Social Media Instruments' Evolution and Importance for the Marketing Communications Mix - An International Social Media Experts Analysis

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Abstract
In endeavoring to create an objective image of the social media ecosystem as it is today, the author felt it was absolutely essential to discover and analyze the perspective of international experts, the ones who represent the spearhead in social media evolution and its future trends, this also being an essential step in crafting a "portrait" of the role, importance, typologies and strategies specific to social media instruments. The present analysis, based on an exploratory qualitative research investigating the perceptions of international experts on the role, importance and specific ways in which social media instruments are currently used globally, the main future developments and the ways companies can harness their full potential, not only generates useful information for Romanian companies and valuable examples of good practices, but it can also become a guide for social media investment efforts on the Romanian market, while also being an irrefutable proof of the importance of this topic for companies and managers which are still skeptical about this. 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, international experts, qualitative research, communications strategy.

JEL classification: M31

1. Introduction

Most of the companies nowadays, regardless of their audience or size, consider their online presence indispensable, the Internet having become an indispensable business component. But it is just as important for organizations to correctly identify the main functions which online tools can play and carefully analyze them before creating and implementing a marketing communication strategy that also includes them. According to Clow and Baack (2007), online communications tools can perform five main functions (advertising, sales support, customer service, public relations and e-commerce). The author considers it is important add another function, especially in the current context of an ever increasing competition, growing sophistication of consumers' needs, as well as their expectations of direct interaction with organizations: online customer relationship management (e-CRM / e-CRM).

In order to be able to fully understand the online environments and how they can influence marketing communications, we need to take into account the benefits that their use has over consumers and the relationship between the organization and the consumer, taking into account the modern, client-oriented marketing approach of contemporary companies. Therefore, Chris Fill (2009) has proposed a list of such benefits, with the mention that the intensity of the influence and the benefits of online environments varies according to the particularities of each organization and the importance it attaches to online media or their investments in this area:

• Interactivity – Digital technologies connected to the Internet allow truly interactive s between organizations and consumers, through which messages can receive an almost instantaneous feedback. Shopping online from the confort of ones home is a reality and a major change in the purchasing behavior of people today and many companies in Romania are trying

to meet this consumer need through their e-commerce tailored websites (eg Carrefour, Ikea, H&M, Mango, Pizza Hut, "home banking" offered by most banks, etc.)

• Multichannel Marketing – New technologies have helped organizations reach new markets or different market segments using more than one marketing channel. These, along with traditional marketing mix tools, have allowed companies to precisely determine the channels that consumers prefer, as well as the most profitable ones (in order to allocate resources more efficiently and to increase the profitable consumers base of the organization). This multi-channel marketing strategy must take into account consumer preferences, usage patterns, needs, and price sensitivity, in order to optimize each channel in a way that provides value for each type of customer. In this way, the target audience can interact with the product or service in a way that matches with their lifestyle or behavior, and the organization succeeds in reducing message waste, using communications media more efficiently, thereby reducing associated costs

• Personalization – The online environment has provided the opportunity for organizations to personalize their messages and communicate to stakeholders individually for the first time on a commercial scale, which in turn has led to spectacular developments in direct marketing, in how organizations perform segmentation and positioning, or how they stimulate dialogue with consumers. Personalization should, however, be an integral part of relationship marketing, both on consumer and business markets, depending on the stage of the consumer's lifecycle or the maturity of the customer-organization relationship

• Mobility – Digital technologies and the online environment now support a wide range of devices and applications that enable mobile communications. The impact of mobility on marketing communications is certainly substantial, taking into account that mobile technologies allow transactions to be made in real time from any location.

• Speed – New technologies have allowed some aspects of marketing communications to take place much faster, at electronic speeds, with a strong impact on direct communications with end-users as well as the actual production process (eg documents, movies, video clips, contracts, research, feedback reports etc., all can be written and transmitted via the Internet using digital technologies, thus shortening the time needed for the creation and implementation of marketing communications activities and events)

• Efficiency – The online environment helps organizations accurately target messages, groups or different audiences. It truly enables one-to-one marketing and offers great opportunities to reduce the waste of communication messages and increase their efficiency as well as the transmission of messages to those consumers who are willing and open to communicate with the organization without disturbing those who do not want this.

• Strengthening Relationships – Currently, new technologies are used by organizations to gather and use consumer information to better respond to their needs and to develop long-term relationships with them. The organization's relationships with intermediaries have also changed under the influence of new technologies and the online environment. For example, the emergence of e-commerce has led to the withdrawal of some intermediaries and, on the other hand, created new opportunities, new functions and the need for other types of partners

• Strategic implications – Organizations had to adapt to new technologies as a new way to provide value to stakeholders. In addition to helping organizations adopt a customer orientation, the online environment has changed the way activities and processes work to generate value, thereby facilitating entry into new markets, working with different marketing channel partners, and providing value or satisfaction for new audiences.

2. Social media instruments

Social media instruments are in constant transformation and evolution. New applications and ways of interacting and involving consumers/users are being developed every day, but only a small number will manage to get out of anonymity and become popular worldwide. It is considered that no one can say exactly what kind of social media tools will be used by organizations and consumers in five years time, that's why it's important to know and understand the tools which are currently used, in order to discover possible opportunities or threats for companies in this area.

Beuker and Abbing (2010) suggest a model for efficiently directing organization efforts in social media, called the „POST" model of decision making, created initially by Li and Bernoff in 2008 which focuses on People, Objectives, Strategies and Technologies. The "POST" model focuses on the target audience and its expectations of the product or service offered by the organization, as well as related social media tools, unlike the traditional model that begins by selecting the most popular tools, leaving the wishes of the target audience at the end. Thus, Beuker and Abbing (2010) highlight the fact that the success of organizations in social media depends on the correct understanding of different consumer groups, their patterns of behavior and the specific approach of each of them according to this information.

Many organizations still use social media more as tactical than a strategic tool, but in order to maximize their efficiency, organizations need a strategic framework to develop and implement appropriate social media actions (Bernoff and Li, 2008, Culnan et al., 2010).

From an organization's point of view, social media strategy requires planning, specific actions and continuous information management. Thus, Culnan et al. (2010) claim that in order to gain benefits and value through social media, companies need to develop a three-pillar implementation strategy: (1) mindful adoption, (2) community building, and (3) absorptive capacity. This strategic framework is presented below (Table 1.).

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY		
PLANNING **(Mindful adoption)**	**CONCRETE ACTIONS** **(Community building)**	**INFORMATION MANAGEMENT** **(Absorptive capacity)**
• Selecting tools • Responsibility for administration • Identify indicators to measure the value • Risk management	• Reaching a critical mass of people • Creating interesting content	• Ability to recognize and acquire new knowledge • Monitoring • Team and resources

Table 1. The three pillars of social media implementation strategy
Source: Culnan et al., 2010

The dynamic nature of interactions in social media allows for the marketing efforts to be precisely targeted, based on the speed and amount of information available to marketing experts as well as the valuable knowledge that can be gathered from the consumer experiences users share online (Canhoto et al., 2013). As pointed out above, online communities dedicated to topics related to the consumption of various products or services are an increasingly valuable resource for marketing research (Kozinets et al., 2010). Thus, important companies such as Nike, Microsoft, Coca-Cola, or Burberry value their communities by using them in the co-creation of various products or services in an effort to remain relevant and to best meet their needs and desires, while targeting long-term marketing goals (Berkman, 2013).

Social media is an important part of integrated marketing communications which can't be overlooked or eliminated, a trend that will intensify in the future for all organizations, it's a

necessary strategic element, but not enough to ensure the success and performance of the company by itself.

A very interesting detail highlighted by a McKinsey report on social media and its future is its untapped potential: there are between $900 million to $1.3 billion in annual value that can be created by social technologies in four sectors (financial services, FMCG, professional services, social sector), one third of consumer spending may be influenced by social media shopping, while 3% of companies report substantial benefits from social media use to all stakeholders (consumers, employees, shareholders, partners) (Chui et al., 2012).

Romania had 9.5 mil Facebook users, over 857.000 Youtube users and over 377.000 Twitter users in October 2017, according to Zelist Monitor (2017). Undoubtedly, Facebook is the current social media phenomenon, attracting the attention of the Romanian marketing and communication community. For this reason, more and more organizations are looking to include this social media tool in their campaigns, and the number of companies with Facebook pages is steadily increasing. However, most Romanian companies do not yet fully exploit the extraordinary potential of this network, limiting themselves to simply creating the page, or disposing of content, using the network like a traditional media channel (TV, radio, prints) for the unilateral transmission of information.
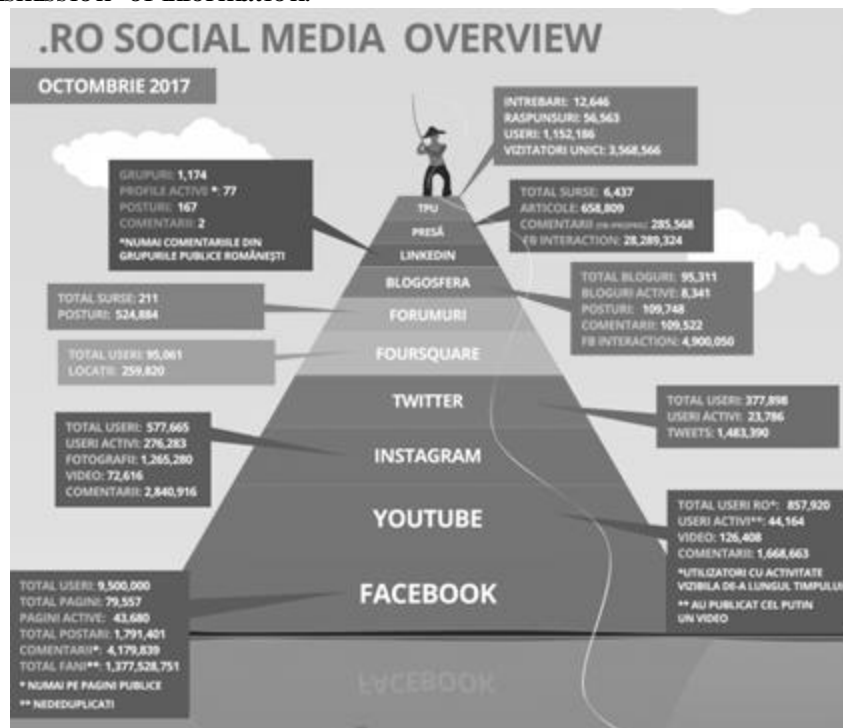

Figure 1. Number of users and frequency of use of the most popular social media tools in Romania
Source: Zelist Monitor, 2017

3. Research Objectives

The aim of the present qualitative research is to identify the perceptions of international experts on social media's place, role and importance, the way in which different social media tools are currently used at international level, as well as future evolutions and the way companies can make use of them to their full potential.

The research objectives of this exploratory qualitative research have been:

O1. Identifying the perceptions of international social media experts on this topic, considering their experience

O2. Determining the most important social media trends and future developments, as well as the impact they will have on companies in the future

O3. Investigating how the social media ecosystem should be used by companies today to be as effective as possible (the types of tools, ways to reach consumers, gain attention, issues on consumer data security)

O4. Exploring the perception of experts on successful recipes companies can apply for their social media strategy

4. Research Methodology

The investigated collectivity comprises of six internationally renowned social media experts from the perspective of the company they represent, the nature of the position they occupy, the accumulated experience, as well as their notoriety and exposure (being invited as participants and speakers at the biggest international events in the field). The author had the opportunity to personally meet the experts at Internet and Mobile World 2014 event (8-9 October, Romexpo), the largest business-to-business expo-conference in Romania for IT, digital and new technologies. Because of the time constraints and high complexity of the event, interviews could not be taken at that time, only an initial contact was established and a Skype interview was planned (social media tool that allows free video calls between users, regardless of physical or time barriers) (Skype, 2017) at a later date, depending on the availability of each individual expert. Out of the twenty-five international speakers present at the Internet and Mobile World 2014, six have been selected with specific expertise in social media, not new technologies, technical fields, digital marketing in general, e-commerce or mobile. All six experts occupy senior management positions in the companies they represent (Head of New Markets Continental Europe, Client Director, Head of Research Services, Communications & Community Manager, Consultant & Strategist, Director of Product) and their companies are in the social media field.

Considering the exploratory nature of this research, the author chose to collect the information using a semi-structured online interview (Corbin and Strauss, 2014) via Skype, between November 2014 and January 2015, depending on the availability and program of each international social media expert.

The interviews lasted for an average of 70 minutes, and discussions were saved in video format, with the consent of the interviewees, through a free recording application (DVDVideoSoft). Information analysis was done using content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Social media experts' responses were grouped by exhaustive categories and themes, and the research results are supported by quotes from them.

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. Defining the social media field (O1)

Most respondents highlighted the interactive and real-time interaction between companies and users through social media as their main feature. Also, some experts have mentioned the role of social media in boosting consumer engagement with a brand, and the fact that they have become an integral part of consumer lives.

All the respondents noted the role and understanding of social media tools from the perspective of users and companies, but particularly emphasized the importance of understanding them from a user perspective, essential also for the correct use by organizations. Moreover, the experts have highlighted that social media tools can be viewed as a valuable source of

information (spontaneous, unsolicited) which companies can use to deepen their understanding of different consumer segments, a bridge between businesses and consumers, based on bidirectional communication, a very important element of the company's communication strategy, especially when used together with other components, both online and offline, and an element that has been present as a central part of the Internet from the beginning, but under a different name.

Social media is an important and effective tool in creating a positive image and a good reputation for a company or brand, as long as consumers believe they are fair and well-deserved. Otherwise, all these consumers can make a significant contribution to the popularity of harsh criticisms about them, which can pose far greater threats than in the offline environment, due to the ease with which they can spread and the high degree of confidence that users invest in those in their social circle.

5.2. Determining the most important social media trends and future developments, as well as the impact they will have on companies in the future (O2)

Most of the interviewed experts suggested that the future trend of social media is their continuous development, until all products and channels of communication have a social component, basically the development of the "collaborative economy". Also, some experts have mentioned that social media has taught users that they can easily create direct relationships with others, leading to the emergence and popularization of peer-to-peer brands such as AirBnB or Uber.

Another future social media evolution mentioned by one expert is that in order to build trust and loyalty, organizations will have to become more "authentic".

Furthermore, another great opportunity mentioned by some experts is the ability to identify users based on the device used, which will allow organizations to better understand their customers' browsing and buying behavior, as well as to strengthen their presence in social media, regardless of the devices used.

A very interesting point from one of the interviewed experts is that in the future, more emphasis will be placed on connecting the company with its consumers in a significant way, on the message transmitted and not on the technology used, just "for the sake of technology."

Last but not least, a future evolution of social media captured by one of the experts is combining them with virtual reality: "the interweaving of social media and virtual reality - is one of the main reasons why Facebook bought Oculus VR."

5.3. Investigating how the social media ecosystem should be used by companies today to be as effective as possible (O3)

A shared vision of all interviewed experts is that in order to be as efficient as possible and to meet their established goals, companies need to learn to build a long-lasting relationship with current and potential consumers and create engagement, need to be present in social media where their target audience is, and especially where this audience is willing to interact with the brand, accepting and respecting the limits set by them.

Another aspect underscored by all the experts was that organizations should not focus on the number of specific social media tools they use, or set to have a presence on all of them, but rather choose the most appropriate one in terms of the presence of their target audience, their willingness to interact with the brands present, the type of message they want to convey and the objectives they are considering. However, most respondents agree that Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the best and most popular social media tools used by companies to engage consumers, given that their users are the most open to accepting the presence of brands, while

forum users are the least willing to accept their presence (forums are seen as private, anonymous communities).

With regard to data security issues, the most important things mentioned by experts are compliance with consumer boundaries (an essential element in creating brand confidence and consumer loyalty), fostering consumer confidence in brands by demonstrating that protecting consumers and their personal data is a priority, even when this creates conflicts with state authorities, investing in cultivating customer relationships rather than collecting their data (taking into acoount that sooner or later, changes in legislation will regulate this area much more strictly and consumers will be privileged).

5.4. Exploring the perception of experts on successful recipes companies can apply for their social media strategy (O4)

Regarding the existence of a successful recipe to guide companies' efforts in social media, experts concluded that there isn't one which encompasses everythingl, and that organizations must independently define their direction and strategy according to their size, targets, type of activity and, above all, the image and behavior of their target audience. Starting from this, most respondents consider organizations can be guided by good practices in their field and can study industry-specific methods to achieve objectives, which they can afterwards adapt to their own situation.

Some of the experts have also highlighted the importance for organizations to innovate and try new things in social media, just to differentiate themselves from other companies and to create a distinct image, to attract consumers' attention and give them something different. Moreover, for the best results, any social media strategy must be integrated with the entire marketing communications mix and subsumed with its overall strategy and objectives.

6. Conclusions and future research directions

Although featured as a central part of the Internet from the beginning, but under another name, social media have nowadays become a normal and very important thing for people, as well as an integral part of their lives. That is why the in-depth understanding of these environments by organizations, especially from the consumer perspective, is vital to the success of their marketing efforts.

The most important features of social media are the bidirectional communication they support, as well as the interactive and real-time communication that can take place between businesses and users. They are basically a bridge between companies and consumers, helping boost consumer engagement with a brand. Social media can also be seen as a valuable source of information (spontaneous, unsolicited) which companies can use to understand the different segments of consumers, and a very important element of the company's communications strategy, used together with other components, both online and offline.

Among the future development trends of social media, one can mention the development of the collaborative economy, to the point that all products and communication channels have a social component, so companies will not only have to remain relevant most of the time, but will also have to become even more authentic. The end purpose of all these developments will be to successfully connect the company with its customers in a meaningful way through the messages sent, rather than the technology used just for the sake of technology.

Consumers appear to be less interested in promoting different brands, and one of the major goals of companies in order to maintain their adaptability and to cope with all the changes, will be to identify new ways of interacting with consumers and to include them in brand actions through various types of activities that are in line with their areas of interest.

With the growing consumer awareness of the implications of sharing a large amount of personal data through social media, personal data security will become a much more sensitive and well-managed subject, and one of the main effects of this change of attitude will be a more careful selection of brands, companies, or apps with which consumers share their private data. In view of this, it is vital for organizations to cultivate consumer confidence in their brands by demonstrating that protecting their personal data is a priority, even when this creates conflicts with state authorities.

In order to be successful in social media, companies need to learn to build long-term relationships with existing and potential consumers and create engagement among them, to be present where their target audience is, and especially where this public is willing to interact with the brand, accepting and respecting the limits set by them, to be authentic, coherent, consistent, persevering, to help consumers by providing relevant content for them and not to be too insistent. Moreover, organizations should not focus on the number of specific social media tools they use, or expect to have a presence on all of them, but rather choose the most appropriate ones considering the presence of their target audience, their willingness to interact with the brand there, the type of message they want to convey, and the objectives they are considering. Many companies still treat social media as a compromise, a short, easy and cheap solution, instead of looking at it as a long-term commitment and building an entire social media marketing strategy, with due importance, time and resources.

A valuable future research direction is continuing this qualitative research with the inclusion of experts from the main companies contributing to the development of social media right now (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WordPress, etc.), as well as the selection of experts from several European countries and the United States, in order to have an integrative vision of what is happening at European level or by region, and comparing it to the situation in the US.

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