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## Innovative marketing as a tool for building a positive image of an institution of higher education and increasing the competitiveness of its graduates - Analysis of the functional use of projects of the Department of Marketing Communications at the Faculty of Multimedia Communications of TBU in Zlín and their potential for integration into the teaching process

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### Abstract

Authors of this paper focus on mapping the current trends at institutions of higher education in the context of combining theory with practice during the study, thanks to which the future graduates will be able to find a better job on the labour market. Part of this paper is an analysis of the functional connection between the real life and a university study program through projects implemented at a selected academic workplace, within innovative marketing, whose task is to build a positive image of the institution of higher education and its reputation in the public as well as professional environment. Student projects, as a part of an innovative marketing, combine theoretical lessons with engaging students into a real-life working process in the given field and the possibilities of such field to provide them a cooperation with a selected commercial sector, application of the obtained theoretical knowledge in real life, further personal development, teamwork, own portfolio and other competencies that provide them with a strategic advantage when looking for their future job.

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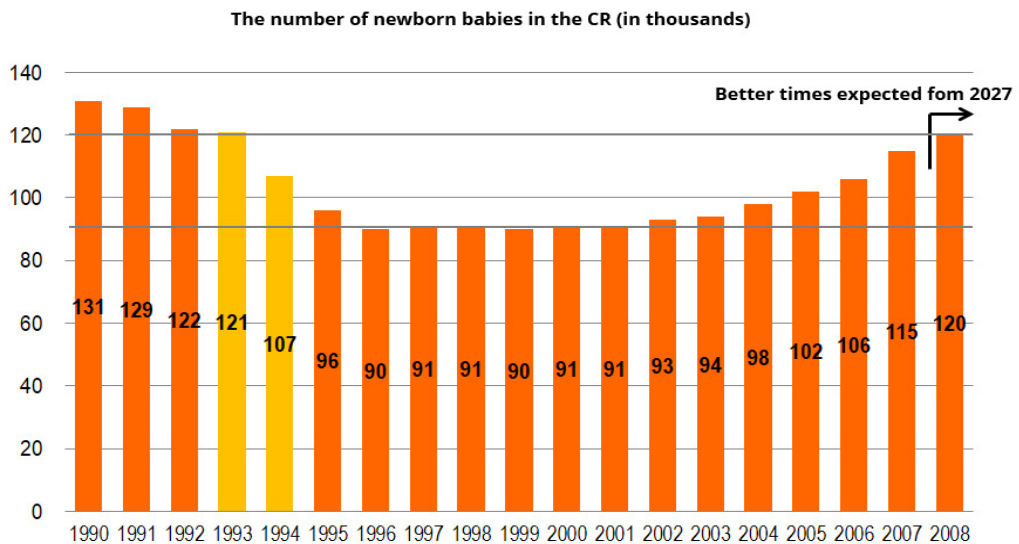
**Keywords:** innovative marketing; higher education institution; student projects; building up a positive image of higher learning; the competitiveness of graduates; linking theory and practice

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## 1. An Analysis of the Target Group of Prospective Applicants for Admissions to Higher Education Institutions in the CR (Demographic Indicators, the Current Situation, and a Prognosis for the Future)

Nowadays, there are growing concerns that the number of secondary-school students will soon decrease significantly. This will not only dramatically affect the educational structure within this age group, but it will also affect further and higher education, as well as the overall market situation influenced by the integration of job seekers in the labour market.

The following graph (Graph 1.) depicts a population curve showing the number of newborn babies (in thousands) in the CR between 1990 and 2008. There was a significant decrease in the number of newborn babies in the CR between 1993 and 1996, when their numbers even fell by about 31 thousand. Therefore, a significant decrease in the number of applicants for admissions to higher education institutions should be expected in years to come.



Graph 1. Population curve – the number of newborn babies in the CR between 1990 and 2008 (expressed in thousands), Source: Internal materials of Tomas Bata University in Zlín processed according to the: Czech Statistical Office[online]. [cited on 2014-06-28]. Available on: <http://www.czso.cz/csu/2010ediciplan.nsf/p/4032-10>

In the 1990s, the Czech economy as well as the whole society went through significant transformational change, which also had an impact on the higher education system. New private and public higher education institutions were gradually established, new and up-to-date education programmes were offered, and new educational levels became available. Population decline among students entering higher education also affects Tomas Bata University in Zlín (abbr. TBU in Zlín). In the academic years 2010/2011 and 2012/2013, their numbers decreased by 1,012.

It may be assumed that population decline among students entering higher education will result in an excess of supply over demand. Thus, individual higher education institutions will be put under more intense competitive pressure and their efforts to address as many prospective applicants to their degree courses as possible will be intensified. Although the situation may be viewed as negative, it also has a positive effect on higher education. In this way, higher education institutions are being forced to improve the quality of the degree programmes and courses offered, and to adapt their offer to the current market demand – the demands of prospective employers (businesses

and companies). This may help their graduates improve their employment chances in the labour market and so make individual degree courses more attractive. As competition increases among higher education institutions, another important area should be mentioned, i.e. higher education promotion, including the promotion of individual degree programmes and courses. Its aim is to provide prospective applicants not only with extensive information relating to the study system, graduate profiles, the activities conducted by the given higher education institution, etc. Also, particular marketing communication activities pursued by higher education institutions to promote their degree courses will contribute to a distinct differentiation from their competitors. In this way, a unique and unmistakable image of a higher education institution or a particular degree course may be created. And this is one of the primary aims of TBU in Zlín and its Department of Marketing Communications (abbr. DMC).

## **2. Innovative marketing as an effective tool for building a positive image of higher education institution and enhancing the competitiveness of its graduates**

The market environment, as well as businesses, companies or consumers are evolving constantly and form themselves, resulting in a change in understanding marketing and its constant need for innovation. Due to this the interest grows at present in innovative forms of marketing solutions that are different from traditional, commercially used marketing techniques.

The inability of classical marketers to respond to the market needs is the main reason for its transformation. Gradually marketing thinking of firms and businesses changes, which responds to the fact that the customer is not only a source of immediate profit but is an opportunity for the long term stability of the company (Hesková, M., Štarchoň, P., 2009).

As a part of the designation of the contemporary marketing trends, as one of the terms, increasingly begins utilizing an innovative marketing concept. Innovative marketing is based on the market expansion by the fact that it discovers new customer needs, new possibilities of how to use the products, a new group of consumers, new situations in which the product could be utilized, which in the initial market definition has not been taken into account. This means that our original product must be significantly altered (Kotler, Ph., Trias de Bes, F., 2004).

The principle of innovative marketing requires a company or a business to constantly search for the real improvements of their products and marketing. The society that overlooks new and better ways of operation will lose their customers in favor of their competition who discovers the better ways (Kotler, Ph., Wong, V., Saunders, J., Armstrong, G., 2007).

Innovative marketing is used when all the other possibilities of traditional vertical marketing are exhausted. Innovative marketing significantly transforms a product that later satisfies the needs, may be used for other purposes, in other situations or address other target customer groups that would not be reached without the particular changes in the product (Kotler, Ph., Trias de Bes, F., 2004).

The principles of innovative marketing may be applied also to the university environment when a study or a degree course becomes a product designed for a certain target group we try to address. By the means of innovative approach, it is possible to design the product in the form of an offered course so that it becomes also an effective tool for building a positive image of a higher education institution and enhancing competitiveness of its graduates, which the authors of the paper will try to demonstrate in the following parts by a demonstration of practical projects of the FMC students at Tomas Bata University in Zlín, and their possibility of integration into an education process.

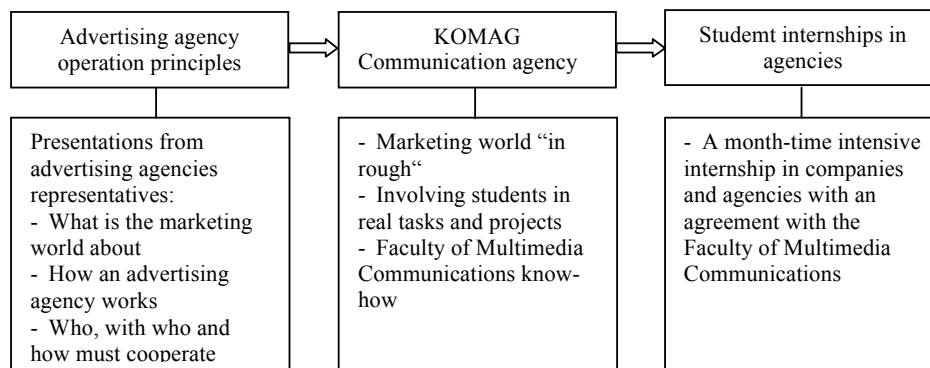
## **3. The Characteristics of the Projects Undertaken at the Department of Marketing Communications, the Faculty of Multimedia Communications, TBU in Zlín, and the Possibilities of Integrating Them into the Teaching and Learning Process**

In cooperation with the other departments at the Faculty of Multimedia Communications, the Department of Marketing Communications provides the degree programme in Media and Communication Studies and the degree course in Marketing Communications. This degree course aims to equip its future Bachelor's and Master's graduates with theoretical knowledge and practical experience so that they could become fully-fledged team members and so

that they could build successful careers in commercial as well as non-commercial businesses and institutions, in communications agencies, as spokespersons, or experts in the field of marketing communications.

The Bachelor and Master graduate profile, produced by the Department of Marketing Communications, is considered by its staff a key factor influencing the graduates' careers. Therefore, within the development of study plans, the profile is constantly being improved and updated. Particular emphasis is laid upon a multidisciplinary approach to the field, which is the reason why subjects covering the following areas are taught, e.g. economics, marketing, psychology, sociology, aesthetics, arts, etc. Nevertheless, particularly subjects covering individual areas within marketing communications are taught, i.e. advertising, public relations, sales promotion, personal selling, direct marketing, sponsoring and others. The Department of Marketing Communications aims to continuously improve the quality of the teaching and learning process, to adapt its offer to the current market demand, as well as to respond to the latest European and global trends in teaching marketing communications.

Within the Department of Marketing Communications the interconnection between the theory and practice during the studies divided into individual phases. During the first phase, the full-service agency representatives provide a series of lectures (aimed primarily at the first year students of bachelor's degree studies) within the DMC, where the students learn about the basic principles of an advertising agency principles (what departments it consists of and what are their main tasks, how an advertising campaign is prepared, what are the individual jobs within such an agency, and what is their main task, etc.). During the next phase, the students are involved into project solutions of the faculty communication agency called KOMAG, where they can try out tasks of different job positions in specific real tasks (how the KOMAG agency operates is to be defined and described in more detail in the subchapter 3.4). During the third phase, a student internship in partner companies, advertising or communication agencies follows that lasts a month. These have an agreement with the FMC and DMC. The students are free to select from the offer internships in different companies and agencies according to which is more convenient for them and to try out any position they would like to do after they graduate. These individual phases of theory and practice interconnection are depicted in the following scheme (Scheme 1.).



Scheme 1. Successive phases of theory and practice interconnection at the DMC, Source: Kocourek, J. (2014). Communications agency KOMAG. Presentation during the open day, FMC TBU in Zlín

Such a model has proved itself in practice and is perceived positively not only by students but also by companies and agencies providing the internship opportunities. For this model in the future to be of a higher quality and to become more effective, the DMC realized a comprehensive research aimed at the students doing the internships as well as at the representatives of the particular companies providing internship opportunities to the students.

The results of the questionnaire research carried out with the representatives of the internships providing companies to the students of Marketing Communications show that the students poses a very good expressing and

presenting skills, they are very well prepared for searching for information and for team work. These skills are essential within the marketing field. The students lack organizational and leadership skills that they acquire only within the genuine practice. The language skills are partly absent as most students actively use English language but they lack knowledge of other languages used in companies in the business dealings and in entering the foreign markets (German, Russian language). The weakest point of the students' readiness for the marketing practice is the knowledge of economics and legal background concerning business. This fact is important for companies and businesses and it is necessary to equip the students with legal and economic knowledge needed for the practice (Jurášková, O. et al. 2011).

The course of Communication agency (abbr. KOMAG), formerly called Advertising agency, was established as an educational course at the Institute of Advertising Creation and Marketing Communications at TBU in Zlín in 2004. It is a unique platform in the Czech Republic that connects students of all years of a daily study program at the FMC and its courses: Media and communication studies, Fine arts and Theory and practice of audiovisual production. The task of this student agency is to simulate real working and goings-on of an advertising, or production, agency.

The KOMAG Communication Agency has gradually become a unique educational project which is the only of its kind in central Europe as the students of the Faculty of Multimedia Communications gain a large amount of practical experience thanks to the agency. Led by teachers as well as by experienced professionals, students create interdisciplinary teams that are able to carry out different projects in a complex manner. This is an opportunity for students to try out typical marketing and marketing communication jobs directly in real projects and gain valuable experience, e.g. in the areas of project management, teamwork, marketing, creation of advertising campaigns, or other tools of marketing communication.

Through the KOMAG Communication Agency, the FMC combines theory with practice and connects students with enterprises, companies, and communication and advertising agencies, thanks to which students are better able to understand the importance of marketing and marketing communication in real life.

What are the benefits of connecting theory and practice in the KOMAG Communication agency:

For students – they can test their theoretical knowledge directly by solving real problems; they can obtain traineeship positions, contacts, material or financial rewards, but above all practical experience during their studies that will help them build their own portfolio and find a better job after graduation.

For the FMC – competitive advantage of faculty graduates; better reflecting of current trends in marketing communication and of practical requirements; increasing the attractiveness of studying at the faculty; building positive faculty image for the target group as well as for the general public.

For companies, enterprises, and organizations – they can obtain complex marketing communication solutions, the creation of which is supervised both by teachers and by experienced professionals and which are cheap (compared to prices offered by large full-service agencies). Companies can also find suitable future employees among students.

For communication and advertising agencies – a big fluctuation of workers; an opportunity to seek new talents; building a positive image of the agency, which is connected with a synergistic PR effect; the opportunity to participate in the teaching process in which the agencies may enrich the education with current trends necessary for practical work, thanks to which it is easier to integrate future graduates in the working process without the need for detailed trainings.

The KOMAG Communication Agency operates as a separate department at the FMC. It is managed by a director who is responsible for the general running of the agency, decides about individual projects to be carried out during the academic year, supervises their overall preparation, designs, and creation, and provides for communication with the representatives of enterprises, companies, or agencies. The management of the KOMAG Communication Agency comprises the Assistant Director and the Economist of the Communication Agency. Individual projects are then led by students, the so-called "project managers". These are usually senior students who have already participated in projects in the past and therefore know them well and possess the practical experience necessary to lead their own teams of students. Student teams consist of individual professions and each student has his/her own specific task that he/she is responsible for (e.g. Art Director, Promotion Manager, Production Manager, Fundraising Manager, PR-Manager, etc.). The sizes of student teams and the amounts of professions depend on the size and

difficulty of the project. Students carry out projects in a complex manner, i.e. the projects are so-called “turnkey projects”: from project design over fundraising and project promotion up to final implementation.

In the following section of this paper, the authors will focus on the analysis of projects of FMC and the KOMAG Communications Agency. On the basis of the conducted research on a selected sample (cohort) of DMC-students, the authors will try to determine the satisfaction of students with combining theory with practice during their studies, as well as their views on the work of the Communications Agency, the quality of the individual realized student projects and the real benefit of those projects.

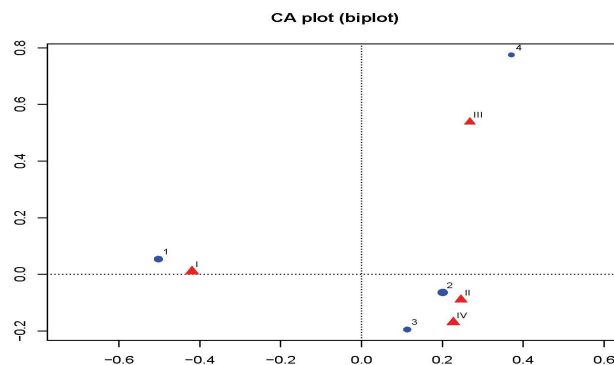
#### 4. Functional Use Analysis of Projects of the Department of Marketing Communications, Faculty of Multimedia Communications at TBU in Zlín (research implemented on a cohort of students studying full-time at the Department of Marketing Communications)

At the end of the academic year 2013-2014, a quantitative research was performed on a selected cohort of students in the years 1 to 5 of the full-time study in the field of Marketing Communication who encounter the innovative element of application and integration of practical project implementations during their study at the Department of Marketing Communications. The quantitative questionnaire survey was carried out with a randomly selected cohort of students of all years, and classical paper questionnaire forms were selected, i.e. PAPI (Pen and Paper Interviewing), and these results were consequently converted into digital form, in which they were further processed in the “R” statistical software.

The objective of the performed research was to determine what approaches exist to practical sessions, practical project implementation and cooperation with companies operating in the given sector, where all these activities were fully integrated into their study. The reason for the survey was the fact that it was necessary to regularly review the suitability of study programme structure as well as perception of students, which was followed by job placement after finishing a university study.

The research found out that the model of implementing practical projects into the study was sufficient within the educational process and it was extraordinarily positively evaluated.

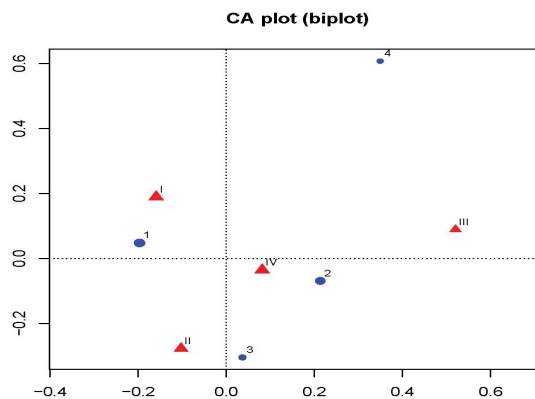
With regard to the fact that students of various years can differ in opinions and their relationship to practice during the study or after finishing the study, an exact statistical test further analyzed the relationship between a year of study and the level of agreement with sufficient level of connection between theory and practice at DMC. Due to the lack of respondents from the 5<sup>th</sup> year of study – there were only 4 students participating – these students` answers were included in the answers of the 4<sup>th</sup> year. One dimension of this variable was also reduced due to a low number of complete disagreement answers. By doing so, a new matrix was formed, or a 4x4 table. To analyse the dependence of two categorical variables, a Chi-square test on independence was used. Due to the lasting lack of values within the ascertained degree of agreement, more specifically at Group 4 “Rather disagree”, the Monte Carlo simulation had to be used which specifies at maximum the rate of the tested criterion, or p-value, by a high number of replications (5000 set) of similar distribution of values in categories.



Graph 2. Degree of consent with a sufficient level of linking theory with practice on DMC, Source: own processed data

The aforementioned result shows that sufficient evidence was not found for rejecting the statistical zero hypothesis which stated there was no relationship between the two monitored variables. In other words, no significant difference was observed across years in the degree of agreement with the sufficient level of connection between theory and practice at DMC. From practical point of view, this means that the degree of agreement almost does not change across years and the value of this fact remains preserved. FMC students permanently show a positive degree of agreement with the sufficient level of connection between theory and practice at DMC. This conclusion is relatively interesting with the first year because it can indicate consistent good image of the Department, which is also reflected in the number of applicants for the study at DMC, as on the basis of DMC communication and awareness of it, applicants search this study, among other things, on the basis of application of practical lectures following from the strategy of innovative marketing of the Department.

The aforementioned facts are also connected with the finding how practical experience is perceived for the use in future practice. To analyse the dependence of two categorical variables, a Chi-square test on independence was used. Due to the lasting lack of values within the ascertained degree of agreement, the Monte Carlo simulation had to be used which specifies at maximum the rate of the tested criterion, or p-value, by a high number of replications (5000 set) of similar distribution of values in categories. The analysis did not provide sufficient evidence for rejecting the statistical zero hypothesis which stated there was no relationship between the two monitored variables. In other words, no significant difference was observed across years in the degree of agreement with the benefit of working on student projects and the use of acquired experience in future practice.



Graph 3. Degrees of consent with the benefit of working on student projects and using acquired experience in the future in practice, Source: Own processed data

Graph 3. shows a balanced distribution both within the “year of study” variable, and within categories of the degree of agreement with the benefit of working on student projects and the use of acquired experience in future practice.

To conclude, we can state that FMC students show a stable positive degree of agreement with a high level of benefits of working on student project for their use in practice.

The aforementioned results show that connection with practice, the implementation of communication agency projects and relationship with companies from the commercial sector can be considered one of key benefits of studying at the Department of Marketing Communication. At the same time, these practical projects strengthen the image of the Department, and thus indirectly ensure communication and building the image of the Department, thus supporting classical communication of the Department.

As mentioned above, the research was only carried out with students of the Department of Marketing Communication and in the following period it will also be carried out with students of the Art and Theory and Practice of Audiovisual Art study programmes. This will extend data collection to all groups of students within the Faculty of Multimedia Communications and create a comprehensive picture of perceiving the presence of this element of innovative marketing at the university.

## 5. Conclusions, proposals and recommendations for a more efficient connection of theory and practice as implemented by the Department of Marketing Communications and the Faculty of Multimedia Communications, TBU in Zlín

Combining theory with practice is the key benefit of FMC and DMC compared to similar competitive institutions of higher education, which helps build a positive image of this field of study.

The surveys have shown that students perceive the projects implemented by FMC and DMC in a positive way, they have sufficient awareness about them, they actively engage in them and understand the strategic advantage of the practical experience already acquired during their studies, giving them a competitive advantage on the labour market. The increase in number of student projects implemented at FMC and DMC has led their surplus, the result of which is that students are losing interest in those projects which they consider little interesting or little beneficial. Based on this finding, it would be preferable if FMC and DMC reduced the number of offered projects only to those that are of a higher quality and more attractive for students. Although the strategic advantages and strengths of FMC and DMC are well-known to the students at the department, they are much less known to the potential applicants (prospective students) and to the general public. That is why it is necessary to creatively communicate these key benefits of the field of study to the target group.

Last but not least, FMC and DMC must maintain and continue to develop the trend of cooperation with the world of business (firms, companies, experienced professionals, communication and advertising agencies), thanks to which the faculty can reflect current trends of marketing communication, the needs of the outside world, thereby ensuring better job prospects for its graduates on the labour market and the attractiveness of the field of study.

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### List of abbreviations used

CR	Czech Republic
FMC	Faculty of Multimedia Communications
KOMAG	Communication agency
TBU	Tomas Bata University in Zlín
DMC	Department of Marketing Communications