

Communication Builder – a tool for Universities

Engage your communities in digital dialogues

Chiara Carlino

Kion
Bologna, Italy
c.carlino@kion.it

ABSTRACT

The digital world offers a wide variety of media, messages types and reception modes. Communications can interact across the different media, realizing a multichannel digital integrated communication, and providing a mutually positive amplification effect. Such amplification and its effectiveness can be fully measured through web-based monitoring systems.

Communication builder is a unique system for digital communication specifically designed for Universities to provide them with a very effective and low cost tool which may help them interactively communicating with all stakeholders.

A simple user-friendly tool plus specific skills in communication through digital media will give Universities a chance to interact with their audience in a fast, modern and cost-effective way.

Keywords: digital media, multichannel, community, direct, communication, one-to-one, marketing, campaigns, incoming students, U-GOV, Student Management System

1. Multi-channel digital communication

A university needs to stay up-to-date in order to effectively communicate with its first and main public: the students. It also needs to be dynamic and collaborative, to start and manage *conversations* in addition to traditional one-way communication.

Digital media are smart, quick, up-to-date, and largely customizable according to the target, capable of interacting and amplifying each other. Through digital media it is possible to get the user's attention by providing him with the information he is interested in through a personal one-to-one and yet machine-driven communication: this will raise the perceived quality of communication and thus the attention of the target. Moreover different digital media can refer one to the other (e.g. e-mail communication may refer to web and social networks presence, web and social network may

refer one to the other, etc), gaining an amplifying effect.

Such characteristic make communication through digital media a unique chance.

2. Communication Builder

In order to make it possible and easy for the University's staff to start and manage communication on digital channels leveraging their most peculiar characteristics, U-GOV Student Management System (from here on *U-GOV SMS*) includes a specific tool: *Communication Builder*.

Communication Builder offers a way to build communication plans – or *campaigns*; realize them through different digital channels; keep track of both digital and traditional communication actions; re-use the same contents on the four – and growing – supported channels; address direct communication actions to a specifically profiled target with adequate contents; manage contact information about a University's audience; accurately monitor the success of actions landing on the web through Google Analytics; customize Google Analytics monitoring through a deep flexible and user-friendly interaction.

Campaigns

Communication Builder offers a single Mainboard to manage and monitor communication campaigns spreading through different digital media. A campaign gathers a set of communication actions with a shared purpose, targeting a specific public and interacting with each other. A communication action can be an e-mail, a website, an SMS and so on.

Communication Builder allows managing multiple campaigns; inside each of them it is possible to create and publish small websites, appealing e-mails, pages for digital terrestrial television and SMS, while other channels are being developed.

Campaign management of *Communication Builder* includes:

- A multi-channel content management system, allowing using the same contents on different media without any need for duplicate information

- A tight interaction with Google Analytics – Google monitoring system – allowing activating and customizing it without any need for coding skills.
- Roles distinction (editors, web designers, marketers) allowing each contributor to cooperate according to his/her specific skills

Communication channels

Communication Builder currently supports two direct communication channels – E-mail and SMS – where it is possible to realize a nearly one-to-one communication; and two publicly available, broadcast channels – web and DTT – acting as landing area, where and interested user can find detailed information, or a deeper interaction.

Web channel also is the channel allowing an accurate monitoring for other channels' *Return On Investments* (ROI), if they can convey users to web.

E-Mail

E-mails can be used as regular newsletter or as *una-tantum* actions meant to emphasize a single news or event.

It is possible to directly address the receiver from inside a mail; the sender name can also be customized according to best-practices in direct communication.

SMS

The strength of an SMS is the ability to reach its target when they are offline, with brief and punctual information, for example reminders of events or deadlines, invitations, or anything creativity can put in 160 characters.

Ad personam SMS can be sent during a communication campaign, but also with more specific functional and informative purposes.

Web

During a communication campaign revolving around an event or service, it can be useful to gather in a single and simple place everything concerning it, so that it can be easily reached by anybody, without any need to surf through deep levels of a complex site such as the official website of a university.

Such a *brand site* will act as a landing area, where interested users can arrive, find references to what they need and directly navigate to the corresponding pages on external sites.

The complexity degree of such sites can vary, from a simple collection of links to a more complex area with authentication, interactions, newsletter subscription and so on.

DTT

Channels and programs on Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) can have interactive pages, which can be viewed by users using the remote's keys. Such pages can be always available on a given channel or

tied to a specific TV show or time; they can provide information, advertising, games and so on.

Communication Builder allows designing such pages - according to the MHP standard - and the navigation inside them, just like a remote-controlled website.

Contacts

A university already knows a lot about people involved in it: it knows who they are, their contact information – from e-mail to home address through cell phone –, age, interests, study level: thanks to the integration with U-GOV SMS, *Communication Builder* can leverage all this information for communication purposes, turning a management database into a contacts database, with the full potential of a CRM application.

Thanks to the integration with U-GOV SMS database, the user will only have to express the defining parameters to a target contact list once, and it will always be available and up-to-date for other customized communications.

Moreover it will be possible to manage external contacts, concerning people who are not – or not yet – directly involved with the University, such as OSYM and ALES contacts, and schools or business representatives.

Monitoring

For web-based communication actions, a quick and accurate monitoring is possible.

Communication Builder interacts with Google Analytics, whose advanced, marketing-tailored and free of charge service allows monitoring with interesting details the performance of online actions and traffic generated towards other sites.

A timely and detailed monitoring allows an accurate evaluation of a campaign's ROI: this is a relevant added value for digital actions compared to traditional ones (paper advertising, television, billboards...), whose revenue is much more difficult and slow to compute.

Communication Builder allows not only to activate such monitoring without any need for specific technical skills, but also to customize it in order to classify visits according to other undertaken marketing actions. It is thus possible to know exactly which actions gained most success, and use this information to tailor subsequent actions.

3. Communication strategies

New technologies aren't just technologies anymore: they are a new way to communicate, to live socially, to spread information. Digitalization of information has been the kick off of a lot of different ways to communicate, different media, with their peculiarities and typical audience, many of which inside or referring to the World Wide Web.

Especially the youngest generations and their most educated part spend a big and always growing part of their time online, in various virtual worlds, each with its specific content, its typical expression style, its purpose and audience.

Virtual places are full of students, former students, potential students, researchers, business representatives: nearly everybody who – for one reason or another – can be an interesting target for a University's communication; even more than television, newspapers and physical public places.

In these digital places it is also possible to reach people one by one, selecting them based on tastes and interests, building with them a dialogue having much more chances to be interesting for both sides – and with a minimum expense when compared to that required by any more traditional medium.

Moreover, most online actions can be accurately monitored and analyzed, so that it is possible to understand in near real time how effective it is being, and maybe change some parameters, change the communication itself in order to be more effective and adequate to the target, getting to better know the addressed audience: which contents are most interesting, which actions get the better response, where the audience is geographically located, when it is more active, if it uses smart technology or not, and so on.

This is possible given that we know how each medium and each virtual place is meant to be used, which are their potentials and weaknesses, their user-base, etc.

A University could decide to implement e-mail communication, a presence on a social network, the building of a community – in every case it is essential to know the peculiarities of each medium in order to better exploit its potential and fulfill the campaign's goal.

For each typical activity and purpose of a University, a series of actions on digital media can be designed, which could usefully integrate and amplify traditional communication actions, or constitute the main campaign, according to needs.

Kion is able to provide universities with services and consultancy on these subjects, supporting the University's skills with its own. *Communication Builder*, together with Kion's consultancy, provide a University with all necessary means to manage digital communication in a flexible, dynamic, up-to-date and appealing way; addressing various targets; working on different channels; so that its communication is always adequate and modern, reinforcing its fresh young but always authoritative image.

With *Communication Builder* the University has all necessary tools to effectively manage online

communication towards all of its contacts – internal as well as external.

4. Designing Campaigns

A consistent communication plan – or campaign – revolves around an object and a purpose, and is realized through actions on different channels, or *media*. Each action is designed to exploit characteristics of its specific medium and to interact with other actions.

Skills needed at various levels to realize such a plan vary from the most technical ones, to the ability to design a campaign, to verbal and graphical creativity and the ability to manage conversations taking place on social media.

Especially important is the use made of direct communication, with which it is possible to offer only interesting content to interested people, thus avoiding spam effect and gaining and keeping users' attention, due to the perceived high quality of contents.

Kion is capable of providing consultancy to Universities in such activities, as a support and complement to existing skills in all phases of a campaign creation: from design to implementation to evaluation of results.

Analysis

A Kion communication consultant will analyze with the University staff the needs in this field. Once identified the desired context for a communication campaign (e.g. incoming students, services advertising, foreign students' recruitment...) targets and goals for the campaign will be set. Starting from goals target and time constraints, channels to be used will be identified.

It could be channels already supported by Communication Builder or new ones, digital or not: most important is their effectiveness in helping the University reaching the designed goal.

A university may be interested in realizing a lot of different campaigns, aiming at different targets for different goals, and therefore involving different channels.

Goals

- Gather contacts
- Create communities - inside or outside the University
- Spread the news about University's events
- Spread the news about University's services
- Incoming students
- Foreign students
- Keep contacts with companies alive
- Gather opinions
- Renew the University's image
- Actively interact with students
- Face a critical situation
- Stress affection to University

- ...

Targets

- Students
- Former students
- Prospective students
- Business representatives
- Researchers
- Teachers
- Public boards representatives
- High schools
- Foreign students
- ...

Channels

- Brand site
- E-Mail
- SMS
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Google Ad Words
- LinkedIn
- Twitter
- Viral and Buzz Marketing
- Banners
- DTT

Project

For each channel, type quantity content and timing of actions will be chosen, and reciprocal interaction between actions on different channels will be planned: cross-references from e-mails or SMS to web pages, from SMS to live events, from the brand site to social networks and so on.

This communication plan is outlined in a Mediaplanning, which will be the central referring point during the course of the campaign.

If a brand site has to be realized, also its functionalities must be determined, such as a chance to record new contacts, a log-in only area with special contents, a dynamic calendar of events, a strong interaction with other systems (e.g. Facebook).

Very important in a communication action is its verbal and graphic content. Kion can realize for the University a set of graphic proposals creating for the concerned campaign a visual plan adequate to the campaign's goals and target, always coherent with the official brand, but never reducing innovation if it is needed.

A key element for the success of direct communication is the availability of contacts of people potentially interested to the concerned contents: their e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers. Such contacts can be gathered through ad hoc actions leveraging other – not direct – channels, such as live events, web, advertising, PR on social networks. Contacts gathered in this way can then be used for direct communication.

The system – flexible enough to adapt to inevitable changes in such fields – also manages privacy concerns, as well as data provided by OSYM and ALES systems, the most precious information sources about incoming students.

Realization

The Mediaplanning becomes a campaign inside *Communication Builder*: here all actions on supported channels will be realized and published, those on unsupported channels will as well be traced. Once a graphical style is agreed with the university, all actions (mail, web, paper...) will be designed accordingly.

Verbal contents can be realized through a tight interaction between the University staff and Kion consultants: communication managers inside universities know very well purposes and contents of the communication to be realized, while Kion consultant will support them in choosing the best style and form, according to the chosen channels and targets.

Kion can actually realize some or all of the actions, or support the University staff as much as needed for the duration of the campaign.

If a brand site will be realized, it will be optimized for search engines (SEO, Search Engine Optimization); it is also possible to make some advertising online to improve the site's visibility according to chosen keywords.

Monitoring

All web based actions can be monitored through Google Analytics, so that the return on investment (ROI) can actually be calculated.

Kion's consultancy concerning monitoring and web analytics can consist of reports, gathering and interpreting the results of performer actions, or be limited to a technical and know-how support towards University staff dedicated to this activity.

The analysis of emerged results becomes a crucial starting point to improve future communication actions and campaigns.

5. A sample campaign: “Attract new students through digital communication”

Admission of students to Turkish universities is based on the OSYM national test and rating. Test results are provided to universities, who are therefore able to get in touch with the students they wish to enroll: all universities know exactly which potential students are there each year, who they are and how they score in different knowledge areas.

Contact between Universities and students takes place mainly through broadcast (one to many) communication, i.e.:

- TV commercials
- Newspapers ads
- Universities websites

The only one-to-one communication is the sending of brochures and other paper materials directly at the students' home address right after the announcement of OSYM results.

A campaign could be designed in order to allow a university to establish a direct and effective communication with its potential students. Thus it will be possible for the University to let each student know exactly information useful to him/her, according to location, scores, interests, school of origin, etc.

The dialogue will be switched from traditional, broadcast, one-way and slow-feedback media to digital media, allowing faster feedback and direct communication: thus the university will be able to make the most of the short two-week period available between the publication of OSYM results and the first choice made by students.

Once established a channel for digital communication, it will be used to provide the student with useful information, targeted to his/her specific needs: this will increase not only the knowledge of opportunities offered by the university, but also the perceived quality of university's communication and its student care.

So, the first goal of the campaign will be to switch the communication between university and students from traditional to digital media without losing already available personal information. Once achieved this goal, the direct digital communication channel will be used for targeted communication.

The most useful information provided by OSYM file in order to directly contact students is their personal data and home address. This is already used to send brochures and informative material. In order for this campaign to start, a unique system-generated user ID will be sent together with such informative material.

Students receiving the material will be invited to visit a brand site, created ad hoc for incoming students: here they'll find a collection of references to useful information and materials, and a form where they can identify themselves through the unique ID they have received and leave their e-mail address.

This way the University will have one more piece of information about its eligible and interested students – a valuable one: their active e-mail address, through which they can be faster, more efficiently and personally contacted.

Once the e-mail address is possessed by the university and associated to the student, the university can use it to establish a direct one-to-one communication,

through which it will provide the student with all useful information, according to the student's specific characteristics: some information will be sent to students with high scores in specific areas, other information will be sent to students living near or far from the university, and so on.

The communication channel thus established between the University and its potential students can then be reinforced through other media, such as SMS for punctual communications about specific interesting events.

The university could also integrate these actions with an active presence on social networks, where useful and interesting contents can be shared, and a two-way communication channel can be opened with potential students in an environment they are familiar with, and which is modern and up-to-date.

An analogue communication can be later repeated during the second preferences phase.

This way students' choices will be much more aware, they will get to know closer the university and its peculiarities, not only as for teaching, but also concerning everyday life and services available at the campus. University, on its side, will have a chance to know its future students better, understand what is important to them and change its messages accordingly, learning valuable information to be used in the following years to realize an even more appealing offer.

6. Conclusions

As promotion of universities increases in importance, due to growing competition and rising standards, it is a basic need for a University to be able to effectively communicate its brand and contents to its audience, in order to let everybody know what makes it different. An up-to-date, one-to-one, timely and always interesting communication can actually make a difference in reaching the right audience and maintaining a meaningful contact with each of its members.

Tools and skills enabling the management of such a communication system can substantially help universities in proving themselves as modern and caring, actually giving their students a chance to participate and stay involved.

