible ones include e.g. the campus and the study facilities. The intangible ones comprise e.g. quality of instruction or faculty’s rapport with students. Nevertheless, it is functional qualities, associated with intangible factors, that ultimately bear the most on the satisfaction of purchasers of educational services, therefore having a critical impact on successful image building.

The external policy area, where coherence is no less important, refers to impressions that a higher education institution creates in the society at large. E. Stachura asserts that “image is a recipient’s own individual notion that has emerged through confrontation with information on the institution that has been acquired deliberately or per chance” [Stachura 2006: 362] This information may be either explicit marketing content or a body of experiences shared by existing and prospective customers who are in a position to assess the quality of a specific educational service. Information conveyed to stakeholders must not be, in J.W. Wiktor’s opinion [Wiktor 2013: 81], self-contradictory or conflicting, and it must not raise doubts as to its reliability and integrity. This discussion will therefore be perhaps best summarized by D. Penar and K. Szczepańska-Woszczyzna’s statement [Penar, Szczepańska-Woszczyzna 2011: 261] that “coherent and consistent marketing communication is precisely the instrument that creates a desirable image.”

Key to coherent communications is the development and establishment of visual identity guidelines (the so called Visual Identity Manual – VIM) to be consistently followed by the academic community. More and more higher education institutions appreciate the positive effects of coherent, integrated marketing communications on brand recognition. As far as the marketing communication categories and tools listed in this paper are concerned, VIM should be adhered to in fostering personal relationships between representatives of the academic and business community as well as in making official appearances at scientific conferences and similar events. Not only can VIM help broadcast consistent identity in diverse areas of marketing activity but it, in the first place, accounts for an institutional ability to build a desirable image among its stakeholders.

VIM may consist of such items as: the institutional logo alongside the logos of lower-level organizational units, student organizations, academic associations and scientific societies, etc.; document templates for use both with e-mail and traditional paper-based mail; folder, flyer, poster designs; e-mail headers/footers; and a host of other visual models and patterns. Sample VIMs available from the Web,¹ developed to align a higher education institution's visual identity to a common pattern, reveal an understanding and approval of the modern-day approach to marketing communication and image building.

3. Discussion of the research findings

The opinion poll was conducted in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University's Office of Promotions (Akademia Morska w Gdyni – AMG).² The 17 555-strong respondent group included secondary school leavers as well as holders of maturity exam certificates from prior years intending to apply for admission to the AMG. The survey aimed at validating the effects of marketing efforts undertaken by the institution and their impact on candidates' choices of higher education programs. For use in this paper, an in-depth analysis was performed focusing on some of the most relevant aspects, viz.: what sources of marketing communications are most used by the candidates, or where they seek information; what marketing instruments they think should be used by higher education institutions to communicate with potential applicants; and what factors drove their decision to choose a particular program and what it was that made them ultimately choose the AMG?

Survey data were gathered electronically via an online questionnaire form that was available to respondents during enrolment campaigns in subsequent years. The findings analysis was based on structural aspects and led to the conclusions that are delivered and discussed further in the paper.

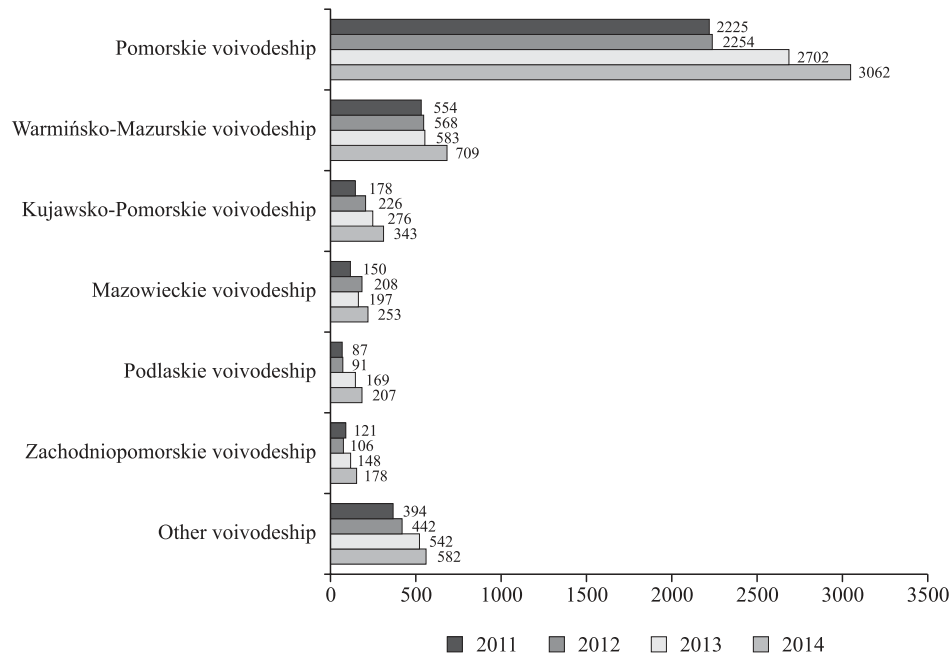
The respondent group was composed of secondary school graduates from different voivodeships (regions) of Poland (Chart 1 depicts the geographical distribution of the population examined in 2011-2014).

As can be seen, most respondents came from Pomorskie voivodeship, representing 58% of the total number of 17 555 respondents. This trend either continued

¹ Cf. e.g. Księga identyfikacji wizualnej UG [no date]; Księga identyfikacji wizualnej AGH [2007]; Księga znaku Stowarzyszenia Absolwentów WSB we Wrocławiu [2011]; Księga identyfikacji wizualnej AMG [no date].

² This paper cites some of the reports on “The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG” – a research project conducted in 2011-2014, whose findings were subjected to an in-depth re-analysis.

Chart 1. Regional breakdown of applicants for admission to the AMG in 2011-2014

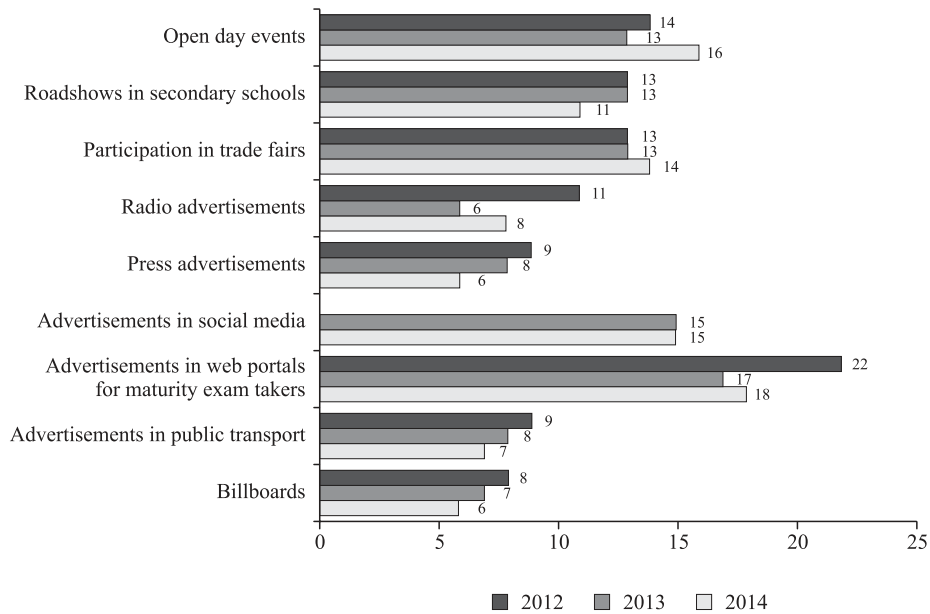


Source: own based on reports from the marketing research on “The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG” conducted in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University’s Office of Promotions, www.am.gdynia.pl/badania-ankietowe-kandydatow-na-studia-w-amg [accessed 12.08.2015].

or grew considerably over the four years under examination. The geographical proximity of the institution stood for their more frequent exposure to close contact with the AMG student community, allowing them to confront their observations and expectations with those of prospective fellow-students. This is indicative of Gdynia Maritime University’s brand recognition throughout the region and across the adjacent voivodeships as well as of stable interest in its academic program offerings.

While registering through the online enrollment system, the applicants had an option to voice their opinion on the marketing campaign being run by the Gdynia Maritime University and to indicate the channels of marketing communication that they think the University should use most heavily. The responses recommended both such forms of communication that involve direct face-to-face contact with University representatives (selected by 40% of the respondents) and indirect Web-based methods (suggested by 60% of the respondents). Chart 2 illustrates the detailed results for 2012-2014.

Chart 2. Advertising media that should be preferred by higher education institutions (%)

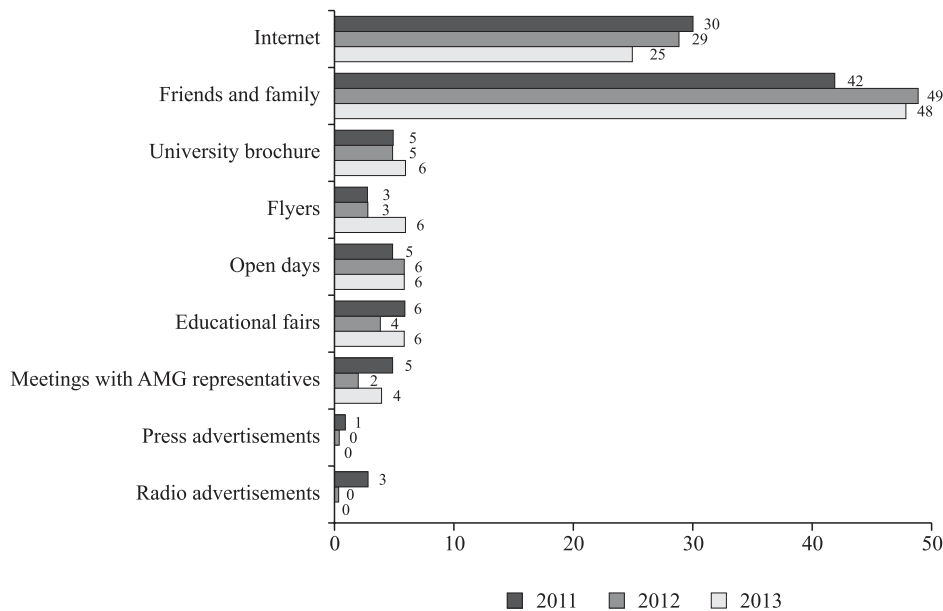


Source: own based on reports from the marketing research on “The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG” conducted in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University’s Office of Promotions, www.am.gdynia.pl/badania-ankietowe-kandydatow-na-studia-w-amg [accessed 12.08.2015].

Speaking of marketing communication channels, most respondents recommended that institutions of higher learning make more use of the Web, clearly placing stress on ease of access to information and its availability via mobile devices. It should be noted, however, that no matter how much they advocate easy online access to information, higher education candidates still do welcome an opportunity to obtain or confirm information through face-to-face interaction with university staff and representatives. Therefore, complementing the infallible traditional forms of personal interaction with the latest marketing communication technology seems to be a viable approach that increases the odds of information on educational products reaching the target audience. These considerations have encouraged the Gdynia Maritime University to establish a presence in such social networking sites as: www.instagram.com, www.fourquare.com, www.youtube.com, www.twitter.com, www.facebook.com, as well as on Web portals dedicated to maturity exam takers.

The findings also suggest that a coherent message conveyed through marketing communications is what most candidates find critically important. This is

Chart 3. Major sources of information on the AMG used by applicants (%)

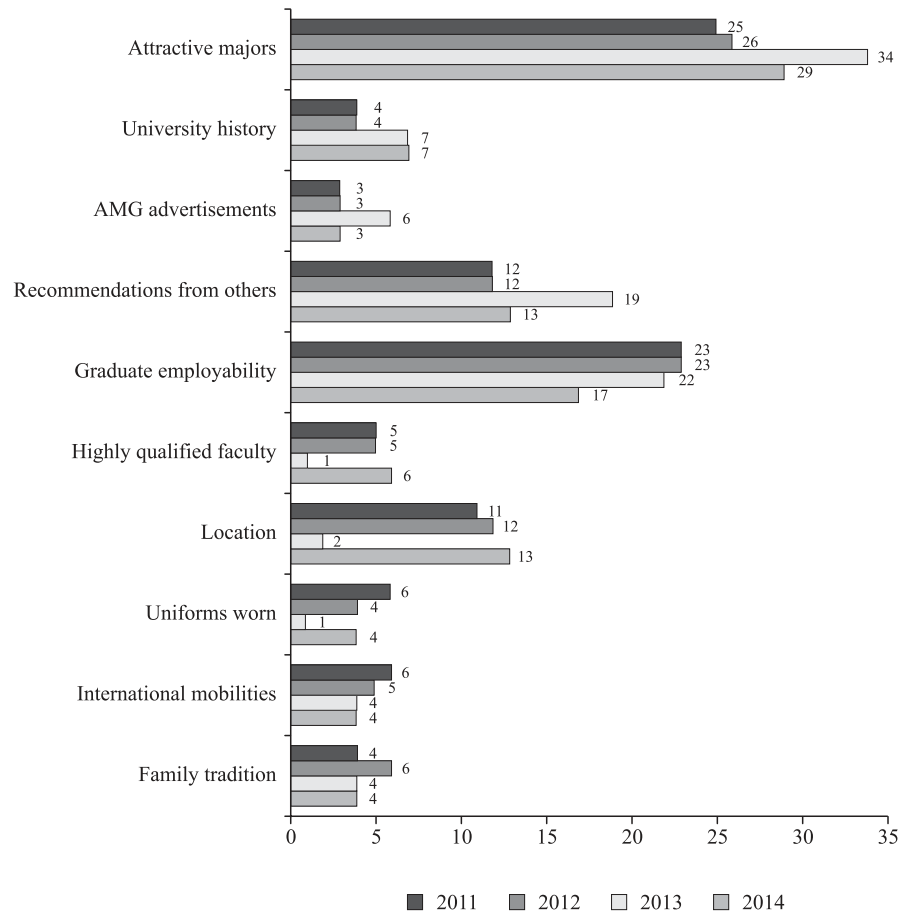


Source: own based on reports from the marketing research on “The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG” conducted in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University’s Office of Promotions, www.am.gdynia.pl/badania-ankietowe-kandydatow-na-studia-w-amg [accessed 12.08.2015].

clear from the fact that they try to validate the integrity of marketing information by consulting friends and relatives (former or current students of a specific institution). Hence, they can be said to be guided by word-of-mouth marketing in building their trust toward an institution and in making their choices. Chart 3 shows the distribution of responses indicating the information sources utilized by the applicants.

In 2013, an unsurpassed 73% of the respondents mentioned the Web or their friends as the primary sources of information on the AMG, which roughly parallels the outcomes from the preceding years: 78% in 2012, and 72% of the respondents in 2011, respectively, named the same primary information sources. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the opinion of friends and relatives was sought by nearly 50% of the respondents. Their prevalence over all other sources is indicative of their high priority. Other information sources proved rather insignificant. It seems therefore that, despite all the innovative forms of communication deployed by the marketing industry, we should not downplay the role of candidates’ families and friends being, after all, long-time customers and hence perceived as au-

Chart 4. Factors driving the choice of AMG higher education programs (%)



Source: own based on reports from the marketing research on “The Implementation of Innovative, and the Improvement of Existing, Marketing Activities Focused on Promoting the AMG” conducted in 2011-2014 by the Gdynia Maritime University’s Office of Promotions, www.am.gdynia.pl/badania-ankietowe-kandydatow-na-studia-w-amg [accessed 12.08.2015].

thoritative information sources. These are apparently the people who play a vital part not only by imparting information or by helping assess the coherence of an institution’s marketing communications but also in the final of decision making process. What is unveiled here once again is that, like in other services markets, word of mouth spread by satisfied customers can give a powerful boost to effective marketing campaigns. For higher education institutions, this signifies an imperative to put emphasis on the quality of instruction in its broadest sense spanning

both its technical and functional (e.g. organizational culture or management style) excellence. At the same time, it is a helpful tip for universities on how to further improve their marketing communications, suggesting a move toward the incorporation of the latest technologies used by potential applicants. The latter is exactly what the Gdynia Maritime University did by, for example, making its Website friendly to mobile devices. Besides, the AMG is present in social networking sites and has a consistent policy in place to make sure its educational products are continually upgraded and adjusted to the requirements of today's job market.

The poll demonstrated, too, that the applicants were not oblivious of labor market requirements and prospective employers' expectations. In choosing a higher education program, they were focused on those factors that maximize their chances of finding employment on graduation.

Almost 25% of the applicants in each year were confident about their employability as holders of degrees from the Gdynia Maritime University. At the same time, they quoted attractive majors as a factor driving their choice of university. Data obtained from other sources³ provide evidence that candidates do look at the curriculum for a given major before making their choices. This leads us to assume that they do their best to make an informed choice of a study path that gives them a head start into a professional career. Notably, it is visible from the responses once again that referrals from people recommending the Gdynia Maritime University as a reputable institution play a central role.

Conclusion

The unique status of the Gdynia Maritime University as one of just two maritime institutions of higher learning in Poland is the key reason why most people using its academic education services aim at careers relating to what is called "marine economy." However, the continued presence of a "land" department within its organizational structure makes it necessary for the AMG to diversify its marketing campaigns by tailoring content to the different target groups. The effects of its marketing activities hinge critically on their consistent alignment with the product portfolio and the quality of services. Although catchy marketing promises and slogans can attract the attention of a potential candidate, it must be realized that marketing communications that fail the coherence test might have highly adverse consequences for the institution. It is therefore advisable to ensure that marketing activities broadcast a consistent message and are supported by the

³ Unique pageviews for the site www.wpit.am.gdynia.pl, www.google.pl/intl/pl/analytics/ [accessed 12.08.2015].

latest technologies, and that they are coupled with a coherent faculty development policy to back up the teaching process. The rapid changes in the higher education market and the increasing competition among entrepreneurial universities make it essential to regularly evaluate the marketing communication tools used and to develop a concern for building a recognizable university brand among the society at large.

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Ocena narzędzi komunikacji marketingowej z kandydatami na studia. Wyniki badań Akademii Morskiej w Gdyni za lata 2011-2014

Streszczenie. *Skuteczna komunikacja marketingowa stanowi niezbędny element działań marketingowych współczesnego uniwersytetu, który stoi w obliczu zmian zachodzących na rynku szkolnictwa wyższego. Pojawiające się innowacje marketingowe stwarzają nowe możliwości komunikowania się z kandydatami na studia. Otwarte pozostaje jednak pytanie o znaczenie tradycyjnych form komunikacji marketingowej i rolę zadowolonego z jakości usługi klienta w podejmowaniu decyzji o wyborze danej uczelni. Z badań prowadzonych przez Biuro Promocji Akademii Morskiej w Gdyni w latach 2011-2014 wśród kandydatów na studia wynika, że mimo rozwoju narzędzi komunikacji marketingowej i korzystania z różnych źródeł informacji, nadal uznają oni „marketing szeptany” za czynnik istotny przy wyborze studiów. Kluczowe dla kandydatów w podejmowaniu decyzji o wyborze studiów jest budowanie zaufania opartego na spójności przekazu marketingowego.*

Słowa kluczowe: *komunikacja marketingowa, integralność, przedsiębiorczy uniwersytet*