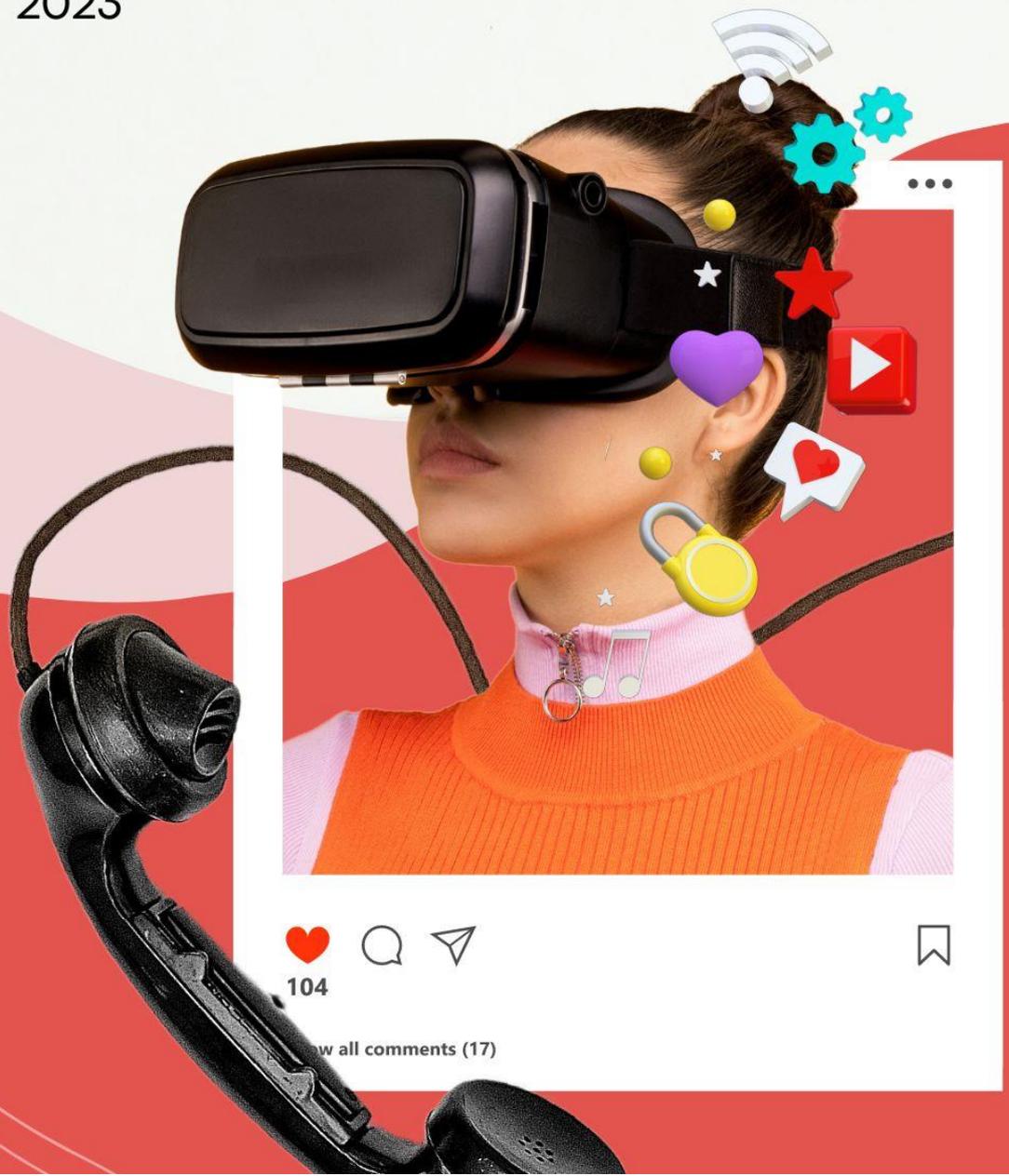




New strategies of marketing and recruitment of international students

Conclusions from the 10th UNICA
PR & Communication Workshop

FEBRUARY 2023



New strategies of marketing and recruitment of international students: Conclusions from the 10th UNICA PR & Communication online workshop

Speakers of the event:

-  Aswin LUTCHANA, Social Media Manager, University of Luxembourg
-  Alejandra OTERO, Founder, CMO and former director specialized in digital marketing and student recruitment, NEO Academy
-  Marco PIETRANGELI, International Officer, Sapienza University of Rome
-  Daniela ASTOLFI, International Officer, Sapienza University of Rome
-  Lisa FLANNERY, UCD Marketing Manager, University College Dublin
-  David Smith, Associate Director of Brand and Marketing, University of East London

Editors:

-  Alexandra DUARTE, Project & Communication Officer, UNICA Secretariat
-  Laura COLÒ, Project Assistant, UNICA Secretariat

Design: Alexandra DUARTE

UNICA – Network of Universities from the Capitals of Europe
c/o University Foundation
Rue d'Egmont 11, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
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www.unica-network.eu | office@unica-network.eu

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Introduction

On the 5th of December 2022, the UNICA PR & Communication Working Group organised its 10th workshop, which followed up on the previous one, organised in October 2020.

In 2020, in the peak of the pandemic, the universities came together online to share experiences related to the challenges of communicating with academic communities during uncertain times. Two years and many lessons later, it was time to reflect on the transformation that PR & Communications Offices went through, in particular when it comes to marketing and recruitment of international students.

The UNICA PR & Communication workshop in 2022 reflected on the new profile of PR & Communication offices (and officers) in the post-COVID era, while looking at a new generation of students that will likely reshape recruitment techniques – the Generation Alpha.

This short reports compiles the conclusions of each presentation delivered during the workshop and finishes with a set of recommendations that can serve as inspiration to set up the group's upcoming activities.

The complete recordings and presentations of the online workshop are available on the [UNICA website](#).

About the PR & Communication Working Group

Established in 2011, the UNICA PR & Communication Group brings together Vice-Rectors for Communication and professionals working in the field of Public Relations, Communication, Media Relations, and Marketing within the context of Higher Education.

The group was created having in mind the rapid and substantial transformation of university communication powered by the advent of digital technologies, the pivotal role of social media, and the increasing competition among Higher Education Institutions. Since February 2022 a subgroup focusing on alumni relations has been created under the UNICA PR & Communication working group. Learn more about this working group on the [UNICA website](#).



About the new profile of students

Aswin Lutchanah, Social Media Manager, University of Luxembourg

uni.lu is a young university founded in 2003 and is the only public university of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. Multilingual, international, interdisciplinary and research-oriented, the university aims to be a modern institution characterised by personal atmosphere.

“Aswin, you are always on Instagram!”

“Yes, and I am happy to say that I am paid for it”.

The University of Luxembourg is rapidly increasing the number of followers since Aswin Lutchanah is in charge of social media. Which is his secret?

To build his strategy, Aswin decided to begin from **understanding the needs of the new generation** and the reality is that this generation does not have time to read long texts and to watch long videos.

To respond to this new way of communicating, the University of Luxembourg uses its Instagram account to share stories which encounter a lot of engagement. Aswin does not want to only provide information, but mostly to **create relations with the followers**.

Whenever Aswin is not publishing, students say they miss the positivity.

What are these stories about and for which target group?

The University of Luxembourg publishes the following kind of stories:

- Informative stories about news and events taking place on campus;
- “Listening” stories to get feedback;
- Promotional stories to promote study programmes;
- Sharing stories composed by user-generated content;
- Motivational stories about exams or to fight loneliness.

The target group not only focuses on students already enrolled at the university, but also considers international students or **future students** at the University of Luxembourg, who are provided with the opportunity to share their stories and to find friends before they start their journey. It also includes **former students** of the university: Aswin's objective is to create a sense of belonging in the long-term in order to make the students become ambassadors of the Luxembourgish university.

Empathy Marketing

This connects to an important point of the strategy of the social media manager which is reflected by Empathy Marketing. Below the main characteristics:

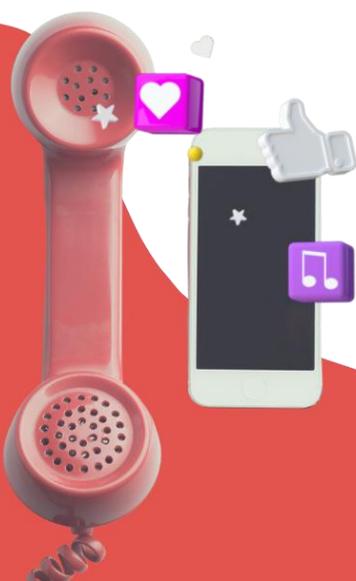
- Not selling but providing assistance;
- Embracing the student world (problems, joy, questions);
- Think like students;
- Listen to students;
- Find solutions for them;
- Direct them to the right contact/person.

The strategy is working, as demonstrated by the fact that the university's account receives constant messages from the students.

Aswin ended his presentation by sharing his motto:

“In social media there is the word ‘social’ which we tend to forget as we are used to the traditional media where we speak and people listen”.

With the new generation we should listen, interacting with students is key!





From myth to opportunity: why understanding Gen Alpha and the Metaverse matters

Alejandra OTERO, Founder & CEO, NEO Academy

NEO Academy is an education marketing and recruitment consultancy. It provides marketing support to institutions and gives them the opportunity to take into consideration different kinds of realities. NEO supports innovation and tries to support universities to consider the needs of current and especially future generations.

In her presentation, Alejandra focused on two topics that universities should get familiar with: Generation Alpha and Metaverse.

Welcome to Generation Alpha!

The Generation Alpha is the one coming after Generation Z. The oldest ones were born in 2010, they are 13 years old and in a few years they will be university students. Their parents are Millennials, and this means that this generation is extremely **tech-savvy**: from a very early age they take their parents' telephone and buy & play online. They can do that at the age of two.

Generation Alpha swipes! It is **impatient**, it needs to watch instant content. The information has to be given immediately, the Generation Alpha needs instant feedback. Generation Alpha is used to voice recognition, future students ask Alexa or Google for answers. They are kids used to live all their lives on social media, to share everything, to follow, to imitate. They are **gamers** at heart. They encounter people in the Metaverse, and they are constantly connected to play. They define themselves as the GOAT, the Greatest Of All Times.

Getting familiar with the Metaverse

Where do they spend the majority of their time? In the Metaverse! This is a virtual reality, which may be distorted for previous generations, but it is THEIR reality. Privacy has another meaning for people living in the Metaverse. In this reality, much data is constantly collected to help companies predict needs and conveniently insert ads.



However, they are not in the Metaverse for ads, but for their sense of belonging, they are there to meet their friends. **Community** is key in the Metaverse, but it has to be properly built.

The question arises naturally: how to join a community in the Metaverse? Previous generations are used to offline communities, why is there a shift? Alejandra believes this is the natural path. At first, the web was a platform to read content, not to engage (1990 – 2005). In a second moment, the web became a place where to interact with the content (2005 – 2020, the social media generation), finally the web became the community: the community owns the web and the web is focused on the community (2020 – ...). Metaverse is Web 3.0.

Below, a few popular tools in the Metaverse ecosystem:

- **“Discord”**. Throughout this community people can assess interests, the Generation Alpha is already there. This channel is extremely popular for gaming and several other interest areas. There is even a whole section for schools to bring their communities through their institutions' domain.
- **“Metamask”** allows a new access to the decentralised web, to connect with privacy. You become an anonymous person to browse the web. Yes, kids are using avatars! This is not a community channel but the new login type for this generation. Passwords are no longer cool.
- **“Coinbase”**, a crypto based service. This platform, although its major focus is to serve the crypto community, has implemented a very interesting concept: learn to earn. People are being paid for learning. This is a difficult concept for our generations, used to pay universities to learn.

Where to start?

By joining these communities! Creating a wallet, avoiding being a late adopter, trying to understand this generation right now.

Like Aswin, the Founder & CEO of NEO Academy believes that listening **to understand their values and their needs** is more important than pushing and selling a product. Universities ask their students to download brochures and read emails, and this needs to change: their reality is playing in the Metaverse!

Some universities are already present on channels like Discord, but many of them are related to video games. One may ask how to evaluate the quality of the exchange, what content universities should share, and especially which amplitude the workload for a Social Media Manager for animating the community would grow. When these doubts come up, universities need to learn to drop the notion of control. The beauty of these channels is that **your users become your voice**, and the role of a Social Media Manager would be to support rather than define. Discord is set on interests, Alejandra suggested that universities create communities on a specific topic. The community would help networking, and learning more about the university would be secondary.

It is also important to remember that the Metaverse is not all fun and games, in this universe there are still many issues such as relating to **bullying**. It is essential to understand how to protect victims of cyberbullies.

Lastly, universities should rethink the way they research on these topics. **The only way to understand Generation Alpha is meeting it where it is!**



International recruitment strategies & data analysis in the largest university in Europe

Marco PIETRANGELI and Daniela ASTOLFI, International Officers, Sapienza University of Rome

Sapienza University of Rome is one of the largest European universities by enrollments and one of the oldest in history, founded in 1303. During the last three years, the Italian university received, per year, tens of thousands of applications. Despite COVID19, the application rate increased and one of the reasons is that many students have been given the possibility to study online.

What is an international student for Sapienza?

He/she is a student whose **entry qualification is earned abroad** regardless of his/her citizenship and nationality. Foreign students that completed studies in Italy are not international students and on the other hand, Italian nationals that are coming back to Italy to continue their studies are seen as international students.

Profile of international students at Sapienza

Most of the students apply to Sapienza to enrol in Master programmes. This is because the university offers more English courses in the Master cycles. Most of the international students come from Asia and Europe and a smaller part from America and Africa.

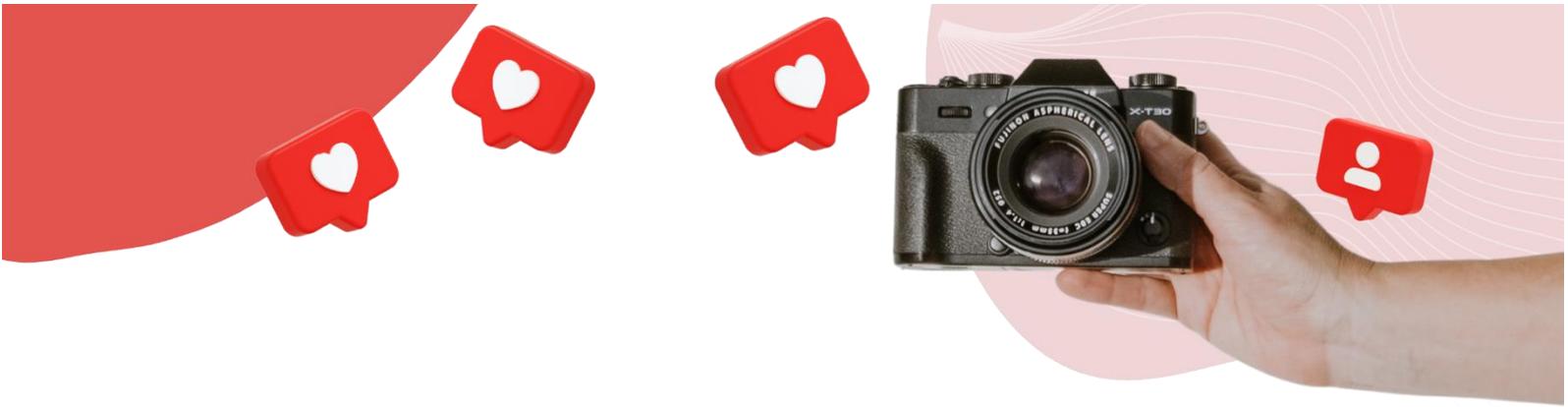
In terms of programmes, the most chosen ones are European studies, Fashion studies and more. In terms of language, most of them choose English taught programmes, but it is very interesting to see that up to 20% of the students decide to enrol in Italian taught programmes. It goes without saying that Sapienza University of Rome offers Italian classes to all international students to foster and facilitate integration.

Recruitment strategy at the largest university in Europe

Below are listed the activities and strategic messages provided by Sapienza University of Rome to attract international students:

- Events and fairs – both in person and online
- USPs and marketing messages:
 - Focus on the International/European (“the largest university in Rome”)
 - Focus on the multidisciplinary/comprehensive (“we teach almost everything”)
 - Focus on the rankings (“#1 worldwide for Classics”)
 - Focus on the cost (“public and affordable”)
 - Focus on the location (“feel at Rome”)
- Survey for international students to understand how to shape the strategy (e.g. define Sapienza in three words, what do you like about Sapienza, etc.).





Future Focused:

Planning for Uncertainty in future proofing our marketing campaigns **Lisa FLANNERY, Marketing Manager, University College Dublin (UCD)**

UCD is Ireland's largest university and one of Europe's leading research-intensive universities. UCD is also Ireland's most globally engaged university with over 38,000 students drawn from 152 countries, including over 5,000 students based at locations outside of Ireland.

"Rising into the future": A new recruitment campaign for a new institutional strategy

In 2021, the UCD central marketing team had to produce a new suite of marketing campaign materials for the 2022-2024 student recruitment markets. The new strategy needed to reflect on the new UCD strategic plan launched the previous year and convey the factors that would be relevant for 2-3 years into the future (education quality, breadth of subjects, positive campus experience and employability), while filming in an almost-deserted campus.



The new strategic plan's goal is to increase student numbers by 25% until 2030. That growth is expected to come from demographic changes in Ireland and the recruitment of international students. Designed with the message "Rising into the future", the plan was based on four strategic themes, namely creating a sustainable global society, transforming through digital technology, building a healthy world, and empowering humanity.

All of this meant aligning the marketing strategy to the new plan, which meant the following had to be done:

- Embedding the "Rising into the Future" message with a meaning;
- Highlighting course areas associated with income generation potential;

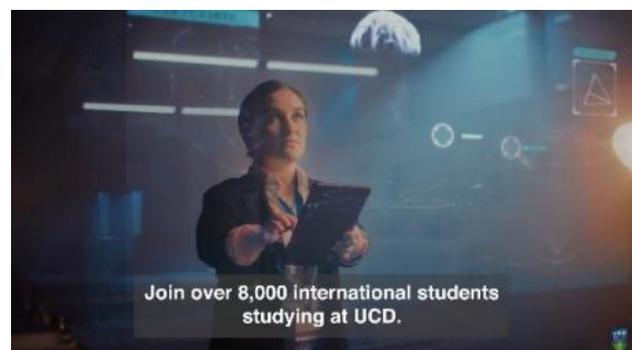
- Showcasing UCD's distinguished features (creative storytelling);
- Narrowing the focus onto income-generating audiences instead of previous concurrent focus on influence audiences (focusing on domestic school leavers, domestic master students and international students);
- Making sure the campaign is future proofed to last for two to three cycles of recruitment;
- Making it authentic (casting of real students);
- Having in mind new safety and logistical challenges due to COVID19.

The result was a functional matrix of storytelling translated in **three videos of 60 seconds**¹ structured around four subject storylines. In terms of **emotional engagement**, the UCD marketing team connected the UCD experience to the added value of joining UCD for the students. Students are shown twice: first, in the context of UCD's learning experience, then later we see how thanks to that learning experience, the student can shape change in the world.

All this was done using modern cinematic production techniques, incorporation of Irish culture through lyrical language, voiceover by UCD a graduate, and use of music tracks that created emotional impact.

Some **additional tactics** that proved to be successful include:

- Cut down of the 60 second videos to 10 and even 6 second videos that played on YouTube;
- Development of landing pages with further details, visuals, benefits and testimonials;
- Acknowledgement of the best media for each target group.

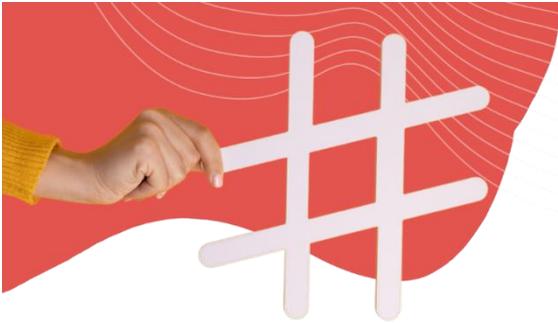


¹ Watch the videos: [Global 60"](#) | [Masters 60"](#) | [CAO 60"](#)

As mentioned before, the videos had to be sustainable to cover two or three cycles of recruitment. At the time of the presentation, the campaign was heading into its second cycle and UCD was confident that most of the selling messages still stand up in 2023 and 2024. However, UCD is already considering some changes due to:

- **New media and regions:** to reach younger generations, it will be necessary to make use of new platforms like TikTok. On the other hand, to reach audiences in specific regions, it will be necessary to prepare localised subtitle translations. Finally, new recordings in Gaeilge are needed to meet new Irish legal requirements;
- **Outdated analytical data:** changes in ranking positions and the increase of international students will force UCD to reframe messages and re-write scripts;
- **Technical limitations:** there are limited ways to 'cut down' the longer videos to 10 and 6 seconds to freshen the campaign. Additionally, impactful cinematic production techniques are not as relevant as platforms like TikTok.

In conclusion, as of now, building a great campaign that survives the test of time requires a great investment in all areas - management, creative, financial. Such a strategy has proven to be so impactful that it can be reused several times with minimal adjustments. However, in preparation for the moment when Gen Alpha fully enters the Higher Education market, it is important to keep an open mind to adapt this strategy and make content more "snackable" and aligned with the new generation's interests.



Content marketing – connecting with prospective students through inspiring and authentic brand-aligned digital content

David SMITH, Associate Director of Brand and Marketing, University of East London (UEL)

UEL is a careers-led university ranked in the world's top 250 young universities². It collaborates with industry to re-develop, redesign and validate its course portfolio to prepare the learners for sustainable careers of the future. It currently has over 30,000 students from 158 countries enrolled.

Content and strategic marketing

“Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.”³

Starting from this definition, content marketing ranges from being a very strategic element of marketing activity, focused on content creation and distribution, segmentation, but also **return on investment**. When creating a campaign, marketing teams look at what is happening in the **external environment** (political and economic context, competitors' strategy and the behaviour of the people engaging with the brands) to set the objectives of the content marketing. They also take into account the return on investment i.e. being profitable in the approach taken to content marketing and audience. Finally, it is important to set a **target group** and the segments that sit within that. Once the strategic marketing approach for the content is detailed, then tactics, actions and controls follow.

Two models to consider

1. Chanel Strategy⁴

Once the audience, the goals and the strategy are identified, the marketing team decides the channels to use which can be:

- Paid channels, useful to reach people that have never heard about a brand before.
- Owned media, which relies on people knowing/having some pre-engagement with the brand.
- Shared media values engagement, i.e. interaction with the content.
- Earned media values, other people talking about the product or the service.

² Times Higher Education 2021

³ The Content Marketing Institute

⁴ See a visual representation in this [speaker's presentation](#)



2. Marketing Funnel⁵

The Marketing Funnel describes a customer's journey with a brand. At the top there's **awareness**, i.e. to make different people understand the brand, its offer and its values. Once the awareness is gained, the marketing team nurtures the audience as it goes through the funnel. This is done by drawing in people's interest, then making them consider the university as a brand to engage with or even to apply to, and finally enrol onto a course.

Thinking about the media mix and the funnel can help identify and understand the valuable and relevant content for the target group and where to push those messages out through. Finally, marketing teams should not forget the brand positioning to really support consistency and content creation. One needs to understand what customers want, but the best space to be is in between **what customers want and what an institution does best.**

From brands to branding the university

1. The Michelin Guide



In the 1900s, Michelin produced a guide to help motorists find service stops across France. Due to lack of engagement, they started to highlight places to eat and to drink. Therefore, it became more of a restaurant guide and then it turned itself into awarding stars to different restaurants.

2. Spotify



Once a year, around December, the streaming platform gives its customers a summary of what they have been listening to throughout the year. The strategy entirely focuses on the users of the service and most importantly, this is a very shareable content!

3. Colgate



The toothpaste brand launched a campaign to give people advice about dental hygiene. This is being useful, relevant, and consistent with what the customer wants by providing digital content that serves the brand without selling.

⁵ See a visual representation in this [speaker's presentation](#)

These three examples bring to mind three things to take into consideration when preparing a campaign in Higher Education: the practical, inspirational and authentic. The **practical** concerns concrete things a university can offer (e.g. course information, application process); the **inspirational** relates to the outcome of the university's products and services; finally, the **authentic** provides realism to the other two: it's the peer-to-peer voice.

The UEL recently developed two campaigns which can constitute a good example for the three areas. During COVID19, it launched the Lockdown Learning Guide as a way to remind students of final year exams while giving useful advice about how to get through lockdown. In "Be the change", the university gave a student a platform to talk about Black Lives Matter movement. The student created content that was not directly related to the university, but rather in something she was interested in, which is more shareable and engaging.

6



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⁶ Take a look at the Lockdown Learning Guide [here](#).

⁷ Watch [this](#) and [other videos](#) of the Be The Change campaign



Conclusions and recommendations

A new generation, Gen Alpha, will enter the Higher Education market in a few years and it's time professionals working in university marketing start preparing to welcome them. The first step is to understand them and meet them where they're at. And that is no longer on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram... It's somewhere else called Metaverse: an immersive place that replicates reality in the virtual world, believed to be the next iteration of the internet.

So what exactly should universities do right now?

1. (Slowly) getting into the Metaverse

Knowing that around 39% of this new generation prefers to meet their friends online during the weekend⁸, the first thing universities should do is to prepare their staff to be present in these communities. Universities are already joining non-traditional social media such as TikTok or Mastodon, but engaging with the new generation of students requires further resources, new expertise, and time to be fully engaged, especially when taking in consideration the faster pace of information in any of these platforms. Universities need to start establishing a process and budgeting for a range of faster turnaround, shorter, and more focused content (more 'snackable' content). The goal is to find the optimal balance between big brand impact and more tactical messaging.

Mastering these channels is a first step to understand the new generation and prepare for the enhanced online environments of the Metaverse that will eventually have a greater expression through virtual reality and augmented reality.

But beyond training on how to connect online communities with offline ones and to navigate the new channels, staff should also acknowledge and understand that old phenomena of the offline world, such as bullying, is not going away but actually finding a new platform. It is important to develop mechanisms to identify cyber bullies and to support the victims.

2. Importance of data analysis for recruitment

Universities should harmonise the different platforms for recruitment so that they can communicate with each other. Analysing data is essential to improve the recruitment strategy, however the data is most of the time not coded, not available or readable.

⁸ <https://blog.gwi.com/trends/4-insights-on-gen-alpha/>

Knowing that data analysis is crucial for recruitment and marketing strategy, this should be inserted in the workload of the staff responsible for communication and recruitment.

3. Invest to future proof

Building sustainable campaigns that can be reused in two or three cycles of recruitment is a good strategy for marketing teams to be able to start preparing and adapting for what comes next. To do this, teams should focus on content that does not expire, use realistic feedback from actual students, and establish a good relationship with them that allows the reuse of material without compromising consent.

4. Learn from the outside

Product marketing is a great source of inspiration for Higher Education. Though universities differ a lot in their objectives from common product brands, there are some common points that can be replicated when promoting what an institution has to offer. Above all, three things are to have in mind: campaigns must be practical, inspirational, and authentic.

5. Foster collaboration among universities

Communication is changing, students are changing. Universities are facing challenging times understanding how to communicate with new generations and how to attract international students.

By sharing new communication techniques and good practices of universities that are more advanced in this field and also taking into consideration the diversity of its Network (in terms of regional contexts, different target groups and needs), UNICA can support institutions overcoming challenges and learn from each other. Collaboration should be preferred to competition. As a Network of Universities based in Capitals Cities in Europe, UNICA can support its members understanding the best way to attract international students and facilitate university exchange and promote continuous innovation!

***Do you want to know more or wish to get involved
in the UNICA PR & Communication activities?***

Reach out to the UNICA Secretariat at

office@unica-network.eu

