
CHAT AS A COMMUNICATION-MARKETING PLATFORM FOR ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Companies with experience using the web chat to support or promote the conversion process are mostly positive. So, we decided to try this communication channel of web chat in the academic environment, on the website of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. In early 2016 we launched it in the Admissions section of the official Faculty's website. We chatted with visitors for a three month period, during this admissions season. This paper presents the results of a detailed analysis of the data obtained from that experiment and the launching of chatting into the marketing context. It notices the strengths and weaknesses or the trends associated with the chat communication and it points out that a web chat is a useful extension of the traditional marketing tools, advocated in the popular marketing framework See-Think-Do-Care.

Keywords: content marketing, customer care, chat, helpdesk

1. Introduction - brief history of chat communication

According to Višňovský, the popularity of the internet is apparent particularly in the case of young and middle-aged generations [1]. Besides the web and email, chat is another very popular service. It is one of the oldest forms of internet communication. Its origins date back to 1973, when the University of Illinois developed their very first online chat system called 'Talkomatic'. The researchers responsible for 'Talkomatic' were Doug Brown and David R. Woolley. The fundamental characteristic of the chat, which differentiates it from the email, is the synchronicity – the fact that both: an expedient and a recipient are communicating with each other at the same time. Instant messaging is another chat service developed based on chat. This service enables a user to monitor the actual status of their friends and sends messages to them – if they are online. The main advantages of the chat communications are: 1) real-time collaboration; 2) immediate response and feedback; 3) opportunity to think about a response message; 4) log the conversation; 5) possibility to communicate in addition to other tasks, 6) most useful for one-to-one communication.

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However, Park & Bunk discuss some disadvantages too: 1) interactions can be focussed on task-related issues; 2) lack of reflection between collaborators; 3) instant messaging does not allow for tone of voice or body language; 4) if technology fails the collaboration session is not possible; 5) large time commitment for collaborators; 6) difficult for one to many communication; 7) lacks documentation [2]. Instant messaging grew significantly – especially between teenagers – in the mid of 90s due to the developing ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger. It reached the status of the most popular communication type in the Netherland and USA after 2000 [3-5]. The milestones which definitely make instant messaging the mainstream type of communication were integrating it into the massively using services, especially Skype (2003), Gmail (2005) and Facebook (2010).

2. Chat in shopping process

As we mentioned in our previous work [6], website quality is largely dictated by how conveniently the user can access needed information. We do not want to encourage to neglecting of usability, but it is becoming clear that chat is a good way to improve it. However, in spite a fact that chat is usually considered as a platform for communication, its usability is going beyond a customer care. As Scott points out, “the best companies are communicating in the new world of the internet and mobile content by any way preferred by their customers” [7].

Chat is very well used within a framework; See-Think-Do, presented by Avinash Kaushik in 2013. He split an audience into three groups by their current stage in the shopping process:

- **See:** largest addressable qualified audience,
- **Think:** Largest addressable qualified audience with weak commercial intent,
- **Do:** Largest addressable qualified audience with strong commercial intent [A. Kaushik, *See-Think-Do: A Content, Marketing, Measurement Business Framework*, 2013, <http://www.kaushik.net/avinash/see-think-do-content-marketing-measurement-business-framework>].

Each of these three groups has its own channels which are appropriate to communicate with an audience. They are shown in Figure 1.

Kaushik extended his framework to include another element – Care. It encompasses a large group of loyal customers, especially those, who have made at least two orders and long-term benefit from the profit from the bought product or service provided [A. Kaushik, *See, Think, Do, Care Winning Combo: Content +Marketing +Measurement*, 2015, <http://www.kaushik.net/avinash/see-think-do-care-win-content-marketing-measurement>]. Kaushik points out that the customer group needs (and deserves) our support. This involves not only an ethical issue but also a practical one. A satisfied customer is more than steady income – it may become a brand lover, even the brand evangelist. The web chat is widely used especially in the last two stages: Do and Care. Anyway, it is quite

well used in the stage *Think*, as well. Company can answer the customers' questions just at the right time, in the right place and by the well-known way.

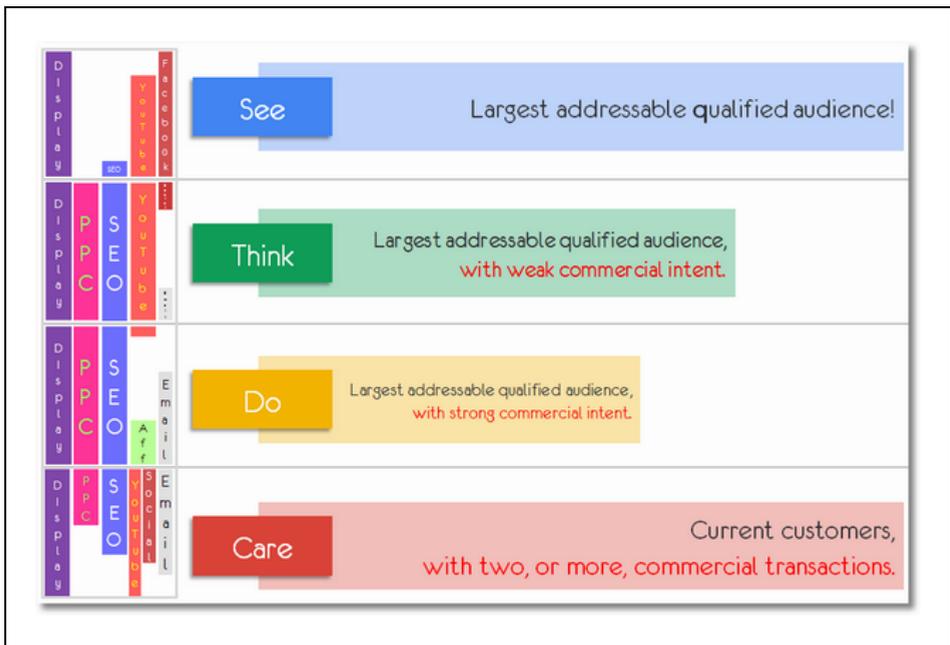


Figure 1. Suggested marketing channels for particular stages of the framework See-Think-Do.

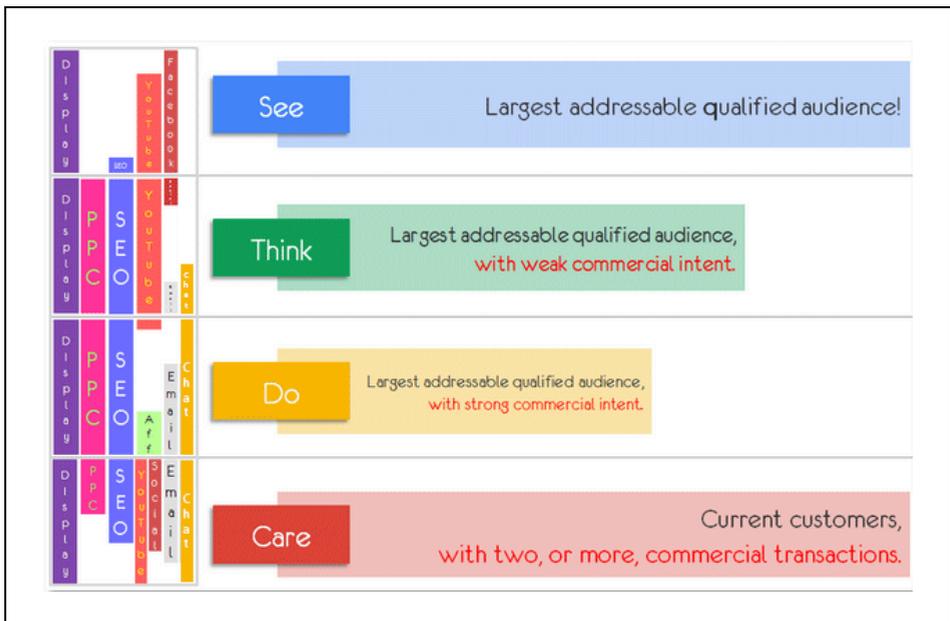


Figure 2. Applicability of the chat within framework See-Think-Do (original figure updated by the author of the paper).

The web chat is a perfect communication channel to answer customer's questions about considered product in the *Do* stage. It may also be a channel to providing support during the more complicated order process. The full potential of web chat can be revealed in the *Care* stage where a chat is a very handy and quick tool to providing support. We can see a significant trend in the field of customer care: a move in customer care from call-centres to web-chat. The main reason is efficiency: While one agent is able to resolve just one client via the phone, he is able to handle up to five – six clients via web-chat. In this context we tried to update the Kaushik's schema (Figure 2).

3. Chatting on the Fmk.sk

We decided to make an experiment within the web chat on the official website in order to encourage them onto website and to provide support to the visitors. Because we did not know how to estimate visitors' interest on chatting, we decided to provide a support via chat only in the Admission section. We also decided to implement the web chat on the microsite Budhrdinom.sk (Become the Hero!), the special website created for our promotion activities operating in Slovak high schools. Both destinations have the same target audience: potential applicants for study at universities. The experiment was conducted during January-March 2016 when senior students are seriously considering and selecting a school so they are looking for information and about universities and submitting the applications.

Objectives:

- Examine and verify a visitors' interest in support via web-chat,
- Measure the intensity of using a chat,
- Estimate the staffing requirements to providing chat support on all website,
- Identify key issues about admissions,
- Find out the difficulty of training the chat agents.

Based on this, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Quick responses will have a positive impact on visitor satisfaction.

H2: Period of the year will affect the discussed issues.

H3: Inviting the visitors to the chat (pro-active chatting) will significantly increase the number of chats in comparison to a normal state.

H4: 80% of chats will be covered by a limited number of issues (max. 20).

In our research we used multiple research methods, especially statistical data analysis, quantitative content analysis and a questionnaire.

3.1. Basic statistics

During January 1st and March 31st we resolved 1396 tickets (issues). Intensity of chatting is visible on Figure 3. The most questions (81%) had been asked when the agent was online. However, about one fifths (19%) of the questions was asked when the visitors used the opportunity to ask questions using the form because no agent was available. 98% of the tickets came from

fmk.sk (official website), and about 2% tickets came from BudHrdinom.sk (microsite).

We discovered that the chat activity depends on the current period. Daily activity was about 11.52 chats and 2.63 emails per day until mid-March. That volume almost tripled during the second half of March. We noticed multiple peaks during the day (see Figure 4). The first peak was about 11 AM, the next one was between 3 PM and 4 PM, when students came home from school. The last top was in the evening - about 7 PM, when students usually sit at the computers and are browsing on internet.

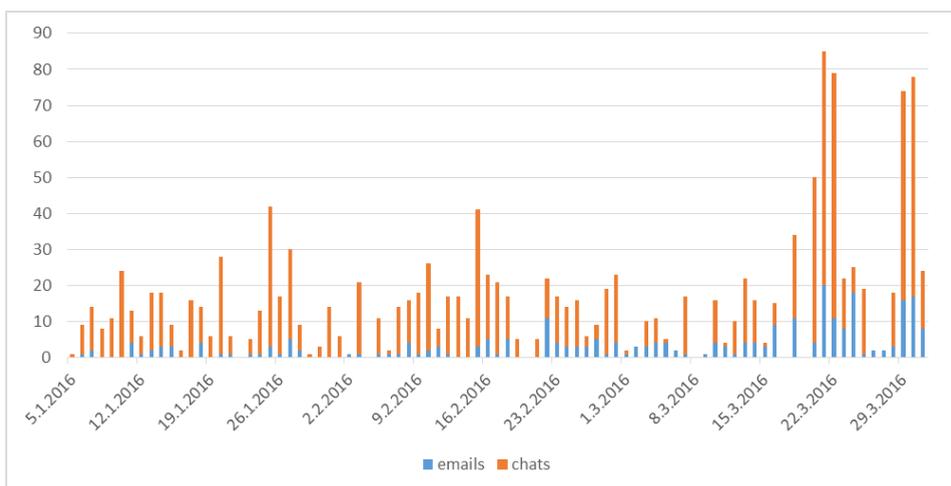


Figure 3. Activity during the experiment, source: Live Agent.

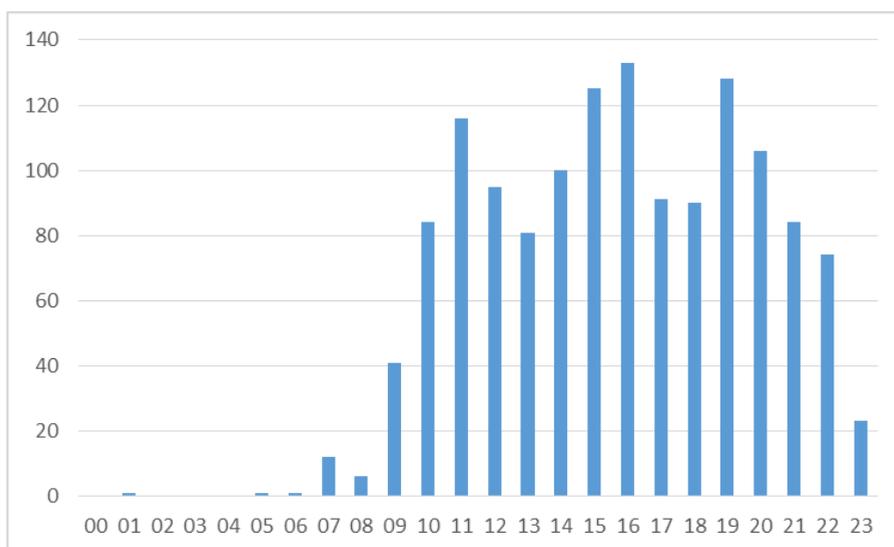


Figure 4. Total activity during the days, source: Live Agent.

As we can see on Figure 5 the strongest period was during the first half of the week: Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. End of week on chat activity (and website) decreases especially towards the weekend. What is interesting is that the chat activity reaches a very high level on Sunday evening. It reflects the phenomenon described by Ataxo in 2010: that the Slovak and Czech users have a habit of sitting at their computer and reconnecting to the internet after the weekend, so Sunday evening is really a hot time on the Slovak and Czech internet – and chat, too [Česko-slovenský Facebook a Twitter v číslech, 2010, <http://www.slideshare.net/Ataxo/jak-se-lid-bav-online>].

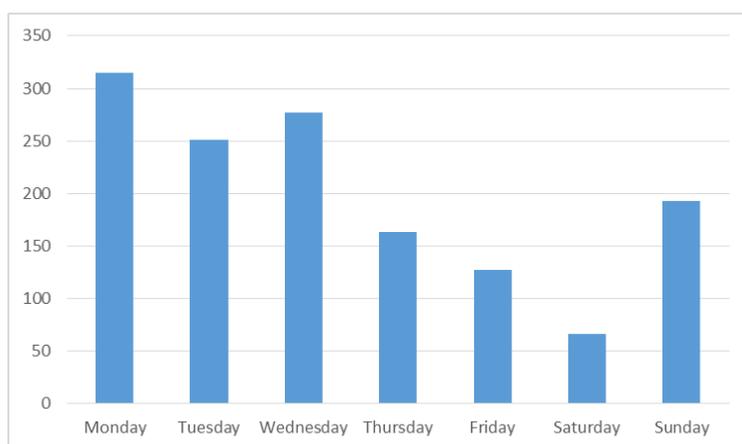


Figure 5. Total activity during the weeks, source: Live Agent.

3.2. Subject to chat

We tagged every ticket for a better understanding of the discussed topics. Each ticket might be tagged by multiple tags. Results of the content analysis are presented in Figure 6. Final analysis of the tags revealed that visitors mostly needed help with filling out an electronic application form (230). Very often issues were requests for payment details (109) due to the bug in the registration application (AIS). It generated a bad link, so visitors could not download a PDF format with payment details. A separate subset of questions for completing applications relating to certificates – the certificates from which classes are requested, which courses and grades are taken into consideration for ranking purposes, etc. We also often posed questions on the content and a form of entrance examination (62) and questions about admissions' handbook (60). These topics created up to 60% volume of all tickets. Content analysis has also revealed the top 20 discussed topics cover up to 85% of all chats. It confirms hypotheses H4. Only 11% of people had opened a chat box with no question. In other words, it is evident, that the visitors opened a chat to solve a concrete issue, not out of curiosity of discovering the chat box.

We found that time influenced the discussed topics. Meanwhile in January and February, more questions appeared about the focus of the course of study,

differences between the programs or the questions on the content and the form of entrance examination. By March, there were questions on a filling an electronic application form and requests for payment details. On the basis of these findings we can accepted the hypothesis H2.

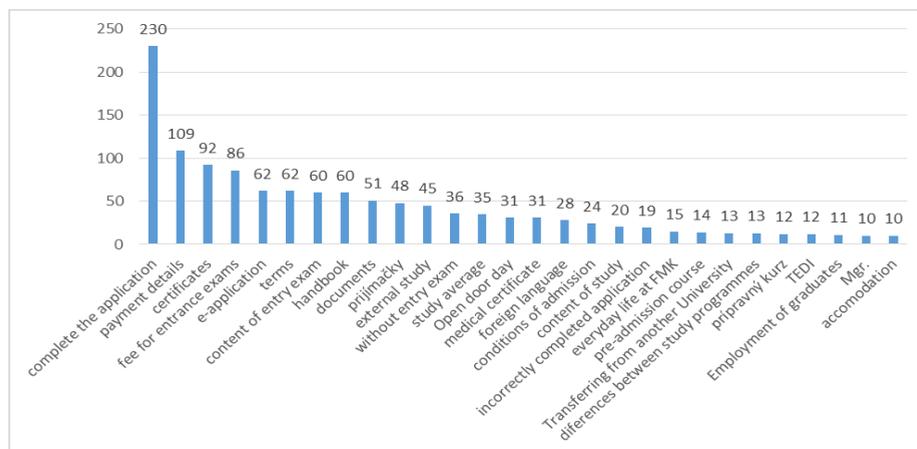


Figure 6. Discussed topics, mentioned at least 10 times, source: Live Agent.

3.3. Proactive chatting

A web chat on the website is mostly a passive element. If a visitor wants to ask questions, he has to be proactive. In the real world, this same approach is used in supermarkets. If a customer needs help, he may find a shop assistant to ask a question. However, some shops – especially with electronics – go beyond that. They train their shop assistants to be proactive and offer help. Something similar is possible in a web chat, too. These applications often have functionality for proactive chatting. So, we experiment with it during an experiment, too. If we saw a visitor read a page for a long time (min. 10 min.), we have a displayed pop-up window with an invitation to chat. However, it seems this approach was not very successful. Among the 202 invitations, there were 146 invitations declined and 55 ones were accepted. Of the visitors who accepted an invitation, only 4 of them started a chat. The remaining visitors accepted invitations only out of curiosity. Later they closed the chat without a question, so we rejected hypothesis H3.

3.4. View of the visitors

Feedback from visitors was acquired by two ways: by a questionnaire and using Nicereply, a special rating application. Invitation to complete the questionnaire was displayed randomly after finishing a chat. During the reporting period, 87 respondents completed a questionnaire. The only respondent was unsatisfied. Moreover we explored a motivation to communicate by chat, not by any other way. As we can see in Figure 7, 40 % respondents consider a

chat more flexible and 33% more comfortable than other communication channels (email, phone). Speed is definitely the most important attribute of chat. During a content analysis, we found it was mentioned by up to 95% of respondents. „An answer is really fast. If I have more questions, I can ask them at once and I will get the answers in seconds.”, „I like fast answers and the fact that help is always available. I got advice whenever I needed.“, „It is an easy way to get needed information which I did not find on a website.“

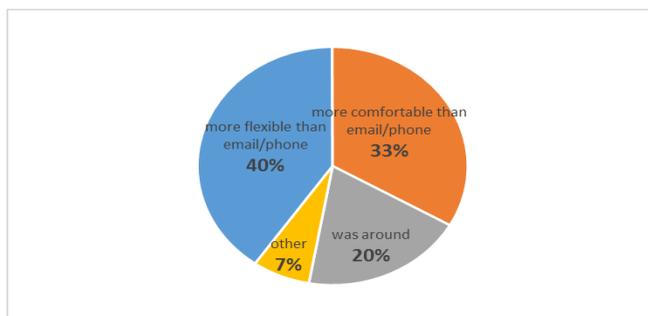


Figure 7. Motivation of the visitors to communicate via chat, source: own research.

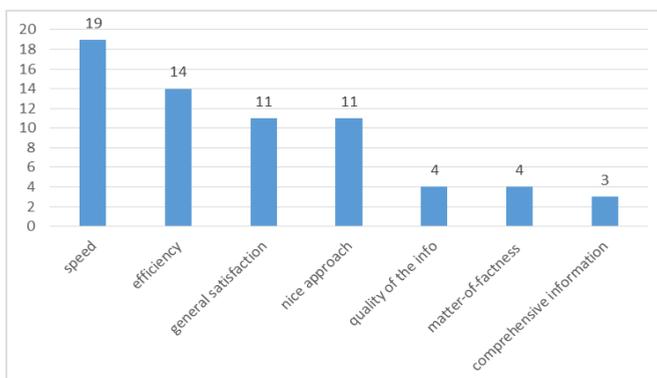


Figure 8. Top mentioned benefits of the chat sourced from respondents' comments, source: Nicereply.com.

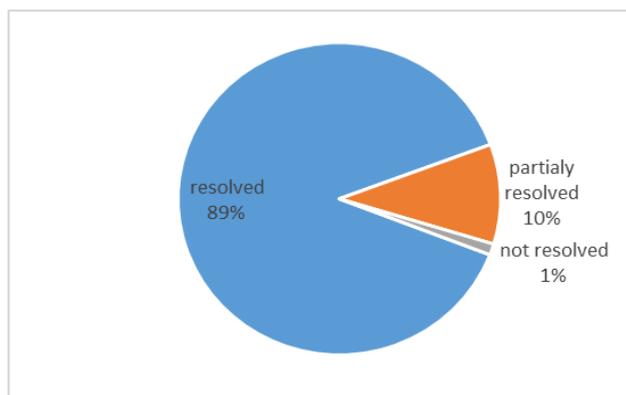


Figure 9. Ratio of the resolved and not unsatisfied issues, source: own research.

Speed dominated the second method of obtaining feedback through Nicereply. This application gathers ratings from users in accordance with CSAT standard (Customer Satisfaction Score), that is to say, via percentages calculated based on users' ratings from 1 to 10. Companies often consider as minimal acceptable standard either 80% or 90% score. Our goal was to reach at least 80% customer satisfaction. The results were higher than our expectations. Of the 179 reviews, ratings were 10, except for one with a value of 5, so we reached an average score 99.7%. Perhaps more importantly were the verbal ratings. We hoped they would reveal what exactly visitors consider as the main benefit of chatting. The opportunity to add the comment to the rating was taken by 31% (56) visitors. Figure 8 shows that besides speed, respondents appreciated efficiency, as well. It also confirms Figure 9 – a rating of the resolving issues reached up to 89%. Respondents also repeatedly mentioned a nice approach. “Nice and helpful. She willingly explained all I needed. She was able to answer all my questions.” “This application on your website helped me so many times that I've lost count. It is great. And now I'm more than extremely satisfied with the answers, too.”, “I absolutely didn't expect reaction on my question from which I have been really desperate, on a Saturday night. To my surprise, I received a response right at night and it really helped me. Thanks!” The Hypothesis H1 was therefore also accepted.

4. Conclusions

A web chat can significantly influence the quality of the communication with customers and thus the subsequent overall customer experience. The satisfied customers are loyal customers. In addition, they are happy to share their experiences with others. That tendency is used by WOM marketing: “Word-of-mouth marketing is a particularly prominent feature on the Internet. The Internet provides numerous venues for consumers to share their views, preferences, or experiences with others, as well as opportunities for firms to take advantage of WOM marketing.” [8] Nonetheless, a web chat is applicable not only as a customer care tool, but as an important element in both the pre-purchase (Think) and purchase (Do) stages. Through chat a shop - the assistant is able to provide useful information about the considered product and later, in the purchase stage, definitely dispel any doubts and get the visitor to make an order just in that website.

The three-month experiment with web chat on the website of FMK UCM confirmed most of our assumptions. Almost 1400 resolved tickets (chats and emails) and content analyse clearly shows that the visitors are keen to communicate. Either they want to explain an unclarity or they need to resolve an issue during a conversion process. Both may be crucial to moving them to next stage. We resolved on average 15 tickets per day, but during the peak it was more than 70 tickets per day. The assumption that pro-active chatting increases a number of chats was not confirmed. In fact, small part of visitors accepted an

invitation to chat and only negligible part of them really got to chat. The Hypothesis H2 has been therefore rejected.

On the other hand, our assumption that the number of discussed issues is limited has proved to be right. Content analyse revealed the twenty most discussed topics cover up to 85% of all chats, so we accepted hypothesis H4. On the basis of that we predict that if we will chat on the entire website, the number of topics might increase to 70–80. It is not such a large number as it might seem; if agents handle them ceaselessly. We also found a strong season impacts to discussed issues. The issues solved in January were different to issues solved on the march. While the first ones discussed general information about courses, the second ones discussed filling the form and other practical issues of admission. The hypothesis H2 was accepted, too. All visitors' feedback was very positive; we really reached a high level of satisfaction – 99.7%. The most popular benefits (96%) mentioned by visitors are speed and efficiency, which confirms a hypothesis H1.

Also, we found that ensuring a chatting in the most visited section (during a season) of the website in this high level of quality requires at least 4 – 5 agents. We suppose it is necessary to have at least 6-7 agents for ensuring the chatting on all website of this quality. Training should not be a problem. Moreover we have started to build an internal wiki with frequently asked questions and we plan to update it regularly. In these circumstances it would definitely be very beneficial to put a web chat on entire website and make it a main communication and supporting channel.

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