

## Characteristics and Development of Social Media as a Marketing Communication Tool

**Irina Iosub**

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies  
irina.iosub@yahoo.com

**Adelina Ivanov**

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies  
ivanov.adelina@yahoo.com

**Dan Smedescu**

The Bucharest University of Economic Studies  
dan.smedescu@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a careful analysis of the characteristics and evolution of the major social media platforms used both in Romania and abroad, as well as some practical insights on the consumer use of social media platforms and its business and marketing communication potential. Development of modern technologies and various devices has increased the willingness to communicate through channels that are interactive and attractive at the same time. Therefore, nowadays there are virtual communities whose members participate, receive and share information and at the same time bring something new, socialize and become influencers. Dynamic changes in the online environment as well as its evolution require a new approach, from a marketing perspective, of how social media platforms can be used to improve communication between a company and its consumers, users or potential customers. In this context, the analysis and practical insights presented are useful for entrepreneurs and managers who are interested in using social media as part of their marketing communication strategy.

**Keywords:** social media, marketing communication, Internet, interaction, interactivity

**JEL classification:** M31

### **1. Introduction**

The digital era has had a great impact on the way we communicate, both for individuals and for organizations. Although traditional and online marketing communication channels play a major role in an organization's communication strategy, social media has gained an increasingly important role in sharing news and creating permanent dialogue with targeted audience. As noted by Hoffman and Novak (1997), "the web is a virtual, many-to-many hypermedia environment incorporating interactivity with both people and consumers".

In 1969, Leonard Kleinrock described the Internet as "an invisible global infrastructure serving as a global nervous system for the people and processes of this planet" (Tungend, T., 1969). As he admitted, Leonard Kleinrock (2010) did not foresee the powerful social networking side of the Internet and its rapidly growing impact on our society. Internet users no longer limit themselves to merely look for information or to send and receive e-mails. The Internet has become more than a medium for information, interaction or a form of entertainment. The rapidly increasing number of users and their expectations has led to the development both in number and complexity of applications and online platforms. In the beginning we talked about the consumer as a simple receiver of the information. Now, however, we are talking about proactive audiences who play the role of information producers in the virtual environment. People

experience the cyberspace as an alternative to real life. A worldwide statistic (Statista, 2016) shows the number of social network users from 2011 to 2015 and estimation for 2016 (Table 1).

	Year					
	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016 (estimated)
Number of users (billions)	1.22	1.4	1.59	1.91	2.14	2.34

*Table 7. Global number of social network users*

Source: Statista, 2016

In 2011 there were 1.22 billion users and the number is increasing every year. As such, in 2016 it is estimated that approximately 2.34 billion people will access a social network regularly, which is up 9.3% from 2015. The increased global usage of smartphones and mobile devices offered new possibilities for users, with mobile applications that allow them to access their accounts from different devices.

According to a Nielsen report (2012) about social media, Internet users devote to social media networks about 20% of the overall time spent online. Furthermore, in the United States, the time spent using social media platforms has increased by 37% in July 2012 compared to July 2011. Nowadays, “fill up spare time” is one of the most common reasons for using social media networks, and the daily time spent on social media is up to 30% of online time, which is an average of almost 2 hours per day (GlobalWebIndex, 2016).

These percentages, but also the continuous multiplication of social media platforms, bring up those features that catch and keep the consumers attention for a long time. But what is *social media*? In Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein opinion, social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Simply put, Dan Zarrella (2010) suggests that to better understand the social media concept it should be presented in contrast with traditional media features. Most of the content which appears in traditional media is paid for. However, new web technologies perform a much faster information transmission and, moreover, without costs which would significantly affect the marketing budget. Virtually anyone can post on a blog, on Twitter or on YouTube, materials that will shortly attract millions of online views for free. Essentially, social media means blogs, microblogs (e.g. Twitter), social networks (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), media-sharing websites (e.g. YouTube), forums, virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), websites that contain reviews (e.g. Yelp).

In social media, the success enjoyed by a post is quantified in the number of followers, fans and likes, and virtual communities are formed based on common interests. Therefore, the fast feedback, the interaction with consumers, the quick transmission of information at low cost are some of the reasons that place social media as a primary tool used in companies' marketing plans. But each social platform has its own features and should be used depending on the marketing communication objectives. For this reason, the main features of the most used social media platforms will be introduced below.

## **2. Characteristics and development of social media as a marketing communication tool**

Many researchers and practitioners (Kotler and Keller, 2008, Zyman, 2001) argue that marketing communication can be considered the voice of the organization and through marketing communication an organization has the ability to manage relationships with current and potential customers in order to build its commercial image, and to interact with other stakeholders in order to obtain a favorable image (Popescu, 2003). Depending on the nature of

the message and the context in which it is transmitted, marketers can use one or more channels simultaneously. The new perspective that the concept of integrated marketing communication brings into literature is that each channel enhances the sum total of all the others. This is the catalyst used in the continuous strive to achieve synergy, that is “the added value of one medium as a result of the presence of another medium, causing the combined effect of media to exceed the sum of their individual effects” (Naik and Raman, 2003). Therefore, the combined impact of multimedia activities such as television, print, radio, direct response, sales promotion, sponsorship, events and public relations, together with the Internet, can be much greater than the sum total of their individual effects.

In 2011 more than 50% of social media users were connected to brands via social media (Van Belleghem, Eenhuizen and Veris, 2011) and this number is increasing every year since companies are willing to invest increasingly more in this segment. Social media development has registered lately a particular increase in the number of users. The advantages of social media are well known, like creating an interactive connection between businesses and their audience, at a low cost and in a timely manner, and with a much higher efficiency compared to other traditional communication channels. This makes it more important and necessary for companies to be present on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other social media platforms in order to succeed online (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

### **2.1. Facebook**

Created initially as a closed circuit social network for the Harvard University students, Facebook has become perhaps one of the biggest online success stories. From September 2006 the network is open to everyone. Nowadays, Facebook has 1.71 billion monthly active users and 1.57 billion mobile monthly active users (Facebook, 2016). In Romania there are about 8.5 million users, with more than 40% of the population, and more than 88% of Internet users (Facebrands, 2016). Given Facebook’s ranking at the top among social networks, we do not misjudge when we conclude that absence from Facebook equals a lack of an online social life. Facebook members can become friends with other members and at the same time can become fans of Brand Pages. Here, brand fans can share their experience with the brand or company and thus a community of people with common interests is created. On these webpages, companies convey messages of interest to their fans, post audio/video and run marketing campaigns.

A first method to receive the coveted likes as simple, inexpensive and fast as possible is to suggest the page to friend lists or just to those who you think would be interested in. After the first 25 received *likes* you can also hold a Vanity URL such as [www.facebook.com/YourChosenName](http://www.facebook.com/YourChosenName). Another specific instrument of the social network is Facebook Insights, which is a free package available for the webpage administrators that helps them constantly monitor the business page activity and figure out which kind of content works and which does not. Besides these, there are many other applications specific for business pages that provide support to the page administrators or to simple visitors.

An analysis of the Fan Courier’s official Facebook page, the leader in express courier services in Romania, shows their social responsibility side in their Facebook posts (22%), although it is not a very well-known corporate social responsibility policy, because they have lots of projects that are not in the public eye. They also make employment announcements (13%) on Facebook page, give information content (20%) about national holidays program or special posts accompanied by the hashtag #FANfacts or “Courier Dictionary” (used to inform the public about special terms used in this field), and public relations content (45%) about financial results, investments, inauguration of the first regional hub in Brasov, events, or celebrating their employees football team success. There were no advertising posts for their services on

Facebook. The analysis was made on a total number of 45 Facebook posts from 1<sup>st</sup> May 2016 to 20<sup>th</sup> July 2016. The company also encourages feedback with the customer satisfaction questionnaire section, allowing users to post comments. Although there is a lot of negative feedback, as customers seem to see social media as an alternative/additional channel to customer support services, the company has a transparency policy, as they make these messages public. In terms of replies, the company doesn't respond to every negative comment. However, sometimes other customers interfere and bring arguments in the company's defense. Most replies are apologies and requests for more details in private messages in order to find a solution. Another type of reply is providing useful information to customers when they ask for it. In addition, in terms of integration, the Facebook page has a "Contact us" button which redirects customers to the official website page.

In the same period of time, an analysis of 30 Facebook posts of Urgent Cargus, an important competitor on the express courier services market, shows that most posts are related to advertising the company's services (43%), public relations content (26%) about events, national holiday greetings and a press release for attempted fraud. Other posts are related to sales promotion (13%), general information for customers (13%) and only one employment announcement. In terms of replies, the company acts in a similar manner as Fan Courier, but the Facebook page doesn't have a customer satisfaction questionnaire section or a "Contact us" button, only a general information section.

## 2.2. Twitter

Twitter is recognized as the network through which the news spreads extremely fast in the form of 140 characters messages nicknamed tweets. Twitter is a microblog due to the short and disconnected messages that it distributes. The platform was created in 2006 and gained worldwide popularity, with almost 313 million monthly active users in June 2016 (Twitter, 2016). This makes Twitter a potentially powerful marketing communication tool.

The word twitter describes the form of short messages (max. 140 characters) sent through the website. On this social network a brand can capture its fans interest if it offers the latest news about various topics such as: ways of leisure, personal development, news of the company (employment announcements, sales promotion etc.), promotional campaigns. So-called followers, who are interested in finding the latest information provided by a certain source, will be notified every time a new message is posted. A distinguishing feature of the messages sent on Twitter is that they are public for everyone. However, certain messages can be targeted and thus they become visible only to subscribers. As a social network, Twitter was created around the idea of following brands. When you choose to follow another Twitter user, his/her user tweets will appear in reverse chronological order on your main Twitter page. For this reason, it is desirable for companies to have as many followers as possible. A tweet is like a short Facebook status update, but, unlike the EdgeRank Facebook's filter, every tweet arrives at every follower's feed. In 2015 Twitter made a few changes, experimenting with the order of tweets in the timeline, and making them appear in a different order from the reverse chronological one (Bell, 2015). In February 2016, a post on BuzzFeed (Kantrowitz, 2016) reported that Twitter was going to start algorithmically ordering tweets, which prompted users to tweet negative comments accompanied by the hashtag #RIPTwitter.

Retweets are basically the most powerful mechanism which help the messages spread to as many users as possible on Twitter. Basically, it is a way to cite and, thus, forward an interesting post, indicating the source. Other interesting and useful applications are TweetDeck – an application used to sort friends in the network, Tweetie – an application for Mac and iPhone, HootSuite – an application used to automatically send a message on a certain date.

A research by Taucharungroj (2016) indicated that Starbucks use three types of original and

retweeted content: information-sharing, emotion-evoking and action-inducing content. Also, the most frequent replies by Starbucks to individual users express apologies and provide further support, information and positive comment. Less common replies are gratitude, enquiry and question, and chit-chat.

Hong's study in the online news industry (2012) shows that there is a positive association between Twitter adoption and online traffic, and this association depends on the size of online networks created on social media sites.

In Romania, Fan Courier, the company analyzed from the perspective of its Facebook presence, joined Twitter in July 2012, but makes little use of this platform. The tweets redirect users to Facebook posts. Fan Courier has under 300 followers and the last media content is from 14<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

### **2.3. LinkedIn**

LinkedIn was launched in 2003 as the most important social network for business-oriented professionals. In 2012, a study report (Qualman, 2012) reveals that LinkedIn is used by 95% of the companies that use social media for recruitment. At the moment, the social network has 450 million members in over 200 countries, most of them from outside the United States (LinkedIn, 2016). On LinkedIn, the company communicates about its products, services and job opportunities. Users meet people with similar interests, who operate in the same field or in related fields and receive or provide feedbacks on business ideas. Therefore, LinkedIn is more than just an online CV by itself, as it requires interaction (van Dijck, 2013). Unlike other social networks, LinkedIn does not include all the photo-sharing features. The basic function is to create professional networks, so it is widely used by applicants for jobs and recruiters (Papacharissi, 2009). As far as the interaction with other network members is concerned, this platform provides many versions such as: searching for other members through connections, be them personal or belonging to other members, the opportunity to post an employment announcement and joining certain groups dedicated to specific topics of interest. Another advantage of the network is that it provides the opportunity to make recommendations about a person depending on your experience working together. Unlike Facebook, LinkedIn designates a special space for testimonials on the person's page or in the business group. The recommendations are important for every user on the network.

### **2.4. Blogs**

Blogs have had an extremely fast maturation from their emergence to their differentiation by topics, from individuals to companies, from having a blog as a way to share your thoughts to having a person delegated to blogging within a firm. From the early 90's to the current period blogs have grown from simple diaries to internet marketing tools. This transformation gave birth to very attractive and easy to use platforms such as WordPress (known as the most used blogging platform), Blogger, Typepad etc.

The nature of blogs may vary widely depending on the objectives for which they were created, from simple personal diaries to political and commercial marketing tools. They also vary depending on the author – from a single one to an entire community. Many blogs allow visitors to respond through comments, which are also public, thus creating a community of readers centered on that blog, while others are not interactive either by blocking comments or not responding to them.

A blog can be an excellent marketing communication tool which many managers and entrepreneurs use to give insight into their company. For example, Steven van Groningen, the CEO of Raiffeisen Bank Romania keeps a personal blog, and more entrepreneurs, like Marius Ghenea, Florin Rosoga –a trainer and author in personal development- found the potential of

blogging for building better connections with customers and other stakeholders. Over the last four years, BRANDfog (2016) studied the role of social media in the development of industry leadership, brand trust and brand reputation and their results indicate that the CEOs engagement in social media makes a brand more honest and trustworthy. In a small to medium business (Centeno and Hart, 2012), the majority of brand managers are the main voice of public relation and advertising, as well as other brand communication activities, also an essential part of personal sales. With this in mind, it could be beneficial for them to be the ones in contact with the media in order to raise awareness and interest about the brand.

Some of the marketing opportunities that blog communities can provide are: (Grosbeck, 2006, p.422) business promotion, product promotion campaigns, PR tools, receiving feedback, more precise targeting, engaging consumers in product development or distribution, reduced publication costs, brand loyalty and a source for marketing surveys.

Regardless of the type of blog or the platform it uses, the difference between a frequently visited blog and an abandoned one will always reside with its content, the facilities it provides, and also the promotion method used.

### **Conclusion**

In this time and age the consumer is the one who takes control of what he wants to purchase and consume, what messages he wants to be exposed to and so on. In this context, the organization is no longer the only source of information for consumers. Social media is a valuable support that provides them with an enormous potential for information and communication and the possibility of interacting with each other (Arnott and Bridgewater, 2002) as virtual communities are a new form of socialization (Seraj, 2012).

In this paper we provide a careful analysis of the main characteristics and evolution of the major social media platforms used both in Romania and abroad. We also describe some practical insights on the consumer use of social media platforms and its business and marketing communication potential. We contemplate a continued growth in the number of online platforms, of virtual communities, some of them demonstrating success, while others being quickly abandoned. This puts the user in a position which offers choice and at the same time it raises his expectations. Of course, each community has a life cycle. Just like traditional social groups, virtual communities can divide and form smaller new communities.

Consumers are exposed not only to the organization's messages, but they also absorb information about the company and its brands from other independent sources. Word-of-mouth communications and publicity are the most common forms of external brand communications (Berry, 2000). All that an organization undertakes, from marketing campaigns to designing packaging, distribution and after-sales services, has an impact on its brands (Popescu, 2003). Therefore, an integrated approach in terms of marketing communication is required so that the efforts are worthy.

The analysis and practical insights presented are useful for entrepreneurs and managers who are interested in using social media as part of their marketing communication strategy. Future research could bring a more complex investigation on how Romanian entrepreneurs use social media as a marketing communication tool. Also, the role of social media in building the brand-consumer relationship could be another interesting subject of a future research.

### **References**

- ARNOTT, D. C. & BRIDGEWATER, S. 2002. Internet, interaction and implications for marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 20(2), 86-95.
- BELL, K. 2015. *Some tweets in your timeline may not show up in chronological order anymore*. [online] Available at <<http://mashable.com/2015/12/08/twitter-timeline-out-of-order/#wWkutUBKXsqQ>> [Accessed 20.05.2016].

- BRANDFOG. 2016. *CEO's, social media, & brand reputation*. [online] Available at <<http://brandfog.com/BRANDfog2016CEOSocialMediaSurvey.pdf>> [Accessed 25.06.2016].
- CENTENO, E. & HART, S. 2012. The use of communication activities in the development of small to medium-sized enterprise brands. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 30(2), 250 – 265.
- FACEBOOK. 2016. *Thank you! Messenger*. [online] Available at <<http://newsroom.fb.com/news/2016/07/thank-you-messenger/>> [Accessed 21.07.2016].
- FACEBRANDS. 2016. *Date demografice Facebook Romania*. [online] Available at <<http://www.facebrands.ro/demografice.html>> [Accessed 20.07.2016].
- GLOBALWEBINDEX. 2016. *Social media captures 30% of online time*. [online] Available at <<http://www.globalwebindex.net/blog/social-media-captures-30-of-online-time>> [Accessed 25.06.2016].
- GROSSECK, G. 2006. *Marketing și comunicare pe Internet*. Iași: Lumen Publishing.
- HOFFMAN, D.L. & NOVAK, T.P. 1997. Marketing in hypermedia computer-mediated environments: conceptual foundations. *Journal of Marketing*, 60(3), 50-68.
- HONG, S. 2012. Online news on Twitter: Newspapers' social media adoption and their online readership. *Information Economics and Policy*, 24, 69-74.
- KANTROVITZ, A. 2016. *Twitter To Introduce Algorithmic Timeline As Soon As Next Week*. [online] Available at <[https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexkantrowitz/twitter-to-introduce-algorithmic-timeline-as-soon-as-next-we?utm\\_term=.lyb4dyNge0#.vu2N7bo2Rj](https://www.buzzfeed.com/alexkantrowitz/twitter-to-introduce-algorithmic-timeline-as-soon-as-next-we?utm_term=.lyb4dyNge0#.vu2N7bo2Rj)> [Accessed 25.06.2016].
- KAPLAN, A. M. & HAENLEIN, M. 2010. Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 53, 59-68.
- KLEINROCK, L. 2010. An Early History of the Internet. *IEEE Communications Magazine*, 48(8), 26-36.
- KOTLER, PH., & KELLER, K.L. 2008. *Managementul marketingului*. 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Bucharest: Teora Publishing.
- LINKEDIN. 2016. *About LinkedIn*. [online] Available at <<https://press.linkedin.com/about-linkedin>> [Accessed 20.07.2016].
- NAIK, P.A. & RAMAN, K. 2003. Understanding the Impact of Synergy in Multimedia Communications. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 40, 375-388.
- NIELSEN. 2012. *State of the media – the social media report 2012*. [online] Available at <<http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2012/state-of-the-media-the-social-media-report-2012.html>> [Accessed 20.05.2016].
- PAPACHARISSI, Z. 2009. The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society*, 11(1&2), 199-220.
- POPESCU, I.C. 2003. *Comunicarea în marketing – concept, tehnici, strategii*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Bucharest: Uranus Publishing.
- QUALMAN, E. 2012. *39 Social Media Statistics to Start 2012*. [online] Available at <<http://socialnomics.net/2012/01/04/39-social-media-statistics-to-start-2012>> [Accessed 20.05.2016].
- SERAJ, M. 2012. We Create, We Connect, We Respect, Therefore We Are: Intellectual, Social, and Cultural Value in Online Communities. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 26, 209-222.
- STATISTA. 2016. *Statistics and Market Data on Social Media & User-Generated Content*. [online] Available at <<https://www.statista.com/markets/424/topic/540/social-media-user-generated-content/>> [Accessed 15.07.2016].
- TAECHARUNGROJ, V. 2016. *Starbucks' marketing communications strategy on Twitter*. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 1-19.
- TUGEND, T. 1969. *UCLA to be First Station in Nationwide Computer Network*. UCLA Press Release
- TWITTER. 2016. *Twitter usage/Company facts*. [online] Available at <<https://about.twitter.com/company>> [Accessed 15.07.2016].
- VAN BELLEGHEM, S., EENHUIZEN, M. AND VERIS, E.. 2011. *Social Media around the world 2011*. [online] Available at <<http://www.insites-consulting.com/report/social-media-around-the-world-2011/>> [Accessed 19.03.2016].
- VAN DIJCK, J. 2013. 'You have one identity': performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 199-215.
- ZARRELLA, D. 2010. *The social media marketing book*. [online] Available at <[http://danzarella.com/Social\\_Media\\_Marketing\\_Book\\_ch1\\_3.pdf](http://danzarella.com/Social_Media_Marketing_Book_ch1_3.pdf)> [Accessed 25.06.2016].
- ZYMAN, S. 2001. *Sfârșitul marketingului*, Bucharest: Nemira Publishing.