Social Media Instruments' Use and Importance for the Marketing Communications Mix - An Exploratory Analysis on Companies' in Romania

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Abstract
The emergence and unprecedented popularity of social media among consumers has dramatically changed the balance of forces involved in the attention economy: who pays attention to what, who influences these decisions and how they are monitored and measured, which is the response speed, and most importantly, how all this is monetized. The social component of the Internet is not just hype, it's a fundamental change in the way consumers shop, play, communicate, get information, interact, collaborate or create and the whole relational universe of an individual is involved. Taking this into account, the article presents the main outcomes of an exploratory qualitative research investigating the marketing activities of companies in the consumer goods sector (FMCG) in Romania (with a focus on online marketing activities), with the purpose of investigating the use, overall knowledge, importance and evolution of specific social media tools for the companies' marketing communications mix. The article comprises a summary of relevant research related to social media marketing, the description and analysis of the research methodology and the main outcomes, followed by limitations and conclusions.

Keywords: Social media, integrated marketing communications, fast moving consumer goods, qualitative research, communications strategy

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

The main features of social media that differentiate it from traditional media result from the powerful interactivity of this relatively new environment. In the academic literature there is an increasingly widespread belief, according to which the growing involvement and engagement between consumers and brands has to be addressed beyond the purely transactional level, in order to include all other potential points of contact with the brands (Schultz and Peltier, 2013). The two-way communication flow, between consumers and brands allows such a level of interaction between the two that social media users become active participants in the brand communication program. Among the effects of having such involved consumers one can mention brand equity increase, customer retention, return on investment (ROI), as well as positive word-of-mouth (both online and offline) (Vivek et al., 2012).

A common conclusion which can be drawn from most social media definitions is that it represents more than the mere sum of the instruments and technologies used and equally important components are user generated content, as well as the online communities in which it is consumed (Mazurek, 2009, Weber, 2009). A thing that has become increasingly stressed by academic articles on the subject is that more than ever modern organizations are no longer asking themselves whether or not to invest in social media tools, their benefits and importance being undeniable today, but instead are considering what specific social media tools to use, in what way and how much. Although the modern communication tools, such as social media, don't replace traditional instruments and techniques, but rather complement them, there is still much to be determined and studied on the most effective ways to integrate these tools into a coherent integrated marketing communication program (Tuten and Solomon, 2014).

Nowadays, most consumers expect organizations to be present online in general and in social

media in particular, hence they must find the best and most effective ways to establish this presence (Nair, 2011). Social media offers a wealth of opportunities for companies to listen to their consumers, to engage them in activities and of course, communicate and establish relationships with them. However, it should be kept in mind that there may also be some negative effects which result from a poorly managed social media presence or lack of concrete objectives and strategy. Some organizations actually invested millions of dollars in social media, in response to the pressure of its popularity, without understanding how to accurately manage it, or knowing the steps to be followed in order to build a coherent social media strategy (Divol et al., 2012).

According to Porter et al. (2011) this seems to be a real problem for modern companies, given that more than half of the Fortune 1000 companies which sponsor virtual communities rather destroy than create value for themselves and their clients. Therefore, social media management and overcoming existing barriers are two intensively studied subjects by experts and academics, most studies of this kind stressing the paramount importance of incorporating the social media strategy into the overall strategy of the organization (Fournier and Lee, 2009, Bottles and Sherlock, 2011, Nair, 2011, Andzulis et al., 2012, Bruhn et al., 2012, Drillinger et al., 2013). It is important that organizations realize that social media is more than just an information distribution channel, therefore it is equally important to determine why social media is effective from a strategic perspective for the company and what it wants to achieve in this context (Bottles and Sherlock, 2011). For this reason, experts recommend integrating social media into the company's communication mix in a consistent manner, rather than simply substituting other means of communication with it (Wilson, 2010, Bruhn et al., 2012). In addition, companies must understand that they don't have absolute control over the social media content present on different platforms (Cafasso, 2009). However, most organizations still try to control as much as possible the content available on social media, instead of allowing users greater freedom so that they can post content directly to their community pages (Parsons, 2011). By allowing more freedom, companies can actually take advantage of social media features, such as the existence of user-generated content, rather than fight them.

2. Social media instruments

In August 2008, Brian Solis, one of the most prominent thinkers and opinion leaders of online marketing and digital transformation, created "The Conversation Prism" in order to provide marketing strategists and experts a visual tool, a map, to help them take into account unforeseen opportunities related to the digital environment and evaluate them through a holistic lens (Solis, 2015). Thus, Solis has succeeded in providing a unique and fresh perspective on the entire social media ecosystem. "The Conversation Prism" is now at version 4.0, being in fact a longitudinal study in digital ethnography, looking into dominant and promising social media tools and organizing them according to the way they are used by consumers. It is a very valuable and important instrument for the entire industry because it is the only map of its kind based solely on research, managing to explore social media development since its emergence. Basically, "The Conversation Prism" is one of the most complex and comprehensive visual studies on how social media tools are used and how they have evolved over time. Brian Solis proposes no less than twenty-six different categories in which the most popular social media tools are divided. These include everything from the already popular social and professional networks, wikis, blogs to the "quantified self" (recent trend to use various technologies and applications in order to share statistics related to personal performances with the network of friends) and "crowd wisdom" (eg BuzzFeed, reddit, digg, NowPublic etc.) or social marketplace (ex: Airbnb, Etsy, Groupon, Kickstarter, etc).

Another very interesting classification and explanation of social media instruments is that of

Tuten and Solomon (2014) who organized the social media space into four main areas, according to similarities in use and established objectives: Social Community, Social Publishing, Social Entertainment and Social Commerce (Figure 1).
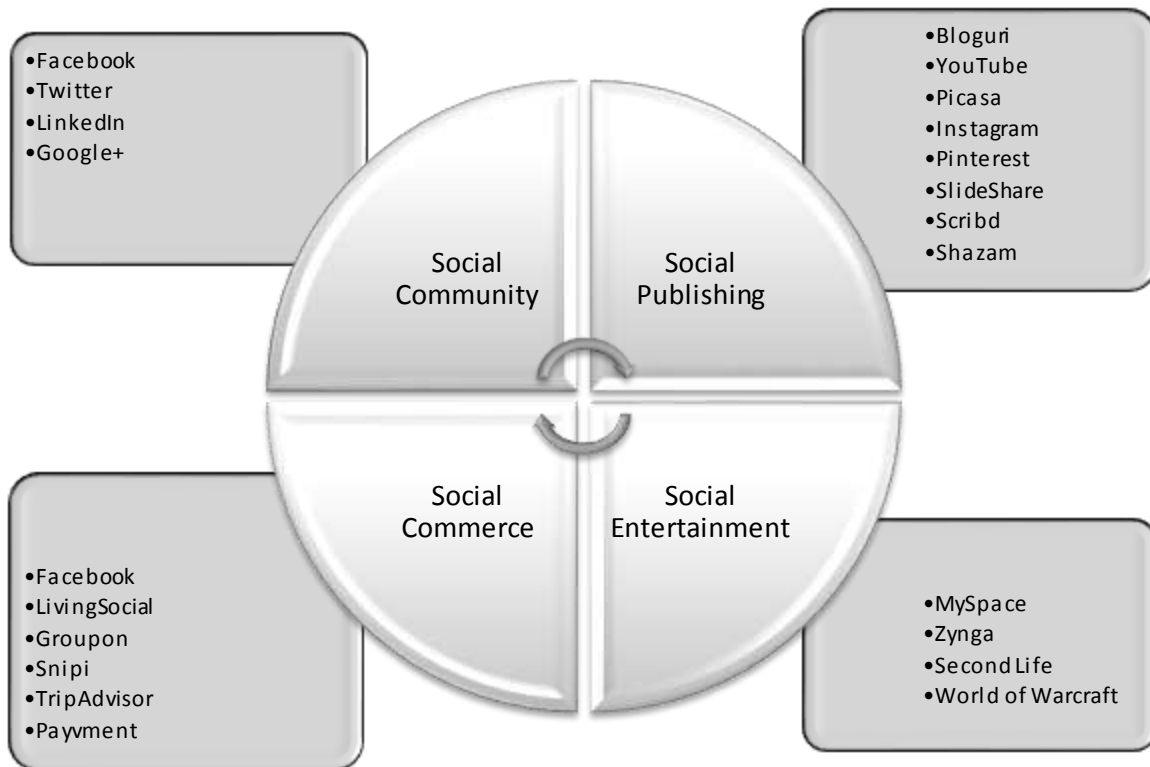

Figure 1. The four areas of social media and examples of component tools
Source: Tuten and Solomon, 2014

3. Research Objectives
To provide an objective view of the social media ecosystem in Romania, it is absolutely essential to interview the specialists who establish the organizations' communication strategies, as well as those who implement these guidelines and interact with the audience through social media, representing the interests of their companies. Thus, a realistic image of social media marketing practices within these companies can be outlined, as well as the gaps in knowledge and faulty approaches which need improvement.

The research objectives of this exploratory qualitative research have been:
O1: Identify the experts' perceptions on social media in general
O2: Discovering the role, limitations and importance which marketing experts assign social media taking into consideration the achievement of specific marketing objectives
O3. Identify the specific social media use by companies, of the decision and motivation behind this choice
O4. Understand how companies' social media activity is budgeted
O5. Exploring how companies allocate human resources to manage social media activities (internal, external or mixed teams)

4. Research Methodology
The investigated collectivity comprises specialists in marketing and communications from Romania, recognized in the field of social media, in terms of the nature of the position they occupy in the company and their experience. The respondents' selection criteria were based on three main elements. First, participants had to hold a management position in the marketing

department (Marketing Manager, Marketing Director) or a management or seniority position within the department in charge of managing the company's social media presence (Media Leader Digital Media Manager, Digital & Consumer Intelligence Manager, Digital Marketing Manager). Second, a minimum of five years' experience (marketing in general or social media in particular) and a seniority of at least one year on that position (so that they had a direct contribution in shaping social media guidelines and activities, be it allocated budgets or strategies formulated) were considered necessary so that respondents could share a mature and well documented vision on the company, the market as well as the studied phenomenon. The third element which was taken into account was the activity sector of the companies represented by the experts. Thus, the considered activity sector was that of fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) present in Romania.

The researched group was composed of six marketing and communication experts from the largest consumer goods companies with a presence in Romania (detergents, cosmetics, personal care products, baby products, food). They agreed to participate in the study and responded positively to the invitation of the author (sent via email or face to face) out of a total of twenty invitations sent to relevant persons of the largest FMCG companies on the Romanian market, with a social media activity in the last year.

The data collection method used by the author was the semi-structured interview, as it was considered to be best suited to adequately address the issue, the exploratory nature of this research and to achieve the objectives set out above. Interviews were conducted during February 2015 - March 2015 at the headquarters of each company, depending on the time availability and schedule of each of the respondents. The interviews lasted 70 minutes on average, and the discussions were saved in audio format, with the consent of the persons interviewed via a free mobile application (Voice Memos). The information analysis was done using content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Interviewed specialists' responses were grouped by exhaustive categories and topics according to research objectives. The research analysis and results are supported by relevant quotes from these responses.

5. Analysis of research results

The analysis and results of the qualitative research among marketing and communication specialists from companies in Romania were grouped into themes and categories according to the research objectives set at the beginning, hence the author will present them according to these objectives for a greater ease in examination.

5.1. Identify the experts' perceptions on social media in general (O1)

All experts have defined social media as the virtual space, consisting of a plurality of platforms and applications that enable online interaction between people or people and companies/brands characterized by specific actions ("like," "share," "post", "comment") and the expression of any type of user-generated content (photos, videos, writings etc.). Moreover, most respondents highlighted some key features of social media, essential both for the company as well as for the individual users: transparency, real-time communication, relevant and up to date information ("fresh information and different viewpoints on the same subject "), openness ("unfiltered communication channel"), direct interaction which is closer to consumers, the benefit of providing prompt or even instant feedback, an answer or a position about any public reaction of a person or institution and a good way to contribute to the successful management of a company's image crisis. Furthermore, interviewed specialists mentioned that often, social media is a very effective way of always being in contact with a large portion of their target audience and a great way to find very valuable information and details from their perspective, which can be used in ongoing activities or to increase the quality of the future ones.

One of the interviewed experts revealed a very interesting perspective on social media, namely their purpose to "promote connections that bring a positive impact on the lives and wellbeing of users".

5.2. Discovering the role, limitations and importance which marketing experts assign social media taking into consideration the achievement of specific marketing objectives (O2)

All interviewed experts believe that social media is important for their company's present communication strategy, being mainly used to convey advertising messages to consumers and to enter into a dialogue with them in order to promote company's various brands and products or to improve its reputation.

A very interesting opinion that some respondents shared was that it is not mandatory for all companies or brands to be present in social media, but certainly the impact of a direct interaction with the target audience has a qualitatively higher effect and in most cases, some positive results. In addition, respondents believe that once the company's social media presence is established, it is very important that it remains consistent in terms of activity, as companies cannot get relevant results without sustained communication in this environment.

Regarding the limitations of social media use, interviewed marketers and communication experts mention some situations to avoid: establishing the company's presence in these environments without a consistent and appropriate budget, addressing and sharing potentially sensitive, confidential subjects, inappropriate social media use by not adapting messages to the channel used, the target audience or the objectives - "Communication cannot be inappropriate under any circumstances, and social media is based on communication. I do not think there are situations where it is inappropriate to use social media, but yes, there are situations where social media is used inappropriately and then it can generate undesirable effects. The same way we communicate, the messages broadcast in social media must be adapted to what we want to broadcast, to whom we are addressing and of course to what we hope to achieve. "

5.3. Identify the specific social media use by companies, of the decision and motivation behind this choice (O3)

All interviewed marketers mentioned Facebook, YouTube and Instagram as the most popular social media tools used by their companies. Several also mentioned Twitter and LinkedIn ("we promote through our employees who are active on these social networks and we serve them as a business card"). The decision to use these tools over others was made taking into account primarily the budgets available, the company's objectives in general and the communication ones in particular, as well as the efficiency of these channels given by the presence of the target audience and the intensity of their use. Some respondents noted that they took the decision to use social media for their company because of the need to be always connected with their target audience, beyond the traditional methods already used and also the need to expand and improve their customer relationship. In addition, some of them have admitted that before starting their social media presence, they first analyzed the activities of the other big players in the industry, as well as the platforms used by their target customers, while others analyzed the type of campaign one has to implement, the company's policy involving regional content and marketing communication development for the brands in the portfolio.

The main social media activities of companies are the promotion of company's products and brands by posting relevant information about them, posting content and showing empathy with consumers on indirect topics to the advertised product, surveys, products usage tips and tricks, contests and promotions - "it is certain that we pay more and more attention to online communication environments. It is a channel that has skyrocketed in recent years, therefore we

must be active in communicating with our consumers. In our industry, TV is still the main promotion channel but the online environment has also shown a spectacular potential."

5.4. Understand how companies' social media activity is budgeted (O4)

Regarding companies' social media activities budget, all the interviewed marketers and communication specialists revealed that they develop it at the beginning of every year and represents a certain share of the total media and communication budget of the company. To set this importance quota, companies take into account the objectives pursued, the time required to achieve these objectives as well as the risks. Moreover, all respondents said they also take into account the return on investment (ROI) when discussing the annual budget approval. Some respondents recognize that depending on objectives and priorities, the monthly social media budget may vary or be recalculated - "we adjust our budget to the objectives pursued. There are months in which we must push on promoting a certain product because we have it on TV and in-store promotion as well. There are months in which we have national promotions and so on. We always plan the online budget correlated with the rest of the environments in which our products are present".

Interviewed marketing and communication experts believe that on average the social media budgets allocated by companies in the fast moving consumer goods sector are about "10% - 15% of the total media budget".

Another interesting thing to emphasize is that respondents pointed out that although there is a company level total social media budget, it consists of the allocated brand level budgets, depending on the specific strategic objectives of each of them.

5.5. Exploring how companies allocate human resources to manage social media activities - internal, external or mixed teams (O5)

All interviewed marketing and communication specialists disclosed that the use mixed teams to manage their company's social media activities. These mixed teams are usually composed of the brand managers and an interactive agency (an advertising agency specialized in online and digital marketing). Some companies even have a more complex social media management team, setting up a special sub department inside their marketing department. This sub department typically consists of a single person (with the position title of Digital Media Manager/Digital Marketing Manager/Social Media Manager) working closely with each brand manager and partner agency.

This mixed teams solution is considered to be the most effective for companies due to the different value that each team member brings, and also because of the advantages linked to a coherent communication and real-time responsiveness to user interactions: the people inside the company know the brands and their strategic positioning and communication the best, while the partner agency employees have an overview of the social media environment in general as well as the industry in which the company operates and rich technical knowledge related to specific social media tools - "This is a team work where each person contributes their own expertise to ensure the best possible and consistent communication for our brands in social media. The two components fit together perfectly and I think they are the ideal recipe to conduct online activities. There is a risk that the person inside the company is too focused on brand promotion and the use of a too corporate language, while the digital agency has the task of reminding us that we are indeed talking about the brand, but we should also not forget whom we are speaking with and how."

In connection with the responsibilities each team member has, they are very well defined. Company employees responsible for managing social media activities outline the strategic directions related to communication objectives, products in promotional focus, communication

direction as well as expected results. The interactive agency and its staff have as main aim the implementation, in an appropriate social media language, of the business objectives communicated by the customer (company), which includes managing Facebook pages and YouTube channels, creating content for them, as well as applications development and competition monitoring.

6. Conclusions and future research directions

For most companies in the fast moving consumer goods sector in Romania, the social media presence is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve their marketing objectives. Social media provides organizations with the possibility of direct and personalized interactions with consumers, with prompt answers or feedback to any person or institution's reactions, with receiving users' feedback about companies' brands and products, as well as an effective means to contribute to the successful management of company image crises.

Used inappropriately, social media can also cause inconveniences to companies. For example, the lack of a consistent and appropriate budget, addressing and sharing potentially sensitive or confidential topics by employees in social media or not adapting messages to the instrument used, the target audience or the objectives pursued, can do a lot of harm to the company and its image.

So, at the moment, social media is assuming an increasingly important role in the consumer goods companies' communication policy, being mainly used to convey advertising messages to consumers and to enter into dialogue with them in order to promote various company brands and products or to improve its reputation and its brands.

The social media evolution trend is towards providing larger control and power to users, to the detriment of companies, therefore, in order to interact with their target audience, organizations will have to reinvent the way they interact with consumers, having to make them voluntarily talk about brands. Using personalized content, offered without restrictions, can be an alternative so the company addresses each separate social media instrument, while always bearing in mind the consumer's need for knowledge. The social media development trend will be observed in the increasing budgets allocated for it by companies, as well as more and better trained human resources, allocated to social media management activities.

Therefore, in order to be successful in social media, companies have to invest long-term, to have consistency, continuity and creativity. They do not have to use as many social media tools as possible just because "they are fashionable," but must choose those that allow access and a better communication with their target audience and serve the objectives pursued. Companies must ensure they provide relevant and personalized content for each channel in order to attract the attention of targeted consumers. Also, the best results can be achieved only by integrating social media in the overall communication strategy of the company, traditional media and social media being complementary and contributing to maximizing each other's effects.

An important future research direction is to carry out a representative quantitative research among the companies present on the Romanian market (divided by sector and company size) which will use as a cornerstone the results of the present research. This quantitative research should examine in-depth the social media use, place and role in the overall marketing strategies of companies in Romania.

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