CONSUMER OPINIONS TOWARDS ONLINE MARKETING COMMUNICATION AND ADVERTISING ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract

On the Internet, a medium that has already proven its effectiveness in marketing activities, changes take place with astonishing speed. The recent explosion of social networking applications and their number of users has captured the marketers' attention. Companies have started to rethink their relationships with consumers and adapt to the new online world. In this virtual world of social networks the public is the key element. Consumers perceive the social network as a personal space where they control the content. They decide on their own what they want to see and share with others. Thus, in order to manage marketing communications effectively, marketers must know the consumers' opinions towards their presence in social networks.

Keywords: *online marketing, online advertising, social networks, Social Media, marketing research*

Introduction

Knowing that, currently, social networks, blogs, forums and sharing sites are the main centers of interest for Internet users, marketers have started to rethink their online communication strategies and adjust to the new trend. Many companies are realizing that having a website and making it visible and easy to find through search engines (SEO) is simply not enough anymore. Nowadays it is vital that their online presence includes a Social Media component on sites like Facebook, Google+, Hi5, MySpace or Twitter.

The specialists' opinion, expressed by the American research firm MarketingSherpa, is that "Social Media moved from the notion of *novelty* to the one of *necessity*, and it should be perceived as an integrated element of the business communication strategy."[1]

Analyzing the maturing of this field, MarketingSherpa also noticed that most marketers, who use Social Media tools, relied themselves more on intuition and did not outline a precise plan to conduct and measure the success of their campaigns. Thus, the effectiveness of the online marketing activities was usually affected.

This situation may be the consequence of the fact that, in general, commercial messages posted on social networks belong to less known brands or companies, with little experience in promoting their products/services. Another explanation may be the fact that many companies didn't

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[1] Sergio Balegno, *Social Marketing ROAD Map Handbook: A method for mapping an effective social media strategy*, (Warren, Rhode Island: MarketingSherpa LLC, 2010),
http:// www.marketingsherpa.com/heap/SocialMediaHandbookExcerpt.pdf

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study well enough the consumer opinions and behaviour towards online marketing and advertising before implementing their campaigns on such a highly humanized channel like Social Media.

Therefore this paper aims to underline the significance of knowing and studying the consumer perceptions, attitudes and opinions before trying to engage their attention with specific online marketing tools.

The importance of this research stems from the fact that many small Romanian companies still need guidance in interacting with consumers on the Internet and taking full advantage of all the opportunities the online medium offers.

Thus, with the help of an exploratory research, this paper will outline the features, online social activity and opinions of social networks users in Bucharest. These findings may provide some guidelines on how to implement efficient marketing campaigns through social networking applications.

Content

About online marketing and Social Media

In essence, "online marketing involves using the Internet to communicate directly personalized, interactively and at a long distance in order to achieve the relational and/or transactional objectives of the organization."[2]

Online marketing activities mainly consist of four categories of actions:[3]
- creating company identities through corporate websites,
- placing online advertisements (especially banners) on different sites,
- participating in group discussions (forums, newsgroups), virtual communities, electronic newsletters, to increase awareness and interest among some well-defined consumer segments,
- using the e-mail as a direct channel of communication with consumers.

The third category primarily focuses on Social Media, which is a virtual space divided into five categories: social networks, blogs and microblogging platforms, wikis, forums and sharing communities (for audio and video content). Amongst all, until now, the social networks proved the most efficient in capturing the user's attention and their potential is far greater than any other application.

A social network can be defined as "an application that expands and gains consistency by means of human interaction, usually an interaction between groups that share the same interests, that come from the same cultural or geographical region or groups formed on a specific criterium."[4] In other words, virtual social networks are a form of public space, led by the concept *"users with common interests/needs"*. A social network is a place where the passion for a common interest, the need for affiliation or for personal development, or even the need to share life experiences, brings people together.

A social network generally has the following features:
- it is built around a regional particularity, local culture, a specific function or dominant traits of its members;
- aims mostly at aspects of work and personal life;
- attracts mainly members of a certain age, depending on their interest.

On this basis, online marketing developed a new facet, that of the communicational campaigns created using well known references about consumers. Based on the information provided

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[2] Călin Vegheș, *Marketing direct*, (Bucharest: Uranus, 2003), 334
[3] Philip Kotler et al., *Principles of Marketing - European Third Edition,* (London: Prentice Hall, 2002), 801
[4] Marius Mailat Blog, *Listă reţele sociale România*, January 28, 2009, www.submitsuite.ro/blog/

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by users on their profile pages, marketers can target a specific audience, defined by age, gender, preferences, hobbies or even by the groups of which they are members.

Beside this aspect, online marketing through social networks has other advantages such as:

- the consumers' personal data can be easily obtained; this helps to establish specific market segments and user typologies;

- it is based on online conversations, dialogues, grants freedom of expression and encourages the direct involvement of the consumer;

- offers direct, rapid feedback from users;

- companies can create their own communication channels with target groups, through newsletter or blogs;

- the fans can promote themselves a message or a brand;

- the enthusiastic consumers can become "ambassadors" or promoters of brands;

- consumers can influence each other by creating homogeneous groups where they may get together and exchange opinions or pieces of advice;

- events that receive attention and create a certain „buzz" form the basis of viral marking, which is an essential element for success on social networks.

Being aware of all the advantages and opportunities that online marketing offers, companies may decide to start communicating on the Internet. After doing that, they should take into account that implementing a promotion through social networks requires, above all, rigorous organization and planning in order for the results to be maximized.

Companies should also take into consideration that, on social networks, the public is the key element. They perceive the social network as a personal space in which power and control over the content is in their hands. Due to these characteristics, implementing a Social Media campaign must be creative, transparent and perfectly adapted to this environment.

Extending companies' presence on these platforms which have a large number of users should be a natural thing since brands should be always heading where they future audience is.

The benefits are obvious when taking into account the fact that two thirds of the world's Internet users constantly use social networks, which overcame e-mail in the top of online activities. The time spent on these social networks has been growing three times faster than the time spent online in general.

An estimated number of 1.2 billion persons are using Social Media applications and nearly 20% of overall time spent online is spent on social networking sites.

According to The Nielsen Company's study, published at the end of January 2010, global consumers spent, on average, more than five and a half hours on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter in December 2009. The study showed an 82% increase from the same month of 2008 when users spent just over three hours on social networks.

In Europe, a demographic analysis of time spent on social networking sites in five countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and United Kingdom) revealed that women spent significantly more time on social networks than men across all age groups, during April 2011. Women aged between 15-24 years were the most engaged audience as they spent 8.4 hours on social networking sites, followed by 45-54 years old women with 5.5 hours, which is double the time spent by men, in the same age group, during the month.

In addition, the overall traffic to social networking sites has grown over the last four years. Specifically, two thirds of online visitors spend their time on social networks and blogs, placing them ahead of other online forms of engagement and interaction including games and instant messaging.

In our country the situation is different. Until recently, companies in Romania took little notice of social networks as potential marketing goals destinations. The reason was the fact that the

number of customers who had membership accounts on such platforms was not large and only a small part of the public was deemed relevant by companies that were using the Internet to advertise.

However things began to change. The phenomenon of social networks has been growing in our country especially during the last two years and has been gradually arousing interest among companies keen on promoting.

With an impressive number of over six million Romanians who use social networks (out of over 7.4 million Internet users in our country) and for whom signing in on sites like Hi5, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn has become routine, social networks have become more attractive for companies in Romania who have started to see this as new means of promotion worth investing into. For example, in 2012 there are 4.161.340 Facebook users in Romania and 26.87% of them live in Bucharest.

Industry experts say that during recent years advertisers have become less reluctant as before when it came to placing their ads on these platforms. At the moment, all big Romanian companies advertise on Social Media.[5]

In this context, the companies efforts must be sustained by researches and studies meant to create an overview of the present situation.

The methodology used within research

The current study was based on a quantitative research conducted among a small group of Bucharest inhabitants, active members of different social networks.

The data collection method used for this research was the survey and an online self-managed questionnaire was used as a research instrument. The questionnaire consisted of 20 closed questions, with choice offered answers, all ranked by research objectives. The introductory section of the questionnaire aimed to reveal the habits of using social networking platforms, the main section of the questionnaire centered on the actual consumer opinions towards Social Media marketing, and the final part's purpose was to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The measurement scales used were generally non-metric, nominal and ordinal (for Likert scale), and metric scales, interval (for responses using semantic differential).

Given that this research has an exploratory character, the final size of sample was set at 200 persons. The target group of the study consisted of Bucharest residents, aged between 18-35, selected using the non-random (nonprobability) method of snowball sampling. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects and it was used because the snowball chain can be obtained easily when using social networks.

The main research results and their implications

The research results showed that Facebook is the social network where most of the respondents own an user account (27.8% of responses), followed by Hi5 with 21.6%, Youtube with 14.7%, Neogen (9.2%), LinkedIn (7 %) and Twitter (6.6%).

Regarding the frequency of using social networks, 55% of the respondents said they sign in daily or almost daily, 25% of them sign in several times a week and 20% several times a month or less frequently than once a month. For 60% of the respondents the average time spent on social networks on a regular day is less than an hour and the locations used to access social networks are in

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[5] Anca Arsene-Bărbulescu, „*Tot mai mulți români sunt pe rețelele sociale iar reclamele îi urmează*", Business Magazin, 29 martie 2010, accesed May 15, 2010, http://www.businessmagazin.ro/business-hi-tech/new-media/tot-mai-multi-romani-sunt-pe-retelele-sociale-iar-reclamele-ii-urmeaza-5779806

order: from home (67.4%), from work (20.8%), from school/college (2.8%) and only 9% of respondents said they are using a mobile platform or a mobile phone to log in on a social network.

The purpose why users access social networks is keeping in touch with friends or acquaintances (32.9%), followed by entertainment (30.6% of responses). Only 4.2% of respondents showed interest in using social networks to take advantage of special offers, contests or promotions for various products/services.

In terms of categories that users link to on social networks, the highest percentage was assembled by clubs/bars/restaurants pages with 21.1% of responses, followed by products or services (20.5%), private parties and events (13.7%) and celebrities (12.6%).

Other results, regarding aspects of Social Media marketing, showed that almost half of respondents (49%) rarely seek for advertisements within these platforms.

Regarding the frequency of advertising messages' occurrence on the social networks, opinions are divided between the 54% of Internet users who believe that ads appear in an acceptable number and the 46% who believe that they occur too often. Analysing the responses according to the division by gender, the research shows that women tend to believe that commercial messages appear in an acceptable number, while most men say they appear too often.

About banner ads, most respondents (33%) stated that it's quite disturbing when they appear in their browsing windows, 88% tending to ignore and close them. In the case of men, the responses indicate a more pronounced disturbance regarding the emergence of banners, unlike the women who are less disturbed by their appearance.

Another result shows that respondents tend to agree with the idea that promoting products through social networks is useful. This is shown by the high percentage of responses: 41% of respondents agree and only 11% disagree.

The results for the idea that the promotional methods used on social networks are too aggressive, show that 34% of people agree, 38% are indifferent and 16% disagree.

For most respondents (38%) the element of the greatest importance for the success of promotional campaigns through social networks is the originality, followed by a consistent and well transmitted message (for 25%), interactivity (16%), attractive design (15%) and animation (with only 6% of responses).
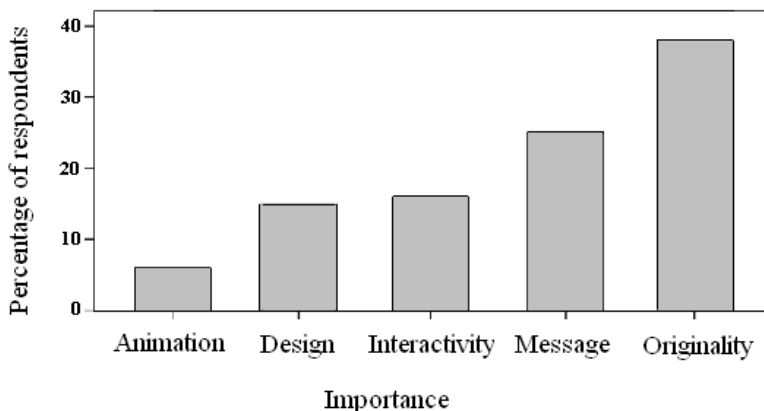

Figure 1. Important elements for the success of promotional campaigns

For more than 50% of the Social Media users the brand, the company name and the company characteristics are also very important for capturing their attention.
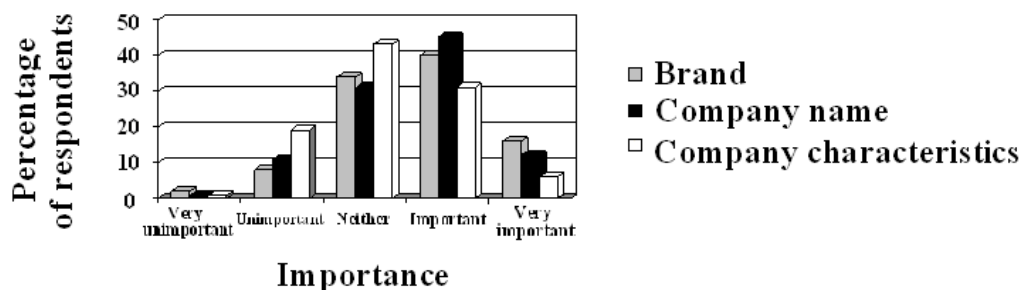
Figure 2. The extent to which brand, company name and company characteristics influences the respondents

The purchase of a product as a result of experiencing a form of online advertising through social networks was achieved by only 16% of respondents who said they had purchased clothing or accessories (sunglasses, jewelry), electronics (cell phones, cameras, laptops), IT products (software and hardware) or flight tickets.

Knowing all the results we can next present a series of conclusions, suggestions and recommendations for marketers in order to manage marketing communications more effectively.

As an exploratory research, conducted on a small sample of respondents, the limits within the research are obvious, but we can shape some conclusions regarding the characteristics of social network users.

The first important conclusion that emerges from the research is that Internet users in Bucharest are more and more open towards social networking platforms and spend a lot of time surfing them. Most users are young, educated and are middle-income employees. The respondents own on average 2.73 membership accounts on social networks, which means that a typical user has accounts on at least two different social platforms.

The fact that more consumers sign in every day on one or more social networks is essential in creating a successful online marketing campaign, because in this way their visibility and contact will be ensured among a large number of Internet users.

Another interesting conclusion is that almost all respondents aged between 18 and 25 have a Facebook account and the purpose for using the network is entertainment (games, quizzes, music, videos etc.), which shapes the typical Facebook user as being a young, dynamic, modern person, eager for information and entertainment.

Most respondents aged between 26 and 35 and all the respondents who have corporate leadership or decision making positions have a Twitter account, which may confirm the idea that the members of this site are opinion leaders or aspirational models, mature professional people, who have an important point of view to share with others.

The research revealed another important finding, namely that users agree to the idea that promoting products or services through social networks can be useful and that advertisements appear in an acceptable number within these platforms. The study also shows that women tend to be more open and tolerant than men in these aspects.

On the other hand, the Internet user's sensitivity towards traditional forms of online advertising is gradually decreasing. This is revealed by the very high percentage of respondents who have the tendency of ignoring and closing the advertising banners displayed when browsing on social networks.

In this context, user's interest and attention should be captured by new promotional methods. According to this research, the solution for a successful promotional campaign in the future could be originality combined with a consistent and well communicated message.

The content is the key element according to experts' opinions too. Companies interested in the promotion must come up with content of interest to grab the public's attention. Consumers have become reluctant to brands because of the aggressive publicity and assault of a huge number of promotional banners in recent years. So a more original content could be the right solution, and in social networks, this solution is extremely convenient and easy to implement. The organization's goal is to find an interesting subject of discussion for users and people will create content and interact.

On this basis, advertising on blogs can be a segment of increasingly success. Being addressed to a well established segment and not for mass exposure, it has the advantage that in this way consumers can get involved, can offer suggestions and other users are able to see their daily comments posted on blogs.

Another solution to capture the consumer attention, could be the adaptation to user requirements and features. Instead of using the traditional *push* marketing messages, companies could use *pull* messages as:

- interruptive messages (animated banners, display ads, overlay ads, video banners, pre-roll videos);
- involving activities (affiliate marketing, contests, promotions, viral marketing);
- participative branding (blogs, forums, online questions);
- applied actions (sponsored applications, custom tools);
- conversational messages (topics related to brands, products or services).

Another highlighted result of the research is that, although not in large numbers, respondents access social networks through mobile phones as well. However, the international trend shows that more and more users use the mobile Internet, and according to the comScore M: Metrics study "in Europe accessing social networking sites on mobile phone is the fourth most popular activity after e-mail, music and photos."[6]

Currently there are only four social networks that can be accessed from a mobile phone: Facebook, Google+, MySpace and Twitter. In August 2009, 65 million Facebook members (almost one third of users), have accessed the website from a mobile phone, four times more than the same period in 2008, and in 2010 their number has exceeded 100 million persons. In addition, people who have accessed the site from their mobile phones were almost 50% more active than those not using mobile Internet.

In Romania, mobile service companies did not fail to meet users demand. Thus, Vodafone has partnered with Facebook to launch 0.facebook.com. This is an optimized, faster and easier version of m.facebook.com page, which lets you use Facebook Mobile free of charge for data traffic.

Mobile phone as media channel comes with many advantages for Social Media because it is part of the personal things that the user always has with him, always in operation and involves strong participation from consumers. Through them, companies have guaranteed their message's visibility virtually wherever and whenever. Mobile advertising began in 2008 and grew significantly in 2009 with more than 85% invested budgets and 50% more advertising.

Another conclusion outlined by research is that online advertising on social networks can be useful especially for electronic devices (laptops, cameras, mobile phones, computer products), which are the products that most respondents have purchased after viewing an ad.

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[6] Ed Flower, *„Când Social Media întâlneşte telefonul mobil",* OnMedia, February 2010, 10

Having known all this data, we can say that in the future the development of marketing on social networks has all the opportunities and reasons to keep on growing in our country.

Conclusions

The recent development of what is called Web 2.0 was an important step in expanding ways to communicate on the Internet. Consisting of applications such as social networks, blogs, forums or sharing content sites, the Web 2.0 differs from the previous 1.0 versions in that it changes people's relationship with information and media, encourages and provides more niche platforms for users to discuss about their hobbies or interests.

It is worth noting again that, although social networks are proving to be a core partner in the promotional and communication activities for the companies interested to take by surprise the audience, yet looking at them like a saving solution meant to produce miraculous results in a short time, is an exaggeration. The Web is not the ideal way to successfully promote and communicate, because its facilities will not make a poor advertisement to be successful and does not guarantee the sale of unsuitable products.

Providing it has access to all sources of information, a company is able to reap the full benefits of promoting through social networks, while minimizing the disadvantages, and the Internet may prove to be the most convenient form of action for the company in its quest for alternative marketing solutions.

Since the research had an exploratory character, with obvious limits, and because the Internet is a changing environment, the current research could be improved in the future. A larger and representative sample of users, a more complex set of questions or maybe a qualitative research are all possible ways of getting an in-depth insight onto the subject. By applying all these measures of improvement, the research may very well grow into a useful and powerful tool for marketers in the near future.

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