

Digital Marketing at NorthCap University: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study etches out the digital marketing strategies adopted by The NorthCap University during challenging times. The university implemented best practices of online marketing coupled with effective and efficient execution. This case envisages NorthCap's challenges in building trust in their online audience and the tools chosen to mitigate them. Marketers must think strategically about exploring the power of the internet to understand potential customers, effectively communicating with them, and leveraging digital technology to increase returns. The readers are also challenged to think about solutions to mitigate risks that could arise from strong online presence especially in social networking sites. This case also brings forth the relevance of analytics in identifying useful web data and justifying investments in digital advertising and promotional activities. Lastly, it provides a set-up to a meeting where a choice from among clearly-defined digital marketing options must be made. This case works especially well if readers have some background knowledge about social media, SEO, web analytics, and content marketing.

Social media marketing enabled NorthCap University to identify its target audience, in brand building, lead generation, and relationship building. It fostered user participation on social network sites through regular conversations, honoring feedbacks, and maintaining transparency. One practical challenge the university faced in the process was to evaluate whether their social engagement efforts were able to meet the intrinsic motives of the stakeholders. It was crucial to identify the "value of a like" before proceeding to implementing any fan acquisition strategy. In order to combat this challenge, sophisticated analytical tools were utilized to provide key insights about the digital campaigns. Such statistics helped the university to design more focused campaigns targeting specific audiences.

Keywords : Digital marketing, Brand building

I. BUSINESS PROBLEM

Over the past two decades, NorthCap had been successful in establishing itself as a reputed private university in Haryana. By virtue of its strong faculty research output, modern infrastructure and high technology facilities, there hadn't been a strong need to "brand" the university to stay in business. However, with the increase in private universities and other technical colleges in the neighborhood, institutional branding was required. In comparison to its competitors, the university's digital presence was minimal. Prospective students tend to liberally explore facts about an institution on digital platforms. Therefore, highlights of academic reputation and other research capabilities displayed on official website were insufficient to hit their emotional buttons.

The management strongly wanted to build up NorthCap's professional image on the internet with an underlying objective to build a positive perception of the university not only in Haryana but the entire country [10]. Myself and couple of my colleagues from the

Marketing Department, School of Management at NorthCap were called to formulate a team and develop a successful digital marketing plan for the entire university. We suggested leveraging the power of social media marketing using platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to engage with our target audience. The VC had a very clear promotional strategy in mind. "We are not going to engage in paid advertising, let it be honest and organic. Our prospective students must be given realistic insights of our institution". The governing body, too, shared this opinion but believed that organic advertising may undermine the university's repute.

We suggested that search engine optimization is the key to achieve more traffic. It will direct traffic to our website which may increase social engagement rates. "Both SEO and SMM must be used in conjunction to have an overall impact. The right mix of keywords and an effective content for SEO can amplify brand's reach. Social media on the other hand can be a syndication platform to build a strong audience base and encourage social engagement", I recommended.

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II. ITM UNIVERSITY

ITM University, Gurgaon, a state private university in Haryana, was established in 2009 by Act No. 32 of 2006, sanctioned to award degrees as specified by the UGC under section 22 of the UGC Act 1956 of State Legislature of Haryana. A bouquet university with about 4000 students, ITM offered programs at all levels of under-graduation, post-graduation, and doctoral research in engineering, management, law, and sciences. The university was neither in possession of any off campus centers outside the territorial jurisdiction of Haryana nor was running any distance education programs. Prior to acquiring its university status, ITMU was an affiliated college of M. D. University, Rohtak. It was subsequently upgraded to the status of an autonomous college by government of Haryana and the degrees were awarded by M.D University, Rohtak. The university sought approval to run engineering and management schools and applied to the Bar Council of India for seeking approval to run BBA-LLB (Hons.) course. The university envisioned to impart quality education to students by nurturing a learning environment that advances social, economic, and environmentally aware decision making skills. In July 2015, ITMU was rebranded as Northcap University by the Governor of Haryana vide notification no. Leg.B/2015 dated 22.07.2015 issued by the government of Haryana. The move was aligned with the university's mission and overall marketability. It required a concerted effort to market the university outside Delhi/NCR as a couple of other universities with the same name already existed in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, thereby, causing a great deal of confusion in the minds of students.

ITM's new name was accompanied by a brand new logo containing a "bridge" that depicts NorthCap's endeavor to bridge the gap between the corporate world and a classroom. The management strongly felt that the new name and logo were visually more appealing and aligned with the university's dream of a positive change. The management believes that the students graduating from NorthCap must possess the skills to respond effectively and efficiently to the technological, environmental, and ethical challenges posed by the real world. The university's policies are strongly established to ensure governing body's independence in decision-making. The latter is sufficiently autonomous to make decisions in the best interest of the

university and to assure its integrity. In terms of composition, members of the board are committed individuals who bring diverse professional experiences and expertise to its deliberations. Governing body meetings are conducted at regular intervals of time to provide general superintendence and directions, and to control the overall functioning of the university. The strategic objectives of the university are defined through Programme Educational Objectives (PEOs). The PEOs are achievable and consistent with the university's mission. The university quality policy pervades all activities at the university and is reviewed periodically. Overall, the university is adequately equipped to fulfill scholastic requirements of the students and has implemented several value added applications to enrich their talents.

III. SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

To increase visibility among search engines, most prominently Google, and to raise monthly visits on our university website, we implemented a search engine optimization strategy. It was made clear that the focus would be brand awareness and visibility and the university was not looking at conversions.

First and foremost, we wanted to identify the right mix of keywords that could help our website ranked better on Google. We used Google Adwords keyword tool to help us discover most targeted keywords for our website. Google search ranking relies largely on Google bot scrawling the keywords on the website. Therefore, we wanted to redesign our website pages that Google can crawl, index and rank for most sought after keywords. Our team finally identified 110 highly effective set of keywords which were expected to have a lot of search volume.

We spent the first month auditing our website and finalizing our keyword strategy. For the next couple of months, our technical team was busy making modifications on our website based on site audit results. Subsequently, we initiated website related activities including url mapping, creating title tags, description tag heading tag, alt tags and revisiting content which could increase page ranks. The website speed for mobiles and desktops was increased and HTML and CSS errors were reduced to improve the count of returning visitors. In addition, metatags of all the targeted pages were updated to control how Google crawls websites. Overall, our

Activity	Tasks	Expected Outcome
Reduce HTML errors	1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code	1. Increased page speed 2. Organized developer front
Minify HTML	3. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code	3. Better load time and faster scrolling 1. Increased page speed 2. Organized developer front
Leverage browser caching	3. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Construct code	1. Better user experience
Make Java Script Improvements	2. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code	2. Faster reload time 1. Better crawling
Constructing image descriptions	3. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Identify images devoid of description 2. Construct and mark pointer for reference	2. Increased page speed 3. Better user experience 4. Reduced bounce rate
Specifying image dimensions	1. Identify images devoid of dimensions 2. Specify and mark pointer for reference	1. Better crawling 2. Better conversion 3. Google images listings
Optimizing images	1. Construct code 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Better crawling 2. Organized developer front 1. Increased page speed
Minify JavaScript	3. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code	2. Organized developer front 3. Better load time and faster scrolling 1. Organized developer front 2. Increased page speed
Remove render- blocking JavaScript	3. Mark pointer where implementation is required 1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code	1. Increased page speed 2. Organized developer front 3. Better load time and faster scrolling
Enabling compression	1. Construct code 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Increased page speed 2. Organized developer front 3. Better load time and faster scrolling
Mobile friendly	1. Identify the error 2. Reconstruct code 3. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Responsive website 2. Increase page speed 3. Better load time and faster scrolling
Constructing title tags	1. Formulate code 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Better crawling 2. Better conversion
Constructing meta descriptions	1. Construct superior flagship content 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Better crawling 2. Better conversion
Constructing heading tags	1. Formulate code 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	1. Better crawling 2. Better conversion
Constructing Alt tags	1. Identify images devoid of tags 2. Construct and mark pointer for reference	1. Better crawling 2. Better Conversion 3. Google Images listings
Page content optimization	1. Including keywords in the content to maintain optimum keyword density 2. Paraphrasing content	1. Better Listing on Google 2. Increased cache frequency of Google 3. Better crawling
URL restructuring	1. Formulate code 2. Mark pointer where implementation is required	4. Increased user engagement 1. Reduced bounce rate 2. Increased backlinks 3. Increased page authority 4. Better user experience 5. Better crawling

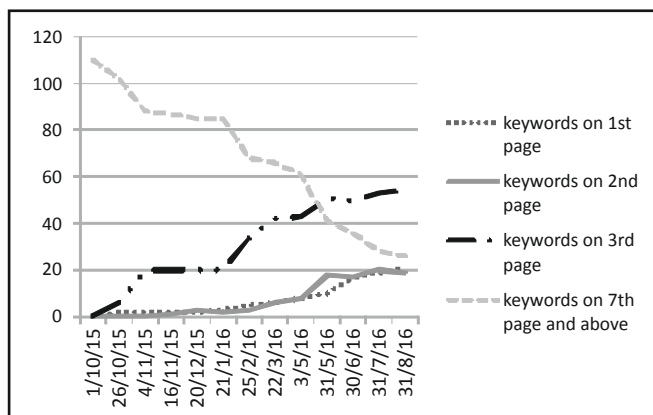
technical SEO works included the activities listed on page 25.

Our website overhauling efforts started to impact outcomes once all changes were finished. Initially, out of 110 keywords, 88 keywords were indexed and two of them started appearing on the first page of Google (refer Fig.1). The results also indicated that we should now start leveraging long-tail keywords. To meet these objectives, we needed more keywords on our current content on various pages of the website, without changing the meaning and impact of the content [4]. NorthCap wanted a strategy that could produce candid organic social engagement. With meticulously designed content our endeavor was to win every scrap of attention on social network sites. Our next plan of action was to:

- ❖ Identify the landing pages that these higher ranked keywords index to.
- ❖ Generate more targeted PPC ads.
- ❖ Create more targeted landing pages to improve Quality Score and overall conversion rates.
- ❖ Create keyword groups to better organize our website.

We added and optimized fresh content for Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and university blogs to seek greater social media involvement on Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. Over the next few months, keywords appearing on the first page increased gradually and rose to 21 after eight months.

Fig. 1. Keyword Statistics



IV. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

Our brand personality was new. ITM to NorthCap makeover wasn't that popular in NCR. We desperately needed to recreate an image and redefine what we stand

for [2]. We initiated various organic campaigns that encouraged students to share their pictures and experiences on Facebook [6]. All this enabled target audiences to see what was going on in the university and augmented organic traffic. Our content creation team ensured that the creatives were more visual than textual and contained the 'social' appeal that student audience looked for. Our social product experience was initiated on Facebook and Twitter and was followed by Google Plus, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube. Content developers were instructed to create content that could 'ignite' student audience. However, participation and audience engagement for a new brand was one big challenge!

Our Facebook ad campaigns were student centric and were focused to drive organic traffic to university website. The management made a conscious decision to accentuate organic reach levels while maintaining the reputation of a new brand [5]. The content creation team tried to leverage creative Facebook posts to foster robust engagement with target audience. We continuously engaged in identifying ways by which we could effectively reach out to student population. One method was to ensure publishing content that could remain fresh and relevant and enhance engagement [8]. We restricted volumes of posts to maintain quality and meticulously selected targeting options to target specific groups of viewers. The time of posting creatives was also closely monitored and we tried to choose time frames when our audiences were mostly online. Our Twitter marketing strategy was a little different from Facebook. We wanted Twitter to drive traffic to our website. Industry relevant hashtags were selected to serve our marketing needs. It also helped us to identify the most relevant keywords around which engaging content could be designed. Twitter posts were targeted towards promoting university by sharing news about recent activities. Photos, videos, slideshares and links were embedded in tweets to boost reach.

V. ANALYTICS

We had to examine the impact of our social media marketing strategy on target audience to optimize our efforts. Observing our competitors' performances was a great way to measure the outcomes of our strengths and weaknesses. We identified six universities and closely monitored their social media presence. Social networks were able to provide us valuable inputs on what data our

Fig. 2. Blogs

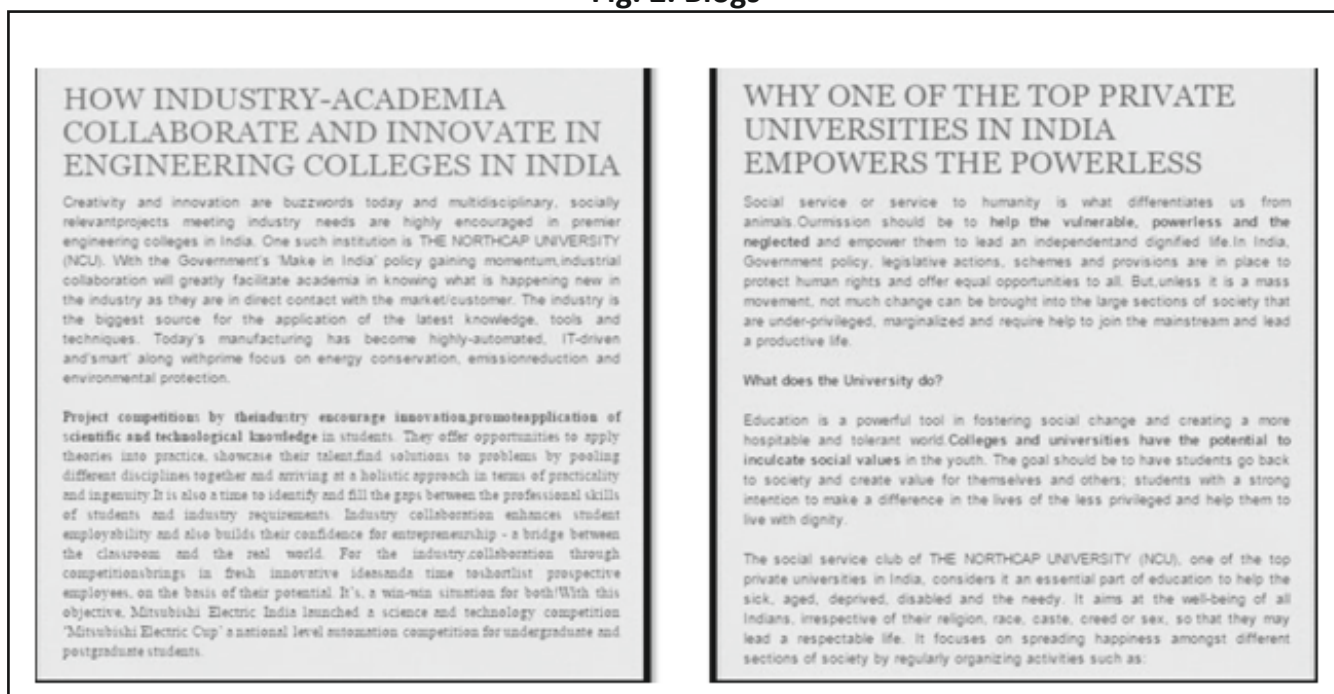
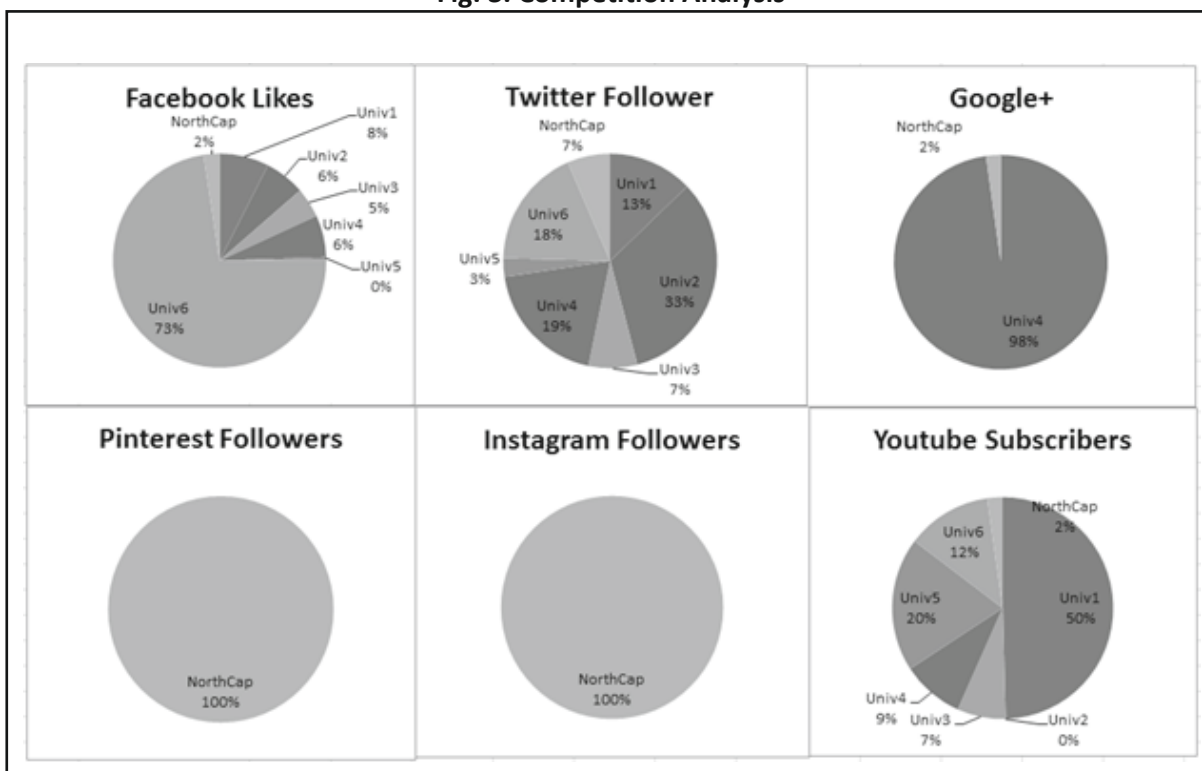


Fig. 3. Competition Analysis



competitors were getting and how they were getting it. While some of the older players were extremely active on Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, we were able to monopolize our online presence on Pinterest and

Instagram. Google Plus's substantial contribution to SEO made it easier for us to show up in search results. Our university blog turned out to be an equally valuable tool in driving traffic to our website and in driving SEO

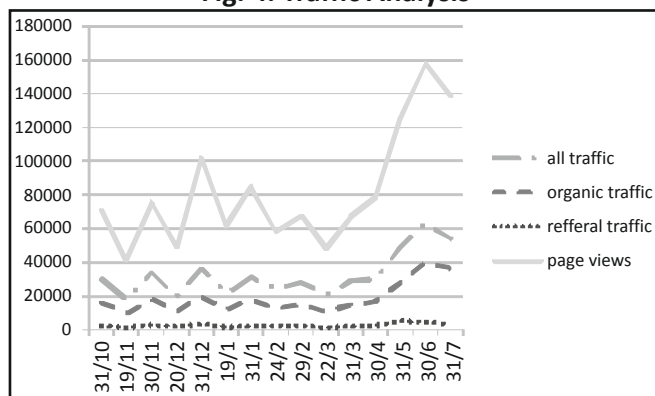
activities. We engaged our faculty members to produce quality blog content on various topics such as how students should evaluate a business school, preferred destination for M-tech in Gurgaon, multi-disciplinary universities in NCR providing quality education, advantage of NCU management school etc. All this helped us to strengthen our social reach and generated new visitors for the website. Social media marketing enabled us to identify our target audience, brand building, lead generation and relationship building. It fostered consumer participation on their social network sites through regular conversations, honoring feedbacks, timely action to customer complaints and maintaining overall transparency.

We ensured that all our accounts on social channels were actively monitored. Hootsuite enabled us to monitor social engagement and conduct sentimental analysis. We configured the following social media metrics on Hootsuite Dashboard to analyze user engagement trends.

- ❖ Top ten Facebook posts
- ❖ Twitter follower growth
- ❖ Daily click summary
- ❖ Keyword over time

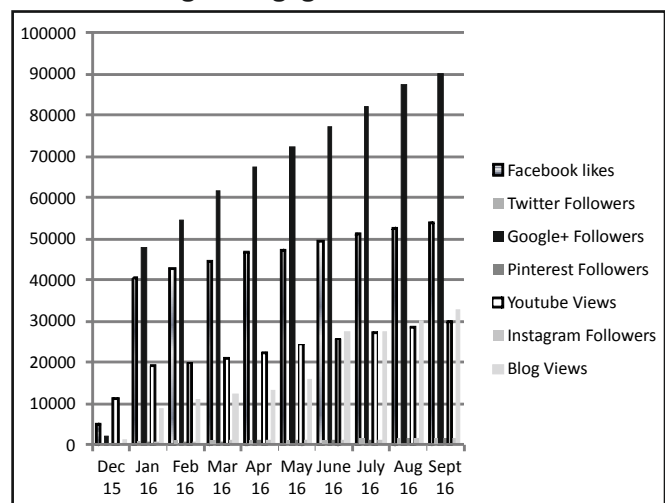
We also utilized Google Analytics to measure the impact of our social media marketing and dictate our content strategy moving forward. Monthly reports helped us to understand what specific things were working and whether we were able to build our audience and engagement. We were able to evaluate which social networks referred the highest quality traffic to our website (refer Fig. 4). In addition, we were able to identify engagement and conversion rates for every social networking site. This helped us identify the quality and value referred by each affiliate. Esoteric measures

Fig. 4. Traffic Analysis



including “likes”, “followers”, “subscribers”, and “views” were chief determinants of measuring NorthCap's social media marketing success. Klout, a third party service, helped us track online reach and measure social media campaign efficiency (refer Fig. 5). Engagement levels were critically analyzed to find out which content inspired people to act. Our social media campaigns produced expected results. Our presence on multiple social networking sites enabled us to connect with large online community. Our content fostered engagement and we were able to build our brand by reinforcing credibility and that too by prominently using organic techniques.

Fig. 5. Engagement Statistics



We embraced latest digital strategies expecting game-changing results [9]. However, all intrinsic efforts would have been wasted had we not adopted an integrated marketing model [1]. Immense emphasis was laid to understand the buyer's journey and the channels to attract, engage and convert the target group. Consumers' expectations change dynamically. They search for relevant online content that not only informs and interests them but also adds value to their lives. Therefore, discontinuity in the message flow over digital media could have led to hazardous results [3].

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Dr. Ruchi, officiating Head of the School of management, The NorthCap University, Haryana, India has over sixteen years of experience constituting both corporate and academia. She specializes in the areas of B2C E-Commerce. Her key interest is to advocate how consumers and brands communicate in today's digital world and enable businesses to develop and establish their own digital roadmap. Her hands-on experience includes implementing successful digital marketing strategies for organizations. She has delivered successful management development programs to marketers focusing on capitalizing on the power of digital media to increase their online visibility and overall marketing efforts.