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Marketing communication instruments used by the retail chain on the Internet

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Abstract. The aim of this paper is to examine the increasing effectiveness of marketing communication in an online environment usage by retailers. The methodology used in the article is based on literature research and Internet resources since those are the most up-to-date information about retailers marketing strategies in Poland. The content of Internet sites and social media profiles was analyzed. The main focus was also kept on the actions that were to result in the increase of private label potential, which is still perceived in Poland as a 'cheaper replacement' of a brand product, meanwhile the skillful usage of available online tools could result in a significant image improvement without high expenses. The retailers are just starting to utilize the potential of social media, although the provided content is not really diversified.

Introduction

The global media landscape has undergone a huge transformation in recent years and with the emergence of social media (referred to as consumer-generated media), tools and strategies for communicating with customers have changed

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considerably (Mangold, Faulds, 2009, p. 357).With the rapid evolution of digital media, the new opportunities for marketing have been created since technology affects not only the way people communicate, but also the type of messaging strategy that organizations are using (Tanner, Raymond, 2012, p. 357). Today, marketing managers can no longer rely completely on a single marketing communication tool, and must choose the right mix of them, from wide and diverse channels through which to send marketing communications to customers (Danaher, Rossiter, 2011, pp. 6−7).

Marketing communication is one of the most stimulating areas in modern marketing (Egan, 2007, p. 15). Challenges of modern market require more and more promotional actions that can be only fulfilled by dialog and interactivity between business and environment (Wiktor, 2013, p. 7). Business provides promotional and informal actions (as well as the means that allows registering and passing the feedback information back), while consumers contribute with the structure of their needs backed by their buying force (Pilarczyk, Waśkowski, 2010, p. 21). Further on, the definition of marketing communication will be interpreted as "the different means that are used by firms to inform and prompt consumers about product and brand" (Kotler, Keller, 2012, p. 510).

The analysis of Internet communication

The social media era gives opportunities to keep a competitive position thanks to the possibility of reaching new customers. This trend influences people's attitudes towards marketing campaigns (Fidelman, 2014, p. 28). The opportunity for novel forms of consumer interaction and the unlimited scope of consumer markets makes social media an attractive alternative or complement to the traditional marketing channels (Coursaris, van Osch, Balogh, 2016, p. 6). This phenomena have transferred into professional practice and academia (Khang, Ki, 2012). Highly popular social media applications attract hundreds of millions of users worldwide, who spend a substantial part of their time on these media daily (sometimes it has become a standard element of their social life − especially among young and middle generation users) so the networking opportunities have opened a whole new domain of peer interaction of social and commercial nature (Drzazga, 2013, p. 107).

Marketing communication has experienced many changes in the recent years (Bajdak, 2013, p. 7). Digital technologies are more and more common, and they appear as a useful tool which opens new, up to this time not reachable, possibilities of actions (Maciąg, 2012, p. 7). The new quality of marketing communication process allows a user not only to consume data, but also to contribute to improving it, since it is not restricted by any economic, social, or political barrier (Kramer,

2013, p. 11). However, media availability, multiplicity, and complexity may result in effective customer message delivery difficulties (Brzozowska-Woś, 2012).

In the face of increasing private label popularity in Europe, the research of retailers marketing activities was conducted. The retailer selection was based on "Top Brand" research made by "Press" and "Press-Service Media Monitoring." The most popular firms in "Retailer chain" category in 1.07.2014−30.06.2015 timeframe were chosen. The ranking of retailers by the number of publications posted online is presented in Figure 1. The first three firms were also the most popular in social media and discussions forums, which are becoming the retailers' natural environment (only on Wizaz.pl forum the analyzed brands were mentioned 19,072 times in one year).
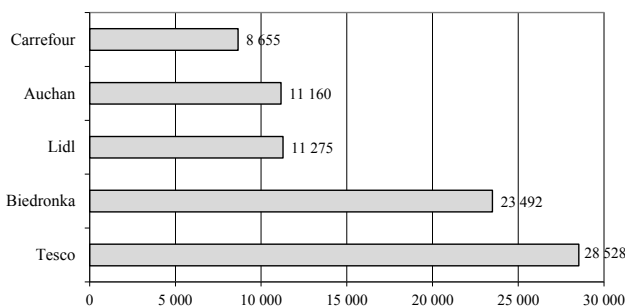

Figure 1. Number of Internet posts concerning particular retailers
Source: own elaboration based on Top Brand 2015 (*Badanie…*, 2016).

Social media

The significance of social media in both practical and academic environment suggests the need for the examination of the current state of social media research content. This study contains the analysis of materials published by the retailers. Last year, nearly half of the companies were using this tool not only for marketing purposes, but also for trade partner communication (*Społeczeństwo…,* 2015). Social media are more and more used in business. According to GUS research, in 2015 in Poland the Internet connection was available for 75.8% of households. Moreover, "We are social media" report reveals that 13 million of Polish people were active social media users. The most widely used services were: Facebook (35% users), Google + (19%), Twitter (10%), Nk.pl (10%), Instagram, Pinterest, Linkedin, and Badoo (5%).Polish retailers are not aware how to effectively use this form

of customer communication dialog yet (however, their foreign profiles are updated currently and have much more likes; e.g. for UK Tesco − almost 2 million, Lidl − 1.5 million). Finding official profiles on Facebook was difficult. Biedronka and Auchan do not have official fanpages, but only unofficial profiles started by users in order to display promotional deals. Pages of remaining retailers are up to date, and moderators answer to each negative comment and react immediately (they redirect users to the info line or contact form). The increasing user interest in a promotion deal has an impact on the number of comments or resource shares. Only two retailers are putting pressure on a private label product promotion, advising users to use them while preparing meals or creating their own recipes based on those products.

Table 1

Retailer's fanpage rating in "Detail and consumer trade" category
by number of likes on Facebook

Fanpage	Likes	Content	Private label promote	Notes
Lidl Polska	972,148	culinary recipes, tips, promotions	very often, mainly *premium* products	appealing dish images, huge feedback from users posting food they bought or prepared
Tesco Polska	561,786	recipes, tips, games, theme actions	deficiency	single offers, questions to users about their buying preferences
Carrefour Polska	398,399	recipes, contests, tips	mainly in recipes – all of the ingredients	esthetic graphic, interesting content, a lot of positive comments
Biedronka	Informal site (based on Fb users' interests. It is neither associated with the company nor initiated by the people connected with it. Information based on Wikipedia (9,268 likes). However, there is an actual Biedronka's special offers fanpage on Facebook (community – 21,411 likes), last update: August 2015.			
Auchan	Informal site. Lack of Polish fanpage. There are individual hypermarkets fanpages (e.g. Auchan Komorniki − 557 likes, Auchan Swadzim − 199 likes) – messages posted by users only.			

Source: own elaboration as of 19 February 2016.

Social marketing requires not only preparing the well-conceived marketing strategy, but also using a proper tool, adapted to users' needs and expectations. There were difficulties in finding official pages, because most of the retailers did not place links to their social media profiles on the official website. When analyzing the three most popular among users services, only one company was using all of these communication channels. Detailed information is presented in Table 2. Biedronka was noted, however, there is no information about the profile on official Internet site, so there is no certainty that it is the official page.

Table 2

Retailers social media accounts rating

Google+			
Page	Observers	Views	Content
Tesco Polska	81	224,405	recipes from brand website only, attractive food photos, private label products offer
Carrefour Polska	8	85,414	outdated promotional clips only (14 posts)
Instagram			
Page	Observers	Posts	Content
Smaczna Strona Tesco	975	494	attractive food photos, contests, tips
Lidl Polska	18,200	163	esthetic food photos, premium products, questions about favorite users' products
Carrefour Polska	94	8	fit food preparing incentives

Twitter				
Page	Observers	Tweets	Likes	Content
Smaczna Strona Tesco	8,624	14,900	8,673	kitchen tips, culinary recipes
Lidl Polska	413	8	240	events and charity campaigns
Biedronka	146	28	0	brand website links only

Source: own elaboration as of 22 February 2016.

Pinterest

Another communication channel that allows for a dialog with customers and business promotion is Pinterest − a visual bookmarking tool that helps to discover and save creative ideas; a "catalog of ideas" rather than a social network, that inspires users to "go out and do that thing" (Nusca, 2015). This portal allows users to upload, save, sort, and manage images and other media content (called pins) through collections known as a pinboard. It is a new medium that rapidly gains popularity especially amongst young users, however, the business approach towards it has not been shaped yet (Bilińska-Reformat, Reformat, 2014, p. 211). Most of the firms treat it as 'another service' which is used as the information board where the fashion brand can display catalogues of its cloths whereas the furniture brand − its products (Molęda, 2014). Only two of the analyzed retailers are using this tool. Lidl has 40 thematically arranged pinboards (2,716 pins), full of tasty looking dishes, recipes, CRS activities, advices, inspirations, premium products offers, and many more. Tesco also took on the task, and currently owns 650 pins on 45 boards (mostly recipes from their www site and private label product offers).

YouTube

The most popularity in YouTube service (a free video-hosting website that allows members to store, serve, rate, and comment on video content) have unorthodox activities realized by the retailers, the content that was not displayed in traditional media, and the compilations of the best advertisements selected by users. This form of communication is still developing while the number of official channel displays is gradually growing. The majority of uploaded videos are not very popular and have only few comments. Blocking comments inthe content provided by Auchan is very surprising.

Private label promotion materials were added a few years ago and, basically, were not watched at all. The most views have comparative tests made by independent YouTubers, where products of daily usage of different retailers and brands were compared (e.g. fast crisps test – Biedronka, Lidl, or Tesco with more than 70,000 views, or yoghurt test – more than 19,000 views), or the contrast between private label and brand products has been shown (e.g. great ketchup test – more than 930,000 views, brand bars and their fakes – almost 920,000 views, crisps test – more than 488,000 views).

Table 3

Chosen Polish videos titles in YouTube portal with their views

Clip title	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments
1	2	3	4	5
Tesco channel: 3,619 subscriptions	20,720,810	**Joined 16.08.2011**		
Inemmited Tesco advertisement	2,364,128	12,178	557	1,372
Tesco realizes clients' dreams from Santa Claus	1,984,549	113	14	54
Tesco E-shopping – order and receive	1,359,408	21	7	15
KuchniaLidla.pl channel: 16,113 subscriptions	10,754,668	**Joined 18.04.2012**		
Pawel Malecki recipes – Lidl baker's	426,661	15	2	0
Lidl – Best from Poland, Best from Europe	158,748	223	25	147
Dorota, Karol, and Guests – Lidl's Cuisine	129,510	11	2	3
Biedronka channel: 5,275 subscriptions	6,017,926	**Joined 16.11.2012**		
Biedronka advertisement – all 29 funny ads	2,643,928	4,523	414	663
Biedronka – potatoes	1,028,863	878	103	170
Biedronka's TV song – low prices everyday	503,501	451	178	201
Carrefour Polska channel: 580 subscriptions	1,741,099	**Joined 18.01.2007**		
How to make an ecological Easter basket?	157,672	5	0	1
Carrefour spring super prices! Part one	68,556	4	3	0
School puzzle − part one − Monster High	67,780	0	0	0

1	2	3	4	5
Auchan Polska channel: 18 subscriptions	No info	**Joined 30.04.2013**		
Auchan Plock FlashMob	399,026	122	485	X
Auchan Direct advertisement	338,372	0	0	X
Auchan's birthday – Fish festival	146,951	0	0	0

Explanation: symbol (X) – comments to this video have been blocked

Source: own elaboration as of 18 February 2016.

Websites

Brand websites can be used to communicate with the target groups, and as a platform that enables interaction with or between customers (or the collection of individual customer data). Moreover, brand pages can also form attitudes and enforce the positioning of the brand. Therefore websites are essential to sustain or even increase effectively the loyalty of users, being necessary for the maintenance of communication all year round (Pelesmacker, Geuens, van den Bergh, 2007, p. 496). In the ranking of twenty most popular thematic websites in "Business" category in December 2015, one could find three retailers websites. Table 4 presents a list of the most popular retailer sites compared with the mentioned social media sites.

Table 4

Ranking of the most popular websites in business, community, and culture and entertainment categories in 2015

Position	Name	Real users	Range
Business			
12	lidl.pl	2,405,602	9.85%
13	tesco.pl	2,096,196	8.58%
20	biedronka.pl	1,910,704	7.82%
Community			
1	facebook.com	19,372,845	79.31%
6	twitter.com	3,826,124	15.66%
10	pinterest.com	1,908,815	7.81%
Culture and entertainment			
1	youtube.com	18,946,779	77.57%

Source: own elaboration based on Megapanel PBI/Gemius, 2016.

Currently, the most popular information source about ongoing promotions and theme actions from the customer's point of view is a website. Thus there is a need to verify the content and quality of retailers' webpages. Due to the fact that many customers (mainly young segment) use their smartphones or tablets to surf the Internet, the mobile evaluation criteria according to Zarańska (2014) was used.

In Table 5, the most innovative and useful for customer functionalities are presented. All the pages contain hyperlinks to promotional catalogues, deal of the week, and realized CSR actions, and can be accessed by a mobile device (meeting the customer's needs, because the popularity of smartphones and tablets is rising). There is usually a cooking section (only Auchan does not have one) and a section where offered private label products are displayed (all sites apart from Lidl). Tesco stands out with a Fashion section and its own magazine (Auchan has one too). The online shopping is available only in non-discount store websites.

Table 5

Standing out content of retailer websites

Retailer	Notes
Tesco	fruit and vegetable interesting information, nutritional plan – Healthy Appetite, Expert Opinion Club invitation, kids game – supermarket building
Lidl	information for clients tabs including product films and PDF operating manuals
Biedronka	new products offer, TV advertisement records, users products and packages test program, products films – how to use them creatively
Carrefour	content match for the store format
Auchan	contact application form – Client Opinion (request for comments in order to improve the website)

Source: own elaboration.

When looking at the site quality, all the compared pages are quite similar (only Auchan website is subpar). Tesco and Lidl have nicer graphic design and more multimedia materials, while the interface of Carrefour and Biedronka is more user-friendly. The summary of page analysis is given in Table 6.

Table 6

Subjective ranking of website design and functionality

Retailer	A	I	N	F	G	T	C	E	Sum	Notes
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Tesco	10	8	8	8	7	5	10	10	66	automatic opening of subpages in a new window

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Lidl	10	9	6	8	9	3	10	9	64	very small font and irritating advertisement placement
Biedronka	7	8	8	9	9	4	9	8	62	too many background elements, easy to read tabs
Carrefour	5	8	10	9	6	5	7	8	58	well designed theme blocks
Auchan	4	7	10	9	7	4	3	8	52	easy to find information, only the most important tabs

Explanation: The rank from 1 to 5, where: 1 – very bad, 10 – very good; A – general appearance, I – website intuitiveness, N − navigation, F – functionality, G – comprehensible goal, T – technological site, C – content, E – economical attractiveness

Source: own elaboration.

Summary

The challenges of modern market require the marketing activities that allow to engage into dialog between business and environment. New technologies point to the direction of developing marketing communication, which allows for building a positive and recognizable brand image. Using new technologies is necessary for creating a bound and engaged customer. Communication on the Internet creates a possibility for message individualization and creating relations with selected groups of customers, especially with young buyers, because they unconsciously treat the Internet as an integral part of life, which affects their consumption behavior and their shopping activities on the Internet.

The fast adoption of social media applications by the public has forced companies to take notice of this phenomenon, and discover the massive impact that social media has on their business. Internet-based actions, instead of a big financial contribution, require only involvement and innovative ideas. After the initial analysis, one can see that retailers are barely initiating a real dialog. Only two companies (Lidl and Tesco) are active online and open on communication in social media. Managers should realize that nowadays social media are perceived by a consumer as a more trustworthy source of information regarding products and services than the messages transmitted via traditional ways. Polish retailers usually neglect building the positive private label products image, whereas those are more and more popular in Europe. The lack of communicative actions results in precaution towards those products.

In conclusion, as practical implications, retailers should notice that customers are using new technologies in overwhelming numbers and the substantial part of the customer generated content in social media is about brands, businesses,

and products images. Having the right customer communication idea, companies can employ it to help to understand market trends, identify potential areas of problems, and, finally, create outstanding marketing actions.

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Narzędzia komunikacji marketingowej stosowane przez sieci handlowe w internecie

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja marketingowa, media społecznościowe, sieci handlowe, marki własne

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie wykorzystania przez sieci handlowe funkcjonalności, którą oferują nowe media w celu zwiększenia skuteczności komunikacji marketingowej przedsiębiorstw. Metodologia badawcza wykorzystana w artykule opiera się na przeglądzie literatury oraz źródłach internetowych jako zasobie informacji o najnowszych strategiach marketingowych wybranych sieci handlowych w Polsce. Analizie poddano treści zamieszczone na stronach internetowych sieci oraz na ich portalach społecznościowych. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono także działaniom mającym na celu zwiększenie potencjału marki własnej, która w Polsce wciąż jest postrzegana jako „tańszy zamiennik" produktów markowych, podczas gdy umiejętne zastosowanie narzędzi dostępnych w Internecie pozwoliłoby na zmianę wizerunku produktów marek własnych przy niewielkich nakładach finansowych. Obecnie sieci handlowe zaczynają już wykorzystywać potencjał, jaki oferują media społecznościowe, jednak zamieszczany za ich pośrednictwem przekaz nie jest istotnie zróżnicowany.

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