

Responses to Communication Techniques used in Building Customer Relationships within Online Social Networks- A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

In online marketing communication practices that target the individual consumer, online social networks are a useful channel both in terms of consumer engagement and involvement in communication involvement and in terms of loyalty.

In order to motivate the usefulness of introducing the online social network as a communication channel within online policy options, we considered a description of effective marketing communications from the consumer perspective as relevant, by emphasizing attributes that motivate the intent to seek additional information, to become involved in the communication activity by disseminating information, to make a purchase, or to become loyal to a brand or company.

Keywords: consumer behavior, online communication, online techniques, online social networks, promotional techniques

JEL Classification: M31, M30, M37

1. Introduction

The decisional problem to be solved through the current qualitative study is that there is insufficient information on the role of online marketing communication techniques in relation to the Romanian consumer within the online social networks and the extent to which these components of such form of marketing communication influence the behavioral intentions of Romanian consumers. The limited number of empirical and theoretical studies makes it difficult to suggest specific communication strategies for the online environment [Phuong et. al., (2017)] marketing communications in the field being conceptualized in structural models (e.g. relational models of information exchange) and in behavioral patterns (e.g. on the characteristics of a particular channel), the moderator role of the channel used between structural / behavioral

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conditions and communication results (e.g. consumer satisfaction, intention to acquire) is being difficult to pinpoint. The reason for the lack of a theoretical framework applicable to online social networks in the case of Romanian users is probably the imperfect understanding of the operational potential of the new communicative media existing for companies and the low emphasis on case studies on best practices in the field.

In the present study, attention will focus primarily on the role of communication techniques that can be used within online social networks, given the rapid development of social media platforms facilitated by the possibility of assimilation into multiple digital technology contexts. By focusing on comparing communication techniques in different contexts, a description of online marketing communication perceptions of users present across multiple online social platforms will be made.

In order to answer the decisional problem, we considered it necessary to study the navigation routine of online social platform users, study the user experience in communicating across online social networks, study the way users interact with companies in different situations, determine the characteristics of the messages that generate friendly responses and the most efficient communication techniques in generating favorable results.

2. Research Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the present study is to provide an overview of the effects of marketing communication techniques used in online social networks on behavioral intent.

In order to find the information necessary for the fulfillment of the research purpose, the following operational objectives are distinguished:

1. Studying the navigation routine within online social networks;
2. Determining users' experience in communicating through online social networks;
3. Description of communication techniques from the user perspective;
4. Determining the characteristics of messages that cause favorable responses to online social networks;
5. Determining the most effective communication techniques in generating favorable responses in online social networks.

3. Methodology

In the present research we opted for the exploratory study, because it is sought to clarify a problem and a deep understanding of the effectiveness of various marketing communication techniques. Also, the present qualitative study precedes a quantitative one and has a functional purpose in developing a conceptual and operational model and exploratory research aims at identifying the coordinates of

the researched marketing phenomenon, defining the variables and hypotheses that will be investigated within further research. [Cătoiu et. al., (2009)]

To collect the data, we first distributed a participant selection questionnaire, then chose an unrepresentative group of sixteen respondents (Master degree students), eight of whom were male students and eight female. The research was aimed at conducting interviews with users of online social networks in Romania. Qualitative research respondents are in the age group of the most active Internet users. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the smaller sample size is recommended. [Cătoiu et. al., (2009)] The sample selection method was non-probabilistic, and subjective criteria such as the availability of respondents to answer questions and the age group selection were also used.

The interview consists of four parts, the first and the second part aimed at learning more about the respondents' navigation behavior and their online experience, and the third and fourth part are about classifying and describing online marketing communication techniques depending on attributes [Lee et. al., (2012)] and the responses they generate in the user's involvement in the communication process. [Delafröoz et. al. , (2011)] Focusing attention on user involvement was done in three types of intentions [Soderlund and Ohman, (2005); Soderlund and Ohman, (2006)] : on the intention to seek additional information, the intention to convey a message to other members of the social network, the intention to make a purchase, and the intention to become loyal to the brand or company.

In order to respond to the decision-making issue, a list of online communication techniques used in online social networks was formulated. The following techniques were considered relevant and included in our study:

- a) Online public relations;
- b) Marketing through online partnerships;
- c) Interactive advertising;
- d) E-mail marketing (and messaging);
- e) Viral marketing.

In order to make a thorough description of the online marketing techniques in terms of their efficiency in online social networks, a number of attributes that can describe online marketing communication have been considered. Following a careful reflection on the empirical study, five attributes that positively describe the social network as a communication media and the relationship between companies and users were conceptualized and confirmed in the first part of the interview. To make this list more effective, before the attributes were checked, interviewees were asked to provide positive or negative attributes describing the effectiveness of communication techniques within online social networks themselves, thereby confirming the presence of researcher chosen attributes.

Navigation routine and user experience in online social network communication were used to the extent of identifying each communication technique perceived in their navigation experience and how users interact with companies in the online social environment. In order to avoid confusion, each technique was presented, as well as examples of its application.

4. Results and Interpretation

The raw data collected through the semi-structured interview was simplified by excluding unnecessary data from the point of view of relevance and significance. In order to answer the research question, case analysis and cross-case analysis was performed, findings and interpretation were formulated.

4.1. Online Behavior

In order to study the navigation routine within online social networks, we started the interview by asking questions about daily navigation routine on the online social network that is used most often.

The most common response to daily social media usage time is three hours, but responses from two to eight hours a day have been recorded, all respondents mentioning profile checking on a social networking, e-mail and instant messaging. The search for information was also mentioned by a majority of respondents.

“I usually check my email, search for information, check my profile on Facebook, Youtube, and watch movies online”. (female, 23 years old, Economist)

“Always, the first thing I do is to check Facebook, then maybe WhatsApp, search for specialized information, search for information about products”. (female, 21 years, Engineer)

“I window-shop online and check my e-mail and social network every day. I check several times a week for entertainment events and news sites. Check out events, especially those on weekends”. (male, 25 years old, Lawyer)

Entertainment activities (online games, music) and online shopping were frequently mentioned. Most respondents watch movies or series online.

As far as navigation routine is concerned, most Romanians use Facebook, Facebook messenger and WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram. Among their favorite activities, we find conversations, image and video sharing.

“I use it (Facebook and Instagram) for messaging, likes, comments, and sharing pictures, publishing personal photos, sharing videos”. (female, 26 years, Engineer)

“...videos and watch what others have done on the list (contact list). I do not do much, but I can see every day what happened there”. (female, 21 years, Economist)

“I'm accessing Facebook from my mobile phone and check-in on outings and trips. I'm in touch with my colleagues from college or high school. I also have a blog, but I don't write so often these days... post on Twitter on a daily basis”. (male, 24 years, Economist)

"I usually check posts by friends and companies, public figures and whatever's in my news feed. It's much better than e-mail, that's mostly for work or school. Sometimes I click on ads." (female, 25, Economist).

Respondents usually access at least two social media platforms, although they're users of multiple social networking sites. Most frequently accessed platforms are used for entertainment and their instant messaging services.

4.2. Experience in Communication via Online Social Networks

In order to determine the users' experience in communication through online social networks, but also with regard to the third objective, namely the description of communication techniques with commercial character and corporate communication from the user's point of view, respondents were asked to express their opinion on various forms of communication within online social networks.

"It's a quick and convenient way to receive useful information and generate interest in companies' products". (male, 23 years old, Economist)

"They are up to date, but they have a low interest in me, I do not use social networks to buy". (female, 21 years, Engineer)

"I don't mind, as though on the social network they address me in a less aggressive manner". (male, 22 years old, Economist)

"It seems like the messages I receive on Facebook and even those ads are more relevant than on other sites". (female, 21 years, Economist)

"They are really useful and relevant, I bought three or four dresses after seeing them there (Facebook) ... I'm now following all the collections of a company in Cluj (female, 23 years old, Student)

When asked about commercial communication and corporate communication, the respondents characterized the presence of these forms of communication within their social networks as being either relevant or easy to ignore, the general perception found that within the online social networks, corporate communications practices are less intrusive and easier to accept than in other online contexts.

Furthermore, as far as the description of communication techniques from the user's perspective is concerned, the respondents were asked to describe their involvement in this type of communication.

"Depending on the company's message, I go through it passively, sometimes recommend products to interested parties, I subscribe to some company updates, I order products ... it depends". (female, 22 years, lawyer)

"I'm active in the sense that I like, share certain posts, I recommend my favorite companies, but in these cases I know the company or my friends who are involved, that is, it comes from a trusted recommendation". (female, 23 years, economist)

"I actively navigate to the sites I find interesting, and I can talk to friends with the information I have obtained. Occasionally, it helps to distribute messages by posting them, especially those of animal shelters". (female, 22 years, engineer)

“I like communicating with some companies through social networks, I'm actively involved in my friendship with my favorite companies, I rarely subscribe to events”. (male, 24 years, engineer)

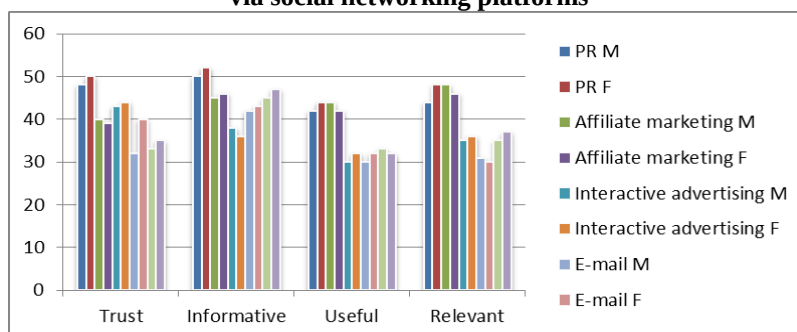
As participants in online social networking companies, an overwhelming majority of respondents appreciate having taken action at least once and sometimes responding to marketing messages.

To determine the characteristics of messages that cause user-friendly responses to online social networks (4th objective), respondents were asked to choose attributes to describe the social network as a communication channel, then asked to rank them in order of importance. Respondents chose in this order, the following: informative, useful, relevant, and trustworthy.

4.3. Marketing Communication Techniques Used via Online Social Networks

The third stage of the interview was aimed at studying the importance of applying every online marketing communication technique in terms of the attributes being investigated, by ranking attributes for each technique on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 for minimum- 5 for maximum). In order for the respondents to understand the functional role of each technique, each technique was addressed separately, by explaining and exemplifying its application in the most commonly used social platforms. Respondents were then asked, "How do you feel these practices influence your activities within the social network?"

Figure no. 1. Scores for communication techniques used via social networking platforms



As shown in **Figure no. 1**, for all techniques analyzed, the highest score was granted to the Informative attribute, followed by the Trust attribute, which means that the perception of users towards the communications received through the online social networks is that they receive significant and trustworthy information.

The lowest scores for each studied attribute were obtained by the e-mail marketing technique, the written messages received within online social networking platforms being perceived by the respondents as less relevant to their

interests, being repeatedly mentioned that they do not find it useful because it was unsolicited.

A closer look at the difference between male participants and female participants reveals that female participants appreciate promotional communication techniques more favorably than men, with the exception of online partnerships (affiliate marketing). The gender differences of the participants are not significant, the scores being close; a quantitative research would be required for a relevant study that differentiates users according to their social and cultural characteristics.

4.4. Studying Motivations and Intentions

In order to determine the characteristics of the messages that lead to user responses within online social networks (objective no.4) and to determine the most effective communication techniques in generating favorable responses within online social networks (objective no. 5), the fourth part of the interview begins with the question "What should a promotional message contain to motivate you to seek more information?".

"If the company's message contains relevant information presented briefly, not necessarily in accordance with my own needs, it may interest me. Keywords like "new", "now," "limited time only" would certainly make me hurry to interact with that company". (female, 24 years old, Lawyer)

"A minimum of information relevant to my activities, to identify something I want". (female, 23 years, Economist)

"It should identify a need or a desire or make me discover I need something. Maybe I do not need a new book on my mobile phone, but I'm always curious to see what has happened and what my friends have read on the Internet, I click on most of them to see what they're reading". (male, 23 years, Engineer)

Most of the answers suggest identifying a need, a call to action, or providing an incentive. At the same time, the presence of key attributes such as "relevant", "informative", "useful", alongside traits such as "fun" or "funny", is noticed. The overall picture of the online social network as a communication channel has been described with positive attributes, while "informative" occupies the first position, showing that users primarily regard the social network as an unilateral channel of information and that their main online activity is that of obtaining information.

The next question concerns the intention to pass on the information received from the company via online social networks and has been formulated as follows: What motivates you to share a promotional message within the online social network? As a general observation gained through interviews, selected users indicated a low level of online interaction with companies and the transmission of commercial messages to other users.

"The interest that a message confers me at the time. There would still be the confidence previously gained in the products / services offered by the company,

or the usefulness of the message to those to whom I distribute the information”. (female, 22 years, Economist)

“Usually a communication message made in an unusual, funny or very relevant manner for my interests or close friends”. (male, 23 years, engineer)

“If I received the message on the recommendation of a trusted person and it seemed interesting to me or I know someone who would benefit from it, I would probably post it further, but I generally do not recommend posting funny videos. I went to a show after seeing a few scenes on the theater profile page, and I sent my friends the link to convince them to go, it was something new and interesting”. (female, 22 years, Economist)

The most common case of interaction between users in relation to marketing communication was related to hobbies and leisure activities, the search for information, or association with the intention of buying products (in this particular order), followed by recommendations or information received from third parties. Sources of information about third parties are referred to as recommendations from a friend through social media and well-known brands present within the social network.

In order to determine what the influence factors of the intention to become loyal to a company, the question has been asked: After interacting with companies online, what motivates you to become loyal to a company?. In many cases, during the interview we noticed the intention to become loyal to a brand as correlated with the consent to receive messages within the social media platform.

“I become loyal to a brand or a company only when it exceeds my expectations when it no longer requires comparison to others”. (female, 24 years old, Lawyer)

“Relevant, informative messages and previous experience of buying quality products and services”. (male, 23 years, Engineer)

“The quality of the products or services, the attractiveness and usefulness of the information posted on the Facebook page and the feedback provided by those who manage the page, especially for service companies”. (female, 22 years, Economist)

Summarizing the observations, the presence of companies in online social networks should be strengthened with the right mix of online marketing techniques. [Karimzadehgan, (2009)] Concerning the intention to become loyal, the same four positive attributes of the message were mentioned, and in the long-term vision, most respondents mention expectations regarding the product or service marketed being met or exceeded as motivation to become loyal. In addition, respondents who showed loyalty towards a particular brand or company within the social network also showed greater availability and interest in receiving messages from said company.

In the final part of the interviews, we presented to the respondents the case of a new online company (online bookstore) wishing to present their offer to students. Respondents were asked to choose their preferred communication tool within the online social network and their favorite means of receiving information from companies. Most respondents chose public posts in social networks and recommendations from trusted sources, either companies or acquaintances, followed by communication through entertainment videos, banner communication, animations, personal messages occupying the last place.

Furthermore, for each technique, respondents were asked what their first action would be, upon noticing the company's message.

With regard to alternatives resulting from public relations via online social media, respondents generally declare message views and intent to search for additional information. Three respondents, however, stated the possibility of not observing or ignoring the company's message.

Regarding recommendations from companies and other opinion makers (specialized websites, friends, relatives, etc.), the answers indicate an intention to search for additional information, all respondents declaring a strong interest in viewing the message.

Regarding e-mail marketing (or social networking messaging service), respondents say they prefer the social networking messaging service to classic e-mail promotion.

With regard to interactive promotional messages via online social networks, respondents generally disagree with or ignore this form of communication.

"It is not very convenient because it tends to stand in the way of what I really want to do on the social network; they usually do not interest me, but I'm accustomed to stop paying attention". (female, 22, Economist)

As far as viral marketing (videos, animations, music, images, etc.) within online social networks is concerned, most respondents show their intention to get additional information and to pass on the information, generally if the message also has an entertainment characteristic.

"I would view it and probably look for that company, I like to be aware of the messages that become viral, I usually share them". (male, 23 years, engineer)

"If it is a video, animation, or anything else that would imply an action on my part, I would ignore the message, it's not useful to me. If it were something static, the message might interest me". (female, 22 years, Lawyer).

Upon reflection, we chose the term "viral marketing", although researchers tend to use "viral marketing" and "viral advertising" interchangeably, [Kaikati et. al., (2004)] whereas others treat them separately, considering viral marketing a framework that encompasses electronic word-of-mouth strategies aimed at encouraging brand-related online peer-to-peer communication. [Golan, (2008)]

According to the respondents, viral marketing is the most enjoyable communication technique in online social networks. Viral marketing is perceived as a more entertaining and informative technique and is also capable of either creating the desired outcome of the viral recommendation or being easily ignored.

5. Conclusion

As a general observation gained through the interview, selected users are avid users of social platforms and already have a daily routine that includes at least 2 hours of browsing.

All respondents bought something in the online environment, and the most frequent answers were travel tickets, electronics and clothing, but they did not wish to stay connected to a vendor or to receive subsequent commercial offers. From the observations, users are more inclined to receive information about their hobbies or things they are interested in.

Updating the company profile within online social networking platforms must be done concurrently with the optimization of the company website, to avoid the loss of position in organic listings and the loss of website visibility.

Public relations activities within online social networks are favored, being mentioned in terms of user involvement in the communication process, especially in the case of participation in consumer opinion events and interactions and post-acquisition assessments. Students are some of the most active users of social networks, and respondents in the present case are master students, who appreciate having fun receiving communications from companies through online PR techniques. Online public relations is favored in B2C communication due to the entertainment factor and also because they are not seen as direct communication with companies, but rather as a social activity and involvement in events.

Respondents choose affiliate marketing as the most technically trusted form of marketing communication. For the participants, the most common example of online partnership was the voucher traders. The online partnership received the highest average scores, and is perceived as: "useful", "trustworthy" and "informative." The communication presented through this technique attracts visitors to the company profile within the social network, which then tracks the information and checks it.

Affiliate marketing techniques have earned the highest scores on positive attributes: credible, informative, trustworthy and useful, and lowest scores for negative attributes. These sets of techniques are most conducive to attracting customers thanks to a third party that mediates communication and provides clear and accurate information.

The results show that online advertising has the highest average negative scores for almost every attribute. Most of the respondents had negative responses to online advertising and the joint response was "disruptive" with regard to this

technique. Although research has shown that today's online ads are designed to be relevant to the social platform user's interests and are even tailored to users' needs, interviewees consider online advertising to be an easy-to-ignore online marketing technique, not disturbing. These can be a sign of saturation for regular online advertising; users are bothered by it, but they have learned to ignore it.

E-mail marketing is mentioned as the preferred way to receive B2C communication but at the same time seems to disturb receivers, due to the volume and frequency of information being transmitted. Within the online social network, the acceptability of direct communication through the messaging service increases, due to the ability to filter the requested information automatically. In fact, respondents do not seem to trust direct communication, unless they are mediated via a third party - a recommendation from another user or an independent website as an opinion maker. This may be due to the massive amount of information available - they use the socialization platform and filter the information they are exposed to, or direct their short-term attention to the recommendations from trusted sources.

In terms of online low-priced online marketing techniques, interactive advertising is not favored by any of the respondents, due to the obvious association with intrusive communication techniques from companies to consumers in any form of advertising (pop-ups, banners, text ads, etc.). These communication techniques are ignored by online users and are regarded as disruptive. Clearly, an alternative to online advertising is found in viral marketing, which was rated by the respondents as "fun". Since the viral component is present in the spread of this type of communication, trust and relevance can attract users into generating positive responses.

The study has confirmed the theory presented on the topic and supports the profile of a new social consumer who is always connected to the Internet to stay up to date with or relate to other people through social media. Despite this need to be connected, consumers do not regard the social network as a communication channel for companies. Online social networking users are seen as passive in B2C communication, but they are aware of this. For marketers as initiators of communication, it is very important to note that most respondents understand advertising as communication received from companies. They feel overwhelmed with information, but they are very receptive when they receive something they are interested in. Due to the frequency and amount of information they receive through social media, consumers are more confident in the online social platform as a communications media and find it more suitable for direct B2C communication than other circumstances. For practitioners, the fact that the online social network is seen as a B2C communication channel but also favored by online consumers means that consumers are aware of B2C communication but are

trying to avoid it. Clearly, Internet presence should be strengthened, but with the right mix of online marketing techniques.

Online marketing techniques that have achieved high scores for most of the positive attributes are online public relations and viral marketing, but there is no need to limit their recommendations, given that the environment, budget, customers, and so on of companies must influence the decision of any trader. Instead, important attributes have been observed that should be present in any B2C communication context. When referring to communication, respondents put a great emphasis on the informational character and source credibility, and this accent put the aforementioned online techniques.

In any online marketing strategy, attributes such as informative, useful or entertaining must be present, and communication must be made through sources customers trust, because regardless of the set of online techniques, user attraction and involvement will be facilitated. The results also confirm previous studies [Saadé, (2006) Venkatesh, (2000)] claiming that emotional factors affect perceived ease of use and perceived enjoyment. Therefore, online marketing professionals should design company social media presence with exciting elements that involve the user and generate positive emotions. However, a broader, quantitative study of the role of the user's socio-demographic characteristics in shaping their attitudes and intentions towards marketing practices used in online social networks is needed to substantiate specific social media strategies.

The present qualitative study also suggests other research directions. For example, future studies may address the relationship between social media consumption and acceptance of marketing communication by users in the context of the online social network. As social media becomes more and more personalized, users of these media are increasingly reluctant to accept communication messages. As a result, user control in the communication process becomes very important in the development of new communication platforms as well as in conceptualizing new communication strategies.

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