

Developing Activities in Social Media and their Functions Illustrated with an Example of Companies from the ICT Sector

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Abstract

Nowadays, when social media has become a very common communication channel between companies and customers, of particular importance is their proper selection that will allow achieving the company's goals. Companies very rarely focus their attention on the possibilities offered by various, not limited to only the most popular channels and tools of social media. By analysing the activities of companies and consumer behaviour in various social media channels, the authors developed a flowchart based on the 5C categorization proposed by V. Vuori, which constitutes a useful classification of social media functions. For the purpose of this study, a concept was developed, under which the authors connected the above-mentioned 5C categorization of social media with selected fields of marketing activities, while choosing channels and tools appropriate for a given area of such marketing activities. The indicated concept was the basis for the assessment of the method and scope of social media usage in the surveyed companies. The aim of this article is to present the way in which companies from the ICT sector use social media in their marketing activities. Moreover, the objective is to indicate factors that affect the use of social media channels and tools by the surveyed companies. The authors have applied triangulation of research methods within the analysed case studies. This has allowed distinguishing action methods and reasons for improper selection of social media tools used to fulfil the set objectives.

Keywords: Social Media, Business Economics, Case Study, Marketing Management, ICT industry.

JEL classification: M21, M31.

1. Introduction

Social media has become an important phenomenon in the last decade in both social and business areas. The development of tools such as Facebook, LinkedIn or YouTube has modified not only the relations between online users, but mainly changed the way companies communicate with the market. On the one hand, the user, i.e., the consumer, has gained tools allowing them to evaluate and express opinions on products, brands, and ways companies operate, while on the other, companies have been provided with a real opportunity to exchange information on the market, and to actively involve the user in various areas of the company's activities.

When investigating the social media usage with the aim to fulfil marketing goals, the authors have observed that, in practice, companies do not use all of the available social media functions, and that selection of tools is very often accidental, dictated by current trends, and caused by the need for imitation. Among companies there can also be observed the lack of knowledge about benefits resulting from the proper use of social media in marketing activities. This has also been proved by research carried out in foreign markets, e.g. Finland (Jussila, Kärkkäinen, Aramo-Immonen, 2014). The presented research results indicate that there is a significant discrepancy between the perceived potential of social media and its usage in the framework of cooperation between clients and partners in business-to-business companies.

The main goal of the research was increasing the knowledge about the identified phenomenon and searching for its causes. The authors have applied triangulation of research methods within the analysed case studies. This has allowed identification of the degree of use of social media functions as well as reasons for the incorrect selection of tools and channels to implement selected marketing activities

2. The essence and functions of social media in marketing activities

Neither the literature on the subject nor practical examples provide a clear definition of individual social media. Among social media one can find websites (informative, social, Q&A), communicators, platforms, blogs, forums, discussion groups, etc. From the point of view of the diverse possibilities, social media can be defined as “communication channels of the online community that enable information exchange, but also interaction or integration between individual users of the network (Internet users) or Internet users and brands. Published information is available to all users or selected groups and is subject to varying degrees of social control” (Mróz-Gorgoń, Peszko, 2016). The following essential features of social media could be distinguished (Vouri, 2011): interactivity, reciprocal communication, many-to-many communication, open channel, and information democratization. For the above reasons, the use of social media when carrying out activities within a company, allows:

- engaging customers in the co-creation process,
- publishing and sharing content online,
- connecting users and creating convenient conditions for interaction between them,
- completing content by adding a description or filtering information, marking content and showing connections between it,
- consolidating and adjusting content by attaching already existing online content.

The complexity of functions executed by social media has been presented in the 5C categorization by Vouri. The indicated categorization divides social media into five basic functions: communicating, collaborating, connecting, completing, combining (Vouri, 2011).

Communicating function can be understood as sharing opinions, storing and publishing content/image or audio. Its main communication channels include: blogs, websites, microblogs, forums, discussion groups, presentations. Examples of tools that perform the above function include: YouTube, Blogger, Twitter, Instagram, SlideShare, and Skype.

Collaborating is associated with mutual creating, testing and editing of content without location and time constraints. Tools most often used in this context are wikis, forums and discussion groups, as well as specialist/industry related communicators. Exemplary tools include TWiki and Google Docs.

One of the most popular functions is connecting, understood as creating a community, communicating and making contacts within the community. The channels most often used in connecting are social networks and virtual reality. In case of tools, the most important function is performed by Facebook, LinkedIn, and SecondLife.

Completing is a function whose aim is to complete, describe, acquire, add or filter information, and display links between content. The most often used channels include social bookmarking, forums and discussion groups with the exemplary tools being Pinterest, FeedDemon, and Twitter.

The last function is combining, which is understood as connecting and integrating information via external channels on platforms that function as mash-ups. In this case, the most typical tool that performs the combining function is Google Maps, while other services such as Facebook or Snapchat are just starting to perform this function as well, due to their constant development.

The above-mentioned 5C concept organizes social media by focusing on functions of selected channels and tools assigned to it. On the one hand, it indicates the spectrum of possibilities provided by social media, and on the other, it underlines the need to properly assign individual channels and tools to the objectives pursued in various business areas. Therefore, the authors of this article considered the described categorization useful for use in the research process described later in the article.

Turning to the aim of this article, attention should be paid to the area where social media is used, namely marketing activities. This is significantly relevant to the changes that were made in regards to the role of the customer, who has become a potential co-creator of the organization, its partner, adviser, ambassador and innovator ready to propose to the company numerous improvements and innovations. Therefore, marketing is no longer a one-dimensional activity, but a multidimensional process engaging both the brand and the recipients (Łopacińska 2014). It should be noted that it was the Internet, and especially social media, that created the above situation. The conducted research indicates areas of marketing activities where usage of social media becomes obligatory in order to meet key goals. Among important activities, there could be distinguished: collecting information, sales support, image creation (product or company brand), marketing content creation, idea creation and development of new products (innovation development), information collection and research marketing.

The literature on the subject frequently confirms that the indicated goals are significant for companies. In their publications, the authors refer to their own or analyzed research results (Kamiński 2012; Greg Broekemier, Ngan N Chau, Srivatsa Seshadri 2015; Bajdak 2017; Bojanowska 2017, E. Goryńska-Goldmann and M. Kozera-Kowalska, 2018; Papa, Santoro, Tirabeni, Monge, 2018).

Among others, the research conducted by A. Bajdak shows that the most frequently chosen goals indicated by companies were presenting complete and up-to-date information about the company, its products and purchase conditions (63.3% indications), as well as providing clients with access to information about the company (55.8% of indications). Moreover, about one third of the surveyed companies pointed to the use of new media, including social media, to build the image of a modern company and conduct a dialogue with clients (Bajdak 2017). Similar results were found in the research performed by G. Broekemier, N. N Chau, S. Seshadri – the main goals companies aim at with the use of social media are improving the company's reputation, increasing customer interest and awareness, as well as promoting business among new customers (Broekemier, N Chau, Seshadri 2015). Research conducted by E. Goryńska-Goldmann and M. Kozera-Kowalska (E. Goryńska-Goldmann and M. Kozera-Kowalska, 2018) confirmed that social media significantly changes the approach towards communication. The changes concern the way of reaching and attracting new customers. Social media allows current observation of trends on an ongoing basis, improvement and development of companies and their employees, following the changing tastes and consumer preferences, but also monitoring the activities of competitors. Furthermore, of *particular importance* is the fact that improvement concerns contact with customers, who more willingly choose to express opinions through social media (E. Goryńska-Goldmann and M. Kozera-Kowalska, 2018). Social media is also one of channels for distributing content that primarily affects the way new customers are acquired, brand awareness is built, and sales of products and services are carried out (Mazurek, Nosalska, 2018). Furthermore, it is an ideal place to meet for interest groups, which also complements traditional ways of finding partners. Established relationships contribute to the development of companies not only at the domestic, but also international level (Deszczyński, 2017).

The research results obtained by Papa, Santoro, Tirabeni, Monge showed that social media has a positive effect on the process of forming knowledge and contributes to supporting innovation

process (Papa, Santoro, Tirabeni, Monge, 2018). As indicated by the authors, from the managerial perspective, managers should consider the implementation and involvement of social media in business and innovation processes.

Numerous confirmations presented in the research results of the possibilities offered by social media, as well as connecting the social media functions described in the 5C categorization with the key areas of marketing activities constituted the starting point for the authors' deliberations and contributed to the exploration of the subject under study.

3. The importance and methodological assumptions of the research

In order to achieve the pursued research objective, the authors have chosen the case study method. The method is defined as “empirical reasoning, which concerns the contemporary phenomenon in its natural context, especially when the boundary between the case and its context cannot be unambiguously determined” (Dańda, Lubecka, 2010). Based on the gathered information, the case study method allows in-depth analysis of the examined problem, presentation of its specificity, and interaction with other elements of the organization or its environment. In the context of the examined phenomenon, it was important to study not only the scope of social media usage, but also find the reasons for this state. As far as business practice is concerned, conclusions obtained from the implementation of the case study can provide a lot of relevant information that will constitute the basis for future management decisions.

Solving scientific problems by using the above-described method may include research in the form of single or multiple case studies. The authors chose a multiple case study that examines a few of deliberately selected companies.

The scientific nature of the case study method is proved by objectified, rational, organized, systematic and structured activities aimed at ensuring the credibility of the conclusions (Merriam, 2002). The most important method is triangulation, which in this case is understood as obtaining data from several independent sources. This method implies usage of a variety of different methods and research techniques, including participant observations, non-participant observations, unstructured interviews, document analysis, and analysis of the key document content created by the research subject (Lee, 1986). The authors applied both primary research, i.e., individual interviews additionally supported by projection methods, or observation of social media profiles, and secondary research within which information from literature sources, reports and summaries presenting the characteristics of the studied industry were analysed.

The authors conducted a case study analysis based on a schema covering seven consecutive stages (Grzegorzcyk, 2015):

Stage one – determining the subject and objectives of the case study.

The main aim of the research was to verify the degree of social media usage by surveyed companies in order to implement selected marketing activities. A supporting objective was to determine factors affecting the examined level of usage of social media channels and tools. Whereas, the practical objective was to support marketing departments in their optimal use of social media for marketing purposes.

Stage two – determining the subject of the case study.

The research covered companies from the ICT sector. The business profile of the surveyed companies is presented in the table below.

Table 1. Identification of the examined entities

Type of company	Type of offered products/services
Company A	Consumer electronics, information technology and telecommunications
Company B	Electricity services for business customer
Company C	Mobile and Web Apps, Data science, Business software
Company D	Designing, visualization, 3D printing

Source: own work

The companies described in the table above operate on both individual and business customer market. Companies B and D operate mainly on the market of business customers. All of the above-mentioned companies use social media in their marketing activities. The choice of companies from the ICT sector was based on the relationship, often described in the industry literature, indicating that companies which create products and applications supporting communication process with the market, successfully use them themselves. Therefore, the authors decided to choose entities for the study from this sector.

Stage three - contact with the case study subject.

Visits at selected enterprises were preceded by analyses of secondary information obtained from industry reports related both to the state of social media usage and the character of companies' activities from the ICT sector. This made it easier for the authors to prepare questions used during individual interviews as well as to plan other research methods.

Stage four – determination of the case study structure.

Firstly, research problems and selection of research methods were specified. Next, research scenario and matrices for collecting information were developed. The employed matrix was created as a result of combining the above-described 5C categorization with selected areas of marketing activities also described above, to which social media channels and tools were subsequently assigned. The prepared matrix was a useful tool for the implementation of the research process.

Stage five – collecting information for the case study.

Industry reports, specialist and scientific articles were analysed as part of secondary sources. The primary sources comprised information collected during individual interviews and observations of activities carried out in social media and indicated by the surveyed company.

Stage six - verification and evaluation of the collected research material.

When taking into consideration the research aim, it seemed important to compare research results obtained from the interviews with observations regarding practical use of social media by a given company. This refers to the essence of triangulation of research methods used in the case study.

Stage seven – writing a case study.

To describe the case study, a linear-analytical system was adopted, which was later used to present selected problems. This, in practice, came down to the indication and description to what extent the surveyed companies used social media included in the proposed concept. Next, the proposed directions of changes in the decision areas of the surveyed companies were indicated in the conclusions.

4. Research results

The case study developed by the authors had made it possible to illustrate to what degree channels and social media tools are used in accordance with the adopted 5C categorization. The following table presents research results describing the degree to which social media functions are used by given companies in selected areas of marketing activities.

Table 2. Use of channels and tools in accordance with the 5C categorization in the surveyed companies from the ICT industry

Social media functions	Image creation	Sales support	Content creation	Innovation creation	Marketing research
Communicating	A,B,C,D	B			B
Collaborating					
Connecting	B, C, D	A, C, D		A, C	
Completing					
Combining					

Source: own work

As can be seen from the table 2 above, the surveyed companies from the ICT industry use only two main functions of social media, i.e. communicating and connecting, in their marketing activities. This means that social media is used by the examined entities to mainly publish and share content online, as well as connect users and create favourable conditions for interaction between them.

As far as communicating function is concerned, the tools playing the key role are YouTube and Instagram, as well as, to a lesser extent, Twitter and Blogger. Connecting is implemented mainly by such tools as Facebook and LinkedIn.

The area where the surveyed companies use most often communicating and connecting functions are: creating an image of a product or a company, as well as sales support.

In relation to activities concerning creation of an image, the examined companies present information (communicating) related mainly to:

- functioning of the company as an organisation, mainly by Instagram
- product and service offer by using YouTube, and more rarely Blogger.

It should be noted that the described function is mainly used as “information mouthpiece” that presents specially developed content. In the case of connecting function, companies mainly use LinkedIn to build relationships with potential employees in the selected area.

In the scope of activities related to sales support, the surveyed entities indicated mainly the connecting function, within which they use the popular social networking site, Facebook, to implement advertising campaigns and establish business contacts. The examined companies barely engage in building communities around their organizations and do not create conditions for active cooperation with portal users. Therefore, it can be stated that the main objectives attributed to connecting tools are not fulfilled in the examined companies.

Communicating function is also used, albeit occasionally, in marketing research. One of the surveyed companies uses blogs, YouTube and Twitter, to collect information about its competition. In addition, two more companies indicated the tools assigned to the connecting category, including Facebook, as a place for testing new products.

In order to better visualize the used tools and the pursued objectives within the specific functions of social media, the authors presented the described relationships in Figure 1.

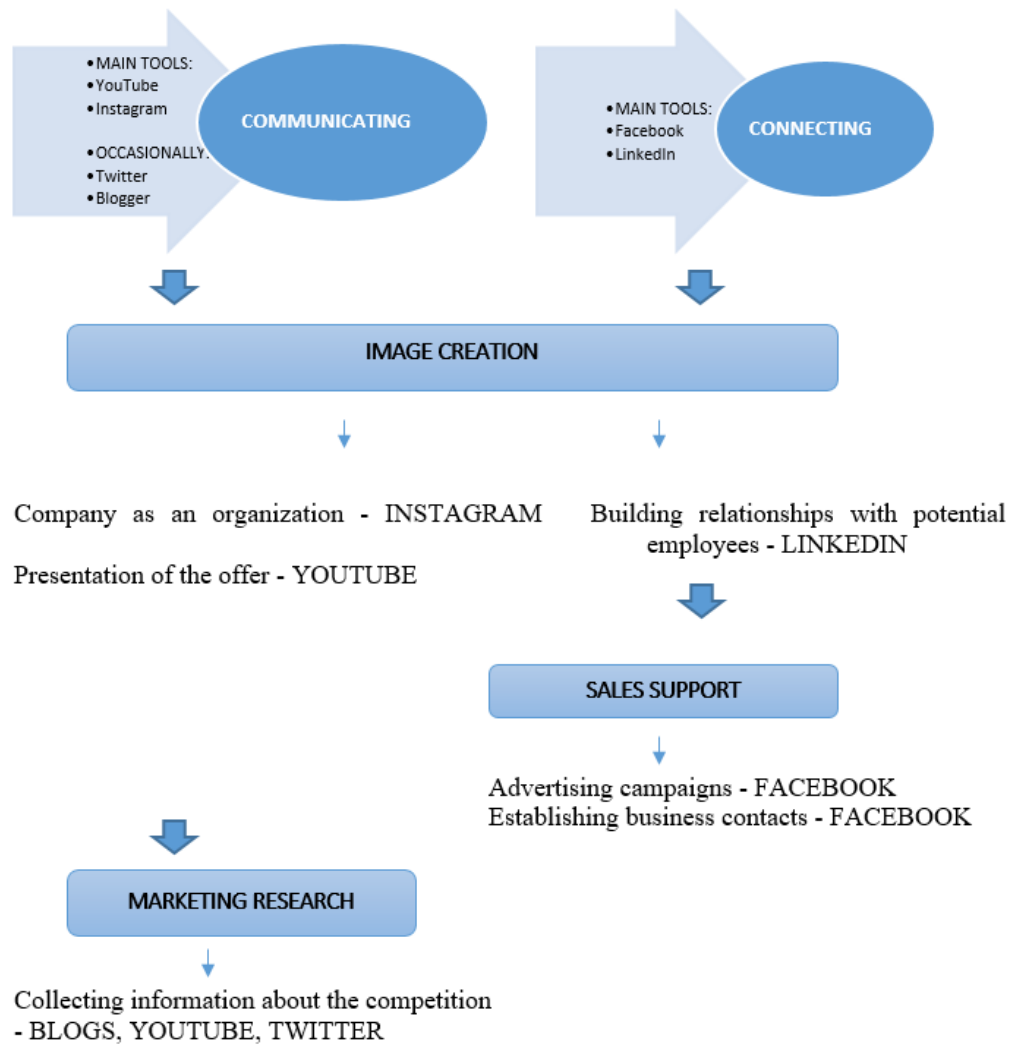


Figure 1. The used tools and the assumed goals of companies within the specific functions of social media
Source: own work

The other functions, including collaborating, completing and combining, are not used by the examined companies. This may imply lack of understanding of the way social media works and the role it plays in the process of engaging clients in the activities carried out by the company.

It should be noted that the examined companies use only selected social media functions, and it cannot be said that they implement them correctly. This is especially visible in the case of connecting tools, where Facebook, a social networking site, is used as a place for successful promotion, not as a tool to build relationships and create favourable conditions for cooperation between community participants.

The reasons for this phenomenon can be found in various areas of the examined company's activities. There could be observed similarities in the opinions regarding the use of social media in marketing activities. However, one of the key limitations was the lack of people responsible for social media in the company. The respondents explained the situation with a failed recruitment or lack of knowledge about the role and function played by such an employee in the company. Among the companies that managed to acquire a specialist from the given industry, the problem occurred at the stage of implementation of set objectives. The readiness of social media specialist to play their role in the company was met with resistance of other

employees, who did not support them with knowledge and materials necessary to create content in various communication channels.

The prevailing opinion among the surveyed companies concerned the lack of need to engage customers or online communities in direct cooperation with a company.

This kind of approach resulted in the emergence of another factor limiting the use of social media due to the assigned functions. In accordance with the previously described theory, an important element of the 5C categorization is the use of functions, e.g. collaborating, to engage social media users in co-creation processes. Moreover, the connecting function, understood as a creation of communities and conditions necessary to establish cooperation between their participants, positively affects engaging consumers in company's marketing activities. Active involvement of online communities in the implementation of marketing activities in the company is now a manifestation of the acceptance of a new approach towards the role of the consumer in the market. The examined companies did not recognise such need, as they perceived a customer as a passive recipient of product information. They also emphasized that there are organizational limitations to implementing this type of process.

However, it should be also noted that the key factor limiting the use of social media functions was low awareness in regards to the concerned area. The examined companies were characterized by a limited knowledge level concerning the essence of how channels operate and how to choose social media tools.

As indicated by the presented research results, the limited scope of using social media functions may be connected with factors characterized as organisational obstacles.

5. Summary and recommendations

Based on the case study of companies from the ICT industry, it can be concluded that the examined entities use social media in many areas of marketing activities, although their level and scope of use of social media channels and tools is too narrow, when taking into consideration aims attributed to the mentioned marketing activities. With reference to the new customer role described in marketing, where the customer is seen as a co-creator of values (Prahalad, Krishnan, 2010), an active participant and market commentator (von Hippel, 1986), as well as a supernumerary (Rieder, Voss, 2010), it should be noted that in this respect, social media plays a key role, whereas the richness of functions enables effective implementation of activities. Furthermore, proper use of social media channels and tools for intended purpose may significantly decrease costs related to marketing activities. However, this requires a company to redefine its way of thinking about communication, leaving the safe position of the information creator and becoming a coordinator creating convenient conditions for communication with the online community, clients, and partners.

With reference to the practical aims of the conducted case study, as well as in regards to decisions related to the use of social media in marketing activities, it is worth considering the introduction of the above-described changes in functions played by individual social media.

In the case of image-building activities, it is important that the customers become product ambassadors and support the company's activities. This is possible with the proper use of social media. It is important that companies use a wider range of tools, when working within the categories described above, as well include new ones related to, among others, the collaborating category. The collaborating function creates opportunities and prerequisites for active and direct involvement of online communities in the company's marketing activities. Using tools such as Google Docs or TWiki can effectively support activities in the area of creating marketing content, as well as actively involve communities in the process of creating new products. For image purposes, it is worth considering various social media channels and

analysing the target group. Tools that allow building relationships with the environment as part of the connecting function include not only Facebook, but also numerous business portals such as LinkedIn, which can also help build a positive image among potential associates or business partners.

Involving customers in generating ideas for promotional activities or improving customer service would be important in case of sales support. In this context, it may be worth employing the tools from the collaborating and combining functions, especially if mash-ups are to be created.

The area which is the least supported by social media is marketing content creation. The development of the Internet, especially of social media, has opened new possibilities that had, until now, remained out of reach for companies. Acquiring content from the online community, including specialists, lead users and enthusiasts, could significantly improve the effectiveness at the level of presentation of interesting content, videos, photos. Such users could become supernumeraries at the company and effectively support those for whom content creation is an additional responsibility. Engaging users to create content through social media also brings additional benefits, namely, tailoring content to the needs of its recipients.

It should also be noted that the surveyed entities indicated social networking sites as channels that are used to create new products. In addition to searching for testers of new solutions, the surveyed companies could also focus on acquiring ideas for new products as well as engage users in the remaining stages of product development. Many researchers in the field of innovation have noted that the engaging customers in the entire process of innovation development increases the real chances of developing a valuable product tailored to the needs of market and customer. Moreover, social media channels and tools provide real opportunities to co-create new products and services with the customer.

As far as marketing research is concerned, companies should to a greater extent focus on collected information, without engaging external entities. It is through connecting and combining functions that the companies can exchange information in a group, be it experts, specialists in a given area or among potential clients. The described functions enable not only collecting but also presenting information from various sources in an interesting way, which significantly improves cooperation between participants.

In the context of the presented considerations, attention is drawn to the fact that increase of the efficiency of social media usage in companies may involve some changes in their organization. In addition to employing competent employees, there is a need to change the approach towards the role of the customer who gets included in the company. Moreover, social media provides new opportunities and challenges for companies. Ignoring this fact may, in consequence, slow down the development of even such enterprises that operate in industries with intensive growth, e.g. the ICT sector. A wider analysis of this area has been investigated by the authors in other publications.

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