

Communication Builder - a tool for Universities

Engage your communities in digital dialogues

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1. ABSTRACT

A need has recently emerged among Italian universities, concerning communication: a need to stay up-to date with trends and habits typical of its main public - the students - and also with other relevant audiences: high school students, former students, firms and public institutions' representatives, etc.

Digital media are smart, quick, up-to-date, largely customizable according to the target: 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 and cost-effective communication.

KION is supporting universities in conducting such dialogues through digital media with *ad hoc* instruments, communication planning and web analysis services.

This technique of managing targeted communication has been applied in the context of incoming students, with positive results concerning the engagement level as well as the return in terms of actual enrollments.

2. THE TOOL: COMMUNICATION BUILDER

In order to make it easy for the University's staff to start and manage communication on digital channels leveraging their most peculiar characteristics, the U-GOV Suite 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 communications with adequate contents to a specifically profiled target; 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 thanks to a flexible and user-friendly interaction.

Communication Builder, together with KION's communication consultancy, is the instrument allowing universities to build interactive dialogues with their audiences leveraging the peculiarities of digital media.

2.1. Campaign design and content management

Once the university has identified its purpose and the related audience, a consistent communication plan is designed, involving actions on different channels, or *media*: each action - it might be an e-mail, a website, an SMS, etc - is designed to exploit the characteristics of its medium, target a specific audience and interact with other actions.

Campaign management of *Communication Builder* includes:

- A multi-channel content management system, allowing the use of same contents on different media without any need for duplicate information
- A tight interaction with Google Analytics allowing to activate and customize Google's monitoring system without any need for coding skills.
- Roles distinction (editors, web designers, marketers) allowing each contributor to cooperate according to his/her specific skills

2.2. Contacts management

A university has its own audience: students, potential students, former students, teachers, high schools, other universities, business representatives. *Communication Builder* offers a contacts database allowing the management of all kinds of contacts with their specific qualities; a user-friendly and non-technical interface allows the use of such qualities for target segmentation in order to send out interesting communication to an interested public.

Communication Builder's Contact Database is going to be integrated with Kion's student management systems for universities using them, so that all information already owned by a University about its public for management purposes can now be used for communication purposes









3. USE CASE

Communication Builder has been so far successfully used in the context of incoming students, with the purpose of contacting them in an early stage of their decision process and provide them with the information and support they need. The first project has been realized with Roma Tre university in summer 2009, revolving around the university's open day: launched in July, the project was mostly over by the end of August.

The core of this communication plan was an e-mail based information service: students could subscribe to it through a small dedicated website in order to receive detailed and targeted information about the university. Contextually they could give some information about themselves, such as wich faculty/faculties they are interested in: this data was then used to fine-tune the communication and adapt it to individual needs. Students were also asked to answer to an anonymous free-will questionnaire, aimed at providing the university with some statistical data as well as providing an evaluation of the project from a user's point of view.

After subscribing to the service, students received e-mail communications from the University, meant to help them better know the University itself and its offer, and find their way towards enrollment.

3.1. Communication plan

		DATE	ACTION
	1.	July 21 st	Contact data of students who asserted interest towards Roma Tre university through the official website “Universo” are loaded into Communication Builder’s contact database
	2.	July 22 nd	Website http://orientarsi.uniroma3.it is online: a small website specifically designed for incoming students. It collects all potentially interesting links; it also has a small form where students can leave name, surname, email address, phone number and faculty of interest - everything except email is optional.
	3.	July 22 nd	E-mail sent to contacts loaded from “Universo” to let them know about the website and invite them to subscribe if they’d like to keep in touch with the university
	4.	July 23 rd	Open Day at Roma Tre University: contacts of students are gathered through oral interviews, computers connected to the website are available for subscriptions, flyers about the website are distributed
	5.	July 24 th	Contacts gathered during the Open Day are added to the contacts database
	6.	July 24 th	E-mail sent to contacts gathered during the Open Day, inviting them to confirm their interest by subscribing to the website
	7.	July 25 th - August 5 th	Informative e-mails
	8.	August 5 th	Holiday closedown - e-mail sent

4. RESULTS

4.1. Subscriptions

Contact data of students have been gathered during live events organized by the university, through official services for early-enrollment to universities and directly from the web.

The distribution of overall gathered contacts is as follows:

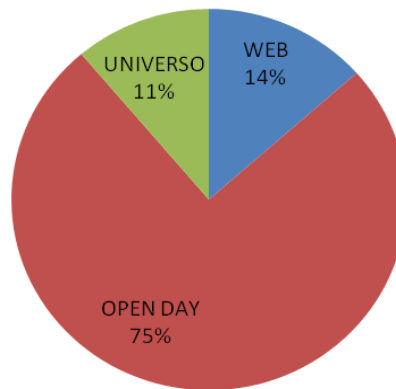


Figure 1 - Sources for contacts

But we need something more than simple contacts: people have to be interested enough to subscribe to the service. So, how many among the contacts gathered at the open day did subscribe? How many among those who simply found the online website?

The distribution of sources for active subscribers has a much different appearance:

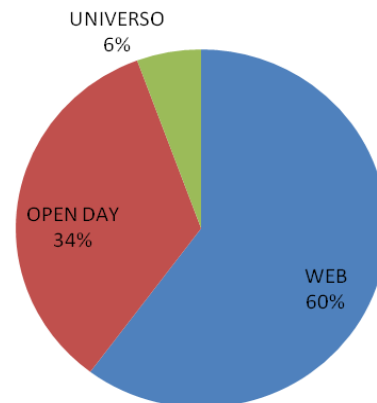


Figure 2 - Sources for subscriptions

These data show that contacts gathered through digital media are more active and willing to be engaged, as they widely took all offered chances of participation, by subscribing to the service and answering to the questionnaire: while 67,3% of contacts coming from the web turned into real confirmed subscriptions (i.e. students willing to stay informed about the university), only 8% of contacts from other sources converted to actual subscribers.

4.2. The users' opinion

The questionnaire was anonymous, it was freely accessible on the website and it was suggested to subscribing students at the end of the subscription process. It included questions about the University itself and also asked for opinions about the website and the email service.

94% of students stated through the questionnaire that the service actually helped them out and 97% of them considered the site as well-structured and clear, while negative remarks have been extremely few.

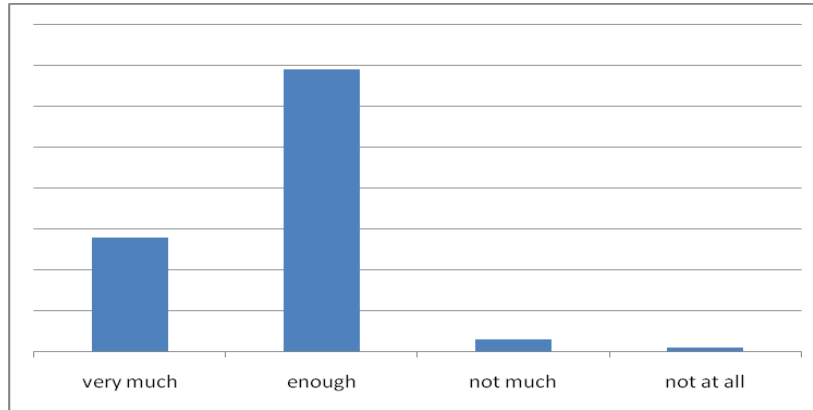


Figure 3 - Do you think this site is well organized?

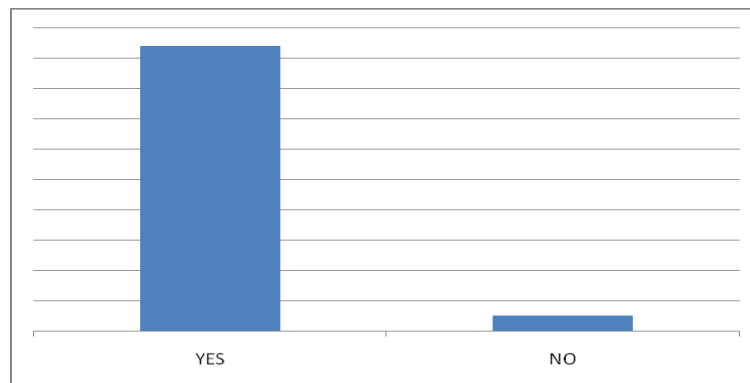


Figure 4 - Do you think that consulting this site is useful to resolve your doubts?

4.3. Emails, visits and content relevance

The interest of users can also be measured through visits on the website and response to emails. During the active period of the service, from July 23rd to August 3rd, emails have been the most important source of visits after the direct link from the main university portal:

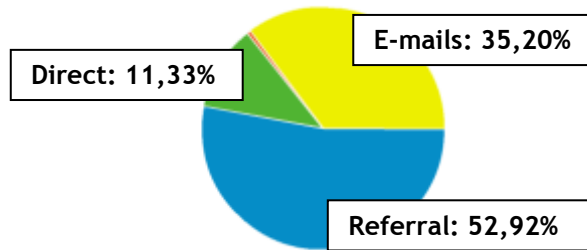


Figure 5 - Visits sources 23/7 - 3/8

Later on, from August to October, 11,30% of visits were still coming from e-mails sent during the active period of the service - which confirms that contents were interesting for users, who saved the received emails and later picked them up to follow the contained links.

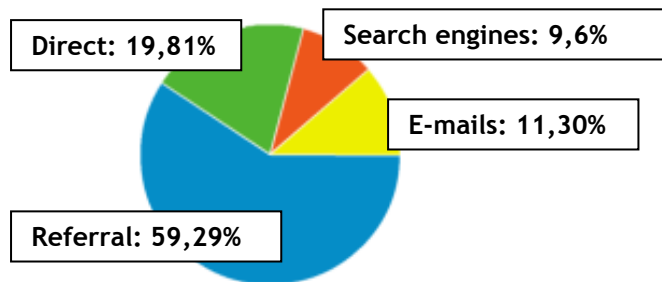


Figure 6 - Visits sources August-October

The tool used - Communication Builder - gave us the opportunity to track visits coming from each email sent, so that we can see which emails brought more visits to the website:

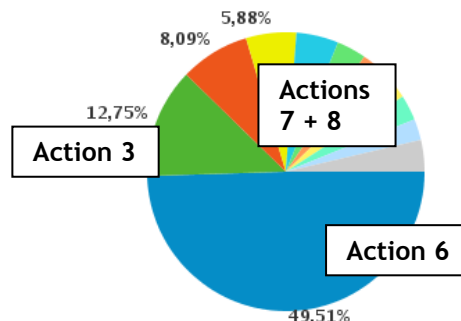


Figure 7 - Visits per e-mail

The ratio between emails sent and visits coming from them gives us a different perspective concerning contents relevance: it tells us which contents have been mostly interesting for the receivers. From this perspective, it turns out that the highest ratio came from emails with information concerning single faculties sent to students who expressed their interest in them: specific information sent to a specific target gives the best results.

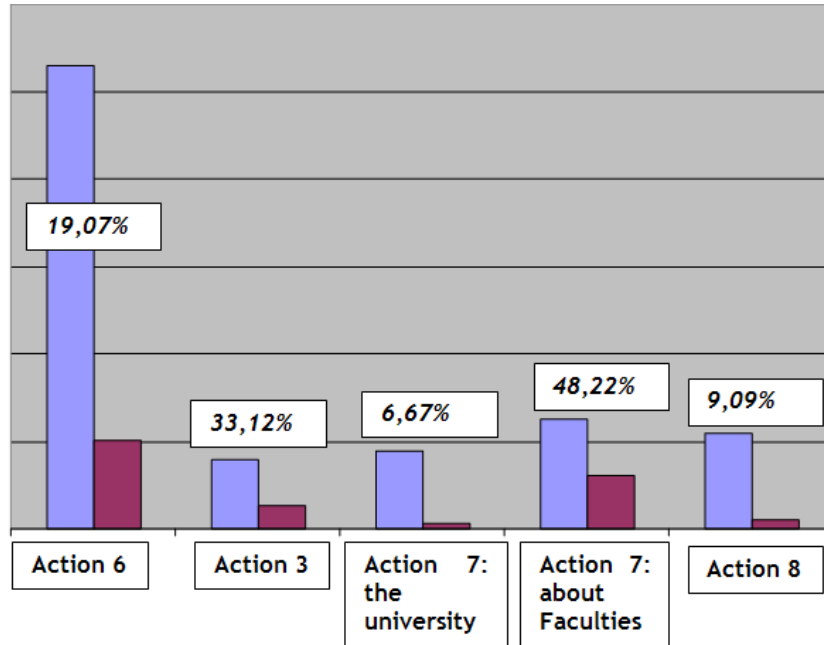


Figure 8 - Ratios between emails sent and visits

Concerning the visitors' location, it reflects the university's main audience, which is located in Rome, but also demonstrates how the website is successful in being a reference point for students who wouldn't have had another chance to get directly in touch with the university:



Figure 9- Visitors location

4.4. Enrollment

The website and email service were meant to help students find their way towards the university, let them know the reasons to choose Roma Tre University, make it easy for them to enroll: so we'd like to know how effective it all has been, how many students followed this new service and then actually enrolled.

Results from this point of view have been very satisfying, as an especially strong conversion rate has been observed: 40% of students who subscribed to the e-mail information service actually enrolled to the university, and another 11% of them tried admission tests.

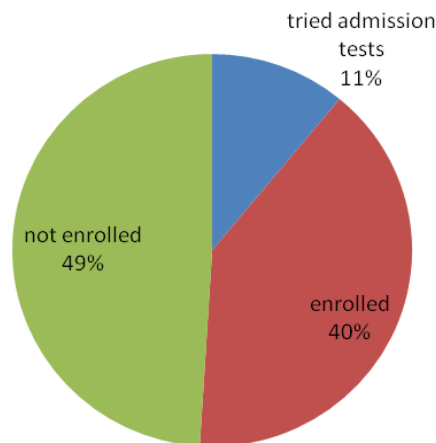


Figure 10 - Enrollment rate

5. NEXT STEPS

Such positive results despite the short time have brought the same university plus another one to start a similar projects earlier this year: the concerned websites can be seen at <http://orientarsi.uniroma3.it> and <http://www.lumsaorienta.it>, while their outcome will be evaluable by the end of the year.

Both projects started in the first months of 2010, with the purpose of being the main reference point for students attending their last year of high school, as they think about their future university. Students may become acquainted with a university in many different ways, including activities with high schools. For students already in touch with the university thanks to these activities, as well as for students who don't have such opportunity due to their location, the website and email service become a reference point and main source of information.

5.1. Other channels

In order to get in touch with more students, different channels are being used for the *Lumsaorienta* project: not only the main university portal and direct contact from university staff to high schools and students, but also

- email communication towards the officially available high schools email addresses
- online advertising campaigns on AdWords
- activities on social networks through a Facebook Fanpage created especially for the incoming students service

5.2. More specific information

As a longer period of time is now available, it is possible to send more information and follow the students as they choose not only the university but also the main subject of their future studies. In

order to be able to give to each of them the most interesting information, students subscribing to Roma Tre's online service are now asked not only which faculty there are interested in, but also which kind of school they come from.

5.3. From management information to contact details

The belonging of Communication Builder to the U-GOV suite makes it possible to use it not only for incoming students, but also for communication towards people who already are among the university's contacts: actual students, former students, teachers, researchers. Thus it becomes possible to use all administrative information available in the Student Management System as details useful to select contacts, in order to build a specific communication.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Actions on digital media appear to be effective in contacting students, keeping the contact alive, making them feel actively involved and engaged. Such actions cannot completely substitute traditional communication, but are successful in reinforcing and completing it: contacts obtained through traditional communication are reinforced through dialogues set up on digital channels, and contacts who couldn't have been established in other ways can now exist.

The audience gathered around digital media doesn't yet correspond to the university's audience as a whole, but appears to be especially active and willing to be engaged.

One-to-one communication requires engagement also on the staff's side, as it is necessary to create many different specific communication, but such effort is rewarded by the appreciation of the public, who actually gets the information needed, feels cared about as an individual and therefore raises its opinion about the University offering the service.