

GATE-Germany (Hrsg.)

## **INTERACTIVE MARKETING AND ENGAGEMENT: FACEBOOK AS A POWERFUL TOOL IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

How to make the most of the interactivity provided by social media – utilizing existing staff expertise and resources – to better recruit and retain international students.



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# **INTERACTIVE MARKETING AND ENGAGEMENT: FACEBOOK AS A POWERFUL TOOL IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT**

How to make the most of the interactivity provided by social media – utilizing existing staff expertise and resources – to better recruit and retain international students.

by:

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*Around the world, universities and colleges of all sorts are facing similar challenges (and opportunities) when it comes to the dramatic increase in international student mobility. GATE-Germany has commissioned eight case studies in 2011 to provide a snapshot of how certain institutions are approaching various aspects of international marketing and recruitment from using data to improve their website to creating a dedicated office for funded students from abroad. Each of the case studies reflects a particular national and international context, as well a particular moment in time; what each of these institutions will be undertaking in 10 years could very well depend on how mobility flows change – or their senior administrators! The intent of these studies was not to provide a step-by-step guide on how to do what they have each done, but to help the reader get a sense of what their colleagues are doing globally, as well as to inspire new ideas for ways to improve activities at home. We are extremely grateful for all of the interviewees who shared honestly and openly for this project, and wish everyone happy reading!*

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## INTRODUCTION

Techniques that reflect broader marketing trends to harness social media for engagement and 'business development' purposes are increasingly being incorporated into international student recruitment. Comparatively, traditional marketing can be unidirectional, with limited opportunity for interaction and dialogue in an open and transparent manner – hardly appealing traits for most prospective students. The trend for many higher education institutions to embrace social media as a student recruitment tool speaks to the need for enhanced engagement with prospective students and standing out in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Yet many universities equally struggle with the daunting task of incorporating an entirely new category of marketing tool with existing resources – or of finding the right balance between openness and control.

Most potential international students considering anything from bachelor's degrees to PhDs, are extremely savvy and use many different online channels and tools to obtain information, including social media. For information sharing between peers in this age range, social media can be construed as a kind of online 'word-of-mouth' equivalent, or a 'new normal'. Incorporating social media in the marketing mix allows universities to better serve the target audience and 'go where they are,' talking to students in a way they are comfortable with.

Social media and particularly Facebook are increasingly used as part of an engaging internationalization strategy for many universities. With more than 750 million active users, the 'population' of Facebook makes it equivalent to the world's third largest country. About 70 percent of Facebook users are outside the United States and more than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photo albums, etc.) are shared each month. Although it is not available in all countries (the most important of which for student recruitment is China), it is available in many countries that have potentially mobile international students.

Facebook is being used by different universities around the world to answer questions; to match future students to specific programs; to provide access to alumni or current students who can serve as peer advisors; answer information about specific questions related to immunization, housing, and insurance; introduce key staff; reiterate important deadlines for students; highlight funding opportunities and scholarships; and provide key event and orientation information. Videos, pictures and blogs contribute additional content, often produced by current students themselves for potential students. This case study concentrates on the use of Facebook by the University of Malmö in Sweden.

The University of Malmö now has the most active Facebook page in Sweden targeting international students, and social media has positively contributed to the university's interaction with this target audience, particularly important now that universities in Sweden will be charging higher tuition for this population. Moreover, the university has followed an interesting strategy of diversifying the responsibility for managing Facebook, training individuals in various administrative and academic roles to answer questions that they would normally answer via email or phone, while maintaining central management of the site. Crowdsourcing questions on Facebook and creating new and open dialogues has both engaged international students and helped Malmö University's recruitment drive. Having staff own the outcomes and engage directly with the site has been a key part of the success.

	University of Malmö
<b>Type of Institution:</b>	Public University
<b>Location:</b>	Sweden: Malmö
<b>Number of Students:</b>	25,000
<b>Percentage of International Students:</b>	7.2% (1800 international students)
<b>Web Address:</b>	<a href="http://www.mah.se/english">www.mah.se/english</a>

## BACKGROUND

With a legacy as a teacher training and nursing school, the University of Malmö has built on its roots in education and medicine to add specializations in culture and society, including international migration, communication, and new media. The multidisciplinary approach to curriculum development means courses cross the traditional school and faculty boundaries, with 90 education programs and 500 courses on offer. Six bachelor's and 12 master's degrees are offered in English and a broad-based approach to student recruitment focuses on flexible learning and a changing job market.

With no tuition fees charged for students from the European Union, the university hosts a significant number of German and other European students, as well as an increasing number of full-fee paying international students from the US, China, India, Pakistan, and some African countries. The International Office is responsible for the internationalization process, developing networks and implementing the strategy in collaboration with schools and faculties. A global focus in the curriculum is encouraged to reflect this trend to internationalization, and the university has agreements with around 150 other universities. Teaching and research is linked to staff and student exchanges and international cooperation. Overcoming distance through the internet to establish networks, build relationships and outreach, has helped these efforts, and for international student recruitment, social media has been particularly important.

Malmö University has recently undertaken a much more concerted effort to recruit international students. Domestic recruitment has included a yearly campaign partly linked to marketing the Malmö city brand as a modern and youthful place. In keeping with these attributes, the university had used social media in Swedish to engage and recruit locally through Twitter, Facebook, and blogging initiatives that featured both students and staff.

In 2010 the focus on recruiting international students with specific country targets really commenced, although there had been various strategy papers and reports published before. Like many Swedish universities, Malmö had been waiting to see the outcome of the government's important decision on international student tuition, a decision taken in February 2010. This set the context for Malmö University to further develop its international student recruitment.

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## IMPLEMENTATION

Critical to implementing the international student recruitment strategy was the use of digital marketing elements, together with traditional methods. Student recruitment fairs and other events required email follow up and ongoing marketing (both online and off), but as with the website, this really constituted a one-way approach where the university was 'speaking' and the potential students 'listening' and 'considering'. It was not the open and engaged conversation that the university wanted to be having with international students. One of the key goals of any student recruitment process is to minimize loss at various stages of the process, from first contact to enrolment. The experience with the university before and during the entire recruitment process is therefore critical.

To specifically target international students and engage them in this more conversational manner, the University of Malmö established an English-language Facebook page. Initially, the two goals for the English Facebook page were to: 1) support current international students and 2) recruit prospective international students and generate new leads.

A **link to Facebook** was established on the main Malmö Swedish and English-language websites, directing visitors to ask questions on Facebook. Responses are written on the page by designated administrators, so as to share the information broadly, rather than sending responses as emails or using the Facebook message system for a one-to-one response. Interestingly, these administrators also "sign" their responses with their first name by writing it at the end of the message itself. This eliminates the feeling of anonymity which can be prevalent at many university or company sites, and allows the primary individual in the International Office responsible for the site to track response time and provide ongoing training to key staff members.

On the Facebook page, students are told in the information box that the university will reply to comments and questions with a maximum **turnaround time of 24 hours**, offering important encouragement to students for students to post questions there. Often it takes less time, and the university feels that this responsiveness is an important sign for prospective international students about how much value the institution places on the students and the services provided to them.

After a few months, it became clear that **prospective students** were using the page more than enrolled students and the admissions information and emails sent to prospective students would immediately result in increased interactions on the Facebook English page. The clear shift from students responding to communications from email to Facebook reflects an overall trend away from email as the preferred medium for people in this age group.

Becoming an international student involves emotional and financial resources for many students and their families, and can be a very big step to take. The time-sensitive and highly personalized responses to students' questions on the Facebook page makes them feel valued and connected. This kind of positive interaction with prospective students is therefore critical to successful international student recruitment, as a fast response rate can help facilitate students' decision-making process.

Content governance is critical to this initiative. A central administrator in the International Office controls the Facebook page, moderating content, and developing it with new tabs, photos and other relevant information. As soon as a new comment appears, he is notified, so traffic is tracked and the 'tone' of interactions is monitored.

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Maintaining an authenticity of voice, by not only providing 'corporate' information one-way from the university to students, but directly connecting prospective students with current students, alumni, and staff, has proved challenging but valuable.

However the availability of administrative staff to respond on Facebook could sometimes be limited by conflicting priorities, ineffective delegation, or a lack of understanding about social media, and the extent to which it became part of existing job descriptions varied greatly. The international office searched for appropriate staff members from the university who could devote the requisite time to monitoring and using Facebook for student engagement. The **team** of two to three staff quickly grew to 13 to 14, who answered questions about everything from housing to admissions and academic programs. The **central administrator** in the International Office generally provides an initial response to the student and notifies the staff of the requests or questions - and follows the progress of the interaction.

However not everyone immediately saw the **value of social media** or agreed to use it. Some staff required convincing. The International Office had to show that Facebook is not only for 'recreational use' but indeed can also be of strategic value in connecting with students and marketing for recruitment, and can be of equal effectiveness and utility as more traditional marketing pieces.

Limited exposure to social media can **negatively impact** participation rates: if administrators or faculty members aren't personally comfortable with social media, they can find it onerous to leave comments, even if the subject matter is something that they're expert with. A new media workshop was therefore established as a joint initiative between the international office and a research center in new media. The goal was to train teachers and staff to interact with students using new media, including social media. Keeping training and support within the university has proved an effective model, as trainers and experts understand the real working environment and the context of student recruitment.

In the end, the results of this effort spoke for themselves as students showed their gratitude online by thanking staff 'publicly' on Facebook; an important positive reinforcement for staff participation.

As an interactive tool, social media can create successful outcomes, but measuring them can be challenging. **Success could be measured** by numbers of 'likes', questions and responses, event attendance, and re-posting of content – but ultimately the real test is if the medium is helping a university, as in this case, reach the 'real' goals of attracting international students. By asking applicants where they found out about the university or if they interacted via Facebook prior to applying (and, if so, how they found that interaction), an institution can get some sense of the impact, and application and enrollment numbers can be correlated with visits from particular countries.

There would certainly seem to be clear benefits to developing an **online persona** for an institution that is responsive and open to the questions of international students. It does not do away with the need for more traditional marketing measures, but as prospective see peers interacting with the institution in a positive way – and on a medium that they feel comfortable with – the belief is that they will be more likely to understand if the institution is the right fit for them, complete an application, and, if accepted, to enroll.

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## ***SUMMARY OF FINDINGS***

- Using social media has many benefits such as providing cost-effective, immediate, and direct contact to target audiences; it is also increasingly the medium of choice for prospective students.
- Used correctly, social media can help to build real relationships between prospective students and the institution across distances.
- The challenges towards implementing a social media strategy can include finding a skilled administrator, convincing key stakeholders, and consistently responding quickly and accurately.
- Thinking of the students' journey from initial inquiry to enrollment (and beyond) can help build messages and engagement across the cycle.
- In house experts (staff and students) can provide important content if they are trained properly and helped to develop the necessary confidence and skills.
- Creating key measurements of success for social media is important to understand whether or not the resources allocated to the initiative are being used effectively.

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**Erstellt von:** Megan Brenn-White, 2011  
**Redaktion:** Dorothea Mahnke  
**Gestaltung und Satz:** aseptDESIGN, Berlin

Onlinepublikation, März 2014.