

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE TWITTER AS A MARKETING TOOL OF CUSTOMER SUPPORT

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the specific aspects of social networking sites as a tool of marketing communication. Regarding evaluation of the direction of the given topic, the article summarises the theoretical outcomes of a social networking sites theme as a part of social media. It describes the current state of using social networking sites as a tool of customer support based on the performed analyses, with its attention being focused on the micro-blogging social network site Twitter. Another aim of the article is to evaluate the options that this topic offers to the marketers and also point out possible issues.

Keywords: E-Marketing, Social Media, Social Networking, Twitter, Customer Support

1. INTRODUCTION

Global trends in online environment are dominated by social networking sites that as a part of the modern social media form a platform which in a sophisticated and efficient way provides space to perform the marketing activities of the companies. Marketers of the companies offering the services or products in the market are beginning to use social networking sites more and more frequently as an effective tool of customer support. One of these sites is the social network Twitter, which has considerably developed during last few years. Although it has started as an ordinary micro-blogging service, it is now considered to be a lively ecosystem with a diverse scale of user communities and brands trying to fully exploit the potential of this platform in order to achieve an effective communication with their target audiences.

2. BASIC THEORETICAL OUTCOMES

Social media represent a phenomenon that has first appeared in the early 21st century, their essence is based on online applications that support the existence of informal user networking sites which enable to generate and share various kinds of digital content such as opinions, attitudes, texts, links, photographs, videos or music. (Karlíček, 2011)

Social media play a significant role in current electronic marketing. Trust put into classical advertising is decreasing, on the other hand the power of Word-of-mouth (good word) is beginning to fully appear

again. This power is intensified by Internet, which allows a return back to the "collective wisdom". (Janouch, 2010)

Social networking sites are unlike social media based on the social bonds that are mutually interconnected. These social ties can have various levels, from the individual (friends, family) to organizational or global (Van Dijk, 2006).

Based on this fact it can be concluded that social networks inherently represent specific categories of social media.

An interesting point of view related to the topic of social networks has Olivier Blanchard (2011), which in his publication states that social networking sites represent a communication tool such as a phone or email, which serves to fulfil the essential corporate functions including public relations, marketing, management, customer service and market research.

Social networking sites as a part of social media generally represent services based on websites that enable individuals to create public or semi- public profile within a closed system, create a list of other users with whom they are connected, see and explore connections that were created by other users within the system. The character and distribution of these connections may vary from website to website. (Boyd - Ellison, 2007)

Based on the stated facts, we can summarise the most important features of social media (Bednar, 2011 - Tredaway, 2011 - Janouch, 2010):

- provide feedback
- social media are not only a source of information, but also a way to exchange and find information, create connections between members of social networks
- they form a place that allows to apply various types of advertising
- they help to acquire new clients
- enable to spread the reputation and positive feedback about the products

The authors Příkladová, Jahodová (2010) describe the current situation and the use of social networking sites and states the following about the other options of marketing withing social networking sites: creating a profile of a brand in selected social networks

- collecting data about users and fans of the product or brand
- creating applications that allow users to come with the ideas that are related to the company or brand
- cooperation with the most active blogger or debater (mutually beneficial),
- monitoring attitudes and opinions in discussion forums
- uploading suitable videos and photographs on YouTube and other websites with shared content
- creating discussion forums and contributing to them
- creating a corporate blog
- publishing special press releases for the area of social networks

As author Dunda (2011) stated, in practice there are certain situations in which social networking sites help us to save time, obtain and process information, which we would not obtain within a reasonable time with the use of just conventional tools. Sharing these values offers companies the way to promote their products and services not only to the general public but also specific people, knowing that there exists a high probability that they would welcome the given offer.

3. CUSTOMER SUPPORT WITHIN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

It is not news that social networking sites influence the way in which we spend time in online environment. Analysis of the company Experian Marketing Services (2013) which was focused on online users of the Internet in the U.S., UK and Australia, and their behavior for the period of the year 2012 points out to the fact that 27 % of time spent online is devoted to the social networks. Social networking sites are currently used worldwide by nearly every fourth person on earth with over 1.73 billion users. There is also an obvious trend of increase of the user base, with its YOY increase in 2013 predicted to be at 18.00 %. It is important to note that 67.70 % of Internet users worldwide in 2013 has used social networking sites services at least once a month, with predictions for year 2017 assuming that 78.80 % of internet users will use social networking sites services at least once a month. As it is clear by observing Figure 1, the increase of the number of social networking sites users has decreasing trend. On the other hand, it does not change the fact that the estimated number of users of social networking sites for 2017 is predicted to be at approximately 2.55 billion users. (eMarketer, 2013)

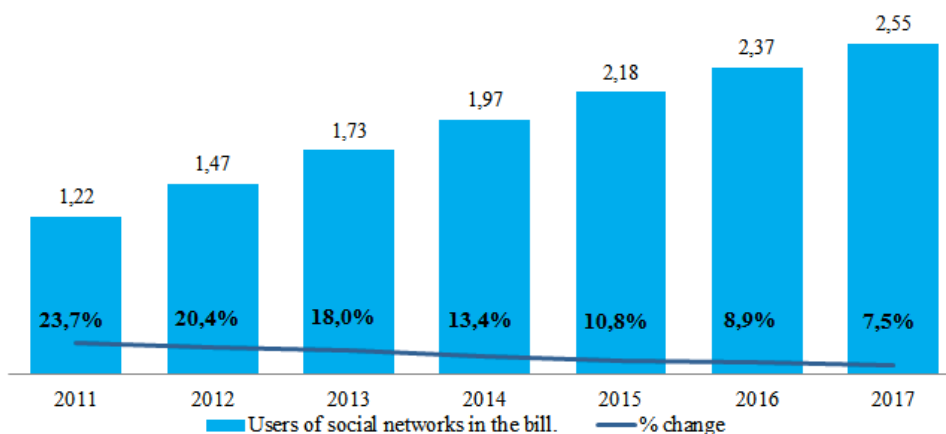


Figure 1 The number of users of social networks globally

Source: Own work based on eMarketer.com

Results of the analysis of the company Fishburn Hedges and Echo (McNaughton, 2012) published in July 2012, responded to the question whether social networking sites form an appropriate and effective communication channel with existing or potential clients. The published analysis states that annually more than 18 million customers in the UK communicated with the brands through social networking sites. With the opinion that social media represent a better form of communication than traditional phone conversation with a call-center worker agreed 65 % of the interviewed clients who have used the form of communication through social networking sites.

Another benefit of social networking sites as a relevant communication tool in the area of customer support are also the results of a survey of a marketing agency Conversocial (2013) published in October 2013, mainly investigating customer support within an environment of social networking sites. Published data point out that 81 % of the top 100 online sellers respond to stimuli of customer support through the social network Twitter. At the same time almost identical number- 80 % of the companies communicates ideas of customer support through the social network Facebook. An interesting discovery is that 50 % of retailers would close the complaint (issue that is being discussed) directed to the

customer support within an environment of a social network, without directing the problem further and involving the responsible department or workers.

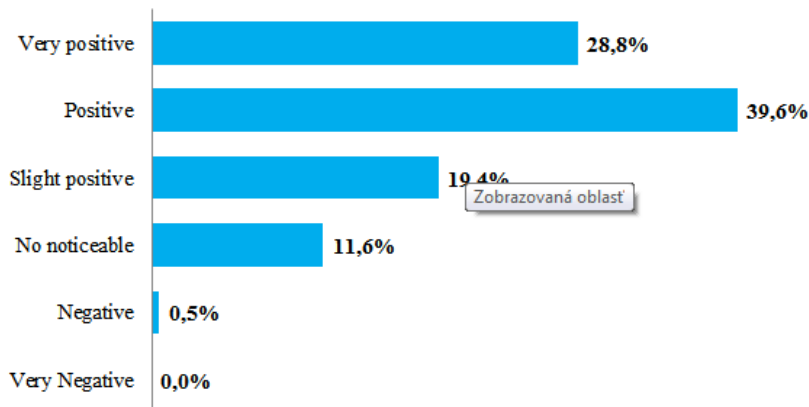
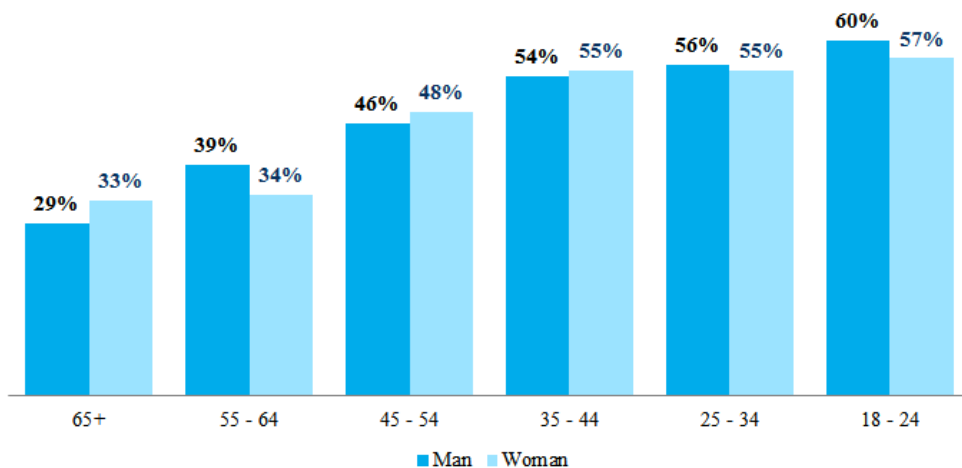


Figure 2 An influence of social networks on customer support
Source: Own work based on Heiligman - Lieu, 2013

Trend of using social networking sites as a relevant tool of marketing communication within the area of customer support is also confirmed by the results of research performed by Social Media Today and SAP (Heiligman - Lieu, 2012), where from the 118 surveyed companies 71.20 % stated that their company is actively using social networking sites as a tool for customer support. Within this group of respondents, more than 65 % of companies responded that they perceive the impact of social networking sites on customer support positively or very positively. 0.5 % of the respondents stated that social networking sites have a negative impact on their customer service (see Figure 2).



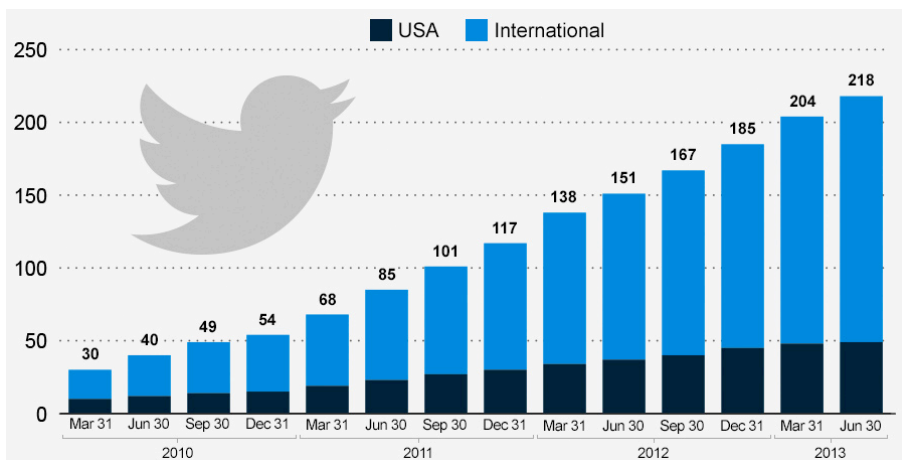
Graph 3 The use of social networking sites as a tool of customer support according to age
Source: Own work based on NM Incite (2012)

Above described trends and matters are followed by the results of research by NM Incite (2012), observing the implementation of research and analyses within the media, focusing on the use of social media as a tool for customer support. The results of the research point out to the fact (see Figure 3) that more than 50 % of the surveyed respondents (2,000 respondents from the United States), all within the age group 18-44 years have used online social media as a tool for customer support.

4. SOCIAL NETWORK TWITTER

At first, Twitter does not represent a classical model of social networking sites, but it is a popular micro-blogging platform in the form of sharing short messages "Tweets" with the maximum length of 140 characters between the users who follow your Twitter profile.

Social networking site Twitter with more than 500 million registered users (Semiocast.com, 2013), with 215 million monthly (MAP) and 100 million daily active users (DAP) (as of Oct. 2013) is the second most popular social networking site in ranking (Protalinski, 2013). The mentioned ranking is dominated by the social networking site Facebook, which with more than 1.11 billion monthly active users (MAP) and more than 665 million daily active users (DAP) represents the world's most widespread social networking site (Constine, 2013).



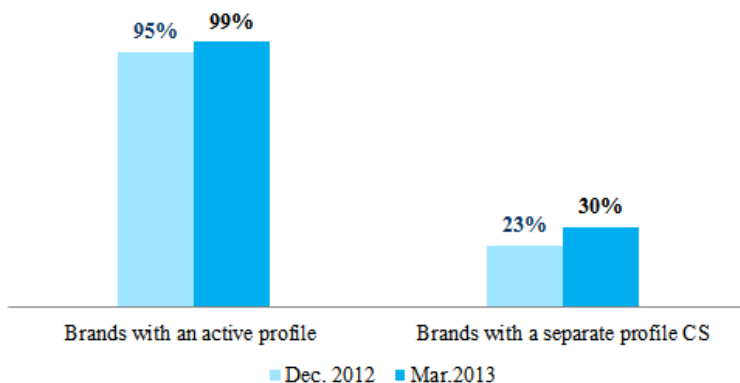
Graph 4 The number of monthly active users on the social networking site Twitter
Source: Statista.com, 2013

A closer observation of the age structure of the social networking site Twitter is provided by an analysis of the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project (2013). The results of the analysis describe overall observed period from November 2010 until May 2013, whereby the data related to the period of year 2013 are built on the responses of 1,895 respondents living in the U.S., which had been collected during the months of April-May 2013. As stated, the fastest growing and the largest age group within the social networking site Twitter are users within the age range 18 to 29 years. Based on the stated data, it is possible to conclude that in all the observed age groups except for a group of users aged 65 + during the period between November 2010 and May 2013 has been recorded an increase of more than 100 %.

The country with the most users in a social networking site Twitter are the United States with a share of 24.3 %, followed by Japan with 9.3 % share which represents 38.27 % of the share of the United States. Regarding Europe, the ranking is dominated by the United Kingdom (4.3 %), followed by Spain (4.3 %), Russia (2.6 %) and France (2.1 %). Countries with a share of less than 1.9 % in an absolute ranking represent 26 % (Richter, 2013). Regarding the comparison in the case of evaluation of penetration (for this purpose the penetration means the value of monthly active users of the social networking site Twitter to the number of internet users in general), the United States (11 %) ranked only as the number eight. Ranking is dominated by Saudi Arabia (33 %), Indonesia (19 %), Spain (14 %) and the UK (12 %). (Richter, 2013b)

5. THE MEANING OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE TWITTER AS A TOOL OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

The significance of the social networking site Twitter as a tool of customer support is confirmed by the analysis of Simple Measured (2013) which during a period of the first quarter of 2013 evaluated the implementation of customer support on a social networking site Twitter within the top 100 global brands based on the ranking of the company Interbrand (2013). The results of the analysis indicate that as of March 2013, 99 % of brands actively communicated through their profiles with their fans, what in comparison with the period of December 2013 represents an increase of 4.2 % (see Figure 6). 30 % of brands in March 2013 in addition to the main profile also owned a profile specialised for addressing the complaints and the problems of the customers (see Figure 6). Another significant fact is that compared to the period of December 2013 within the observed variable, there is an increase of brands with the profile specialised for customer support by 30.4 %.



Graf 6 Share of the brands with Twitter profile and a specialised Twitter profile for the purpose of customer support

Source: Own work based on Simple Measured (2013)

Apart of that, analysis (Simple Measured, 2013) further shows that only 10 % of brands implementing customer service within an environment of social networking site Twitter is able to answer more than 70 % of stimuli - tweets (see Figure 7). In this case, it is important to state that some "tweets" of the users do not represent actual stimuli but an accompanying communication, which therefore does not require the response of the brand.

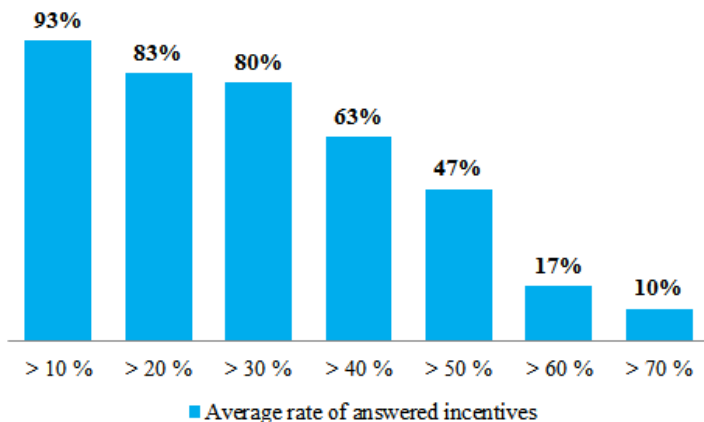


Figure 7 The average rate of answered initiatives directed at the profiles of the brands
Source: Own work based on Simple Measured (2013)

However, in our opinion, in terms of building a positive image, it is necessary to reply to every initiative regardless of whether it is more or less relevant. Observing the data from a broader perspective (Simple Measured, 2013), the analysis indicates that the average response rate during the period of first quarter of 2013 was 42 %. In the case of the observed variable response times of the brand to the stimuli from the users the average response time of 5.1 hours was achieved (Measured Simple, 2013). As Figure 8 states, only 10 % of the observed brands was on average able to respond to the users within one hour of receiving their message. It is essential to state that the enormous amount of the messages that is necessary to process, in the case of the top global brands is caused by the fact that it is not possible to respond to all these messages in a relevant way and within a reasonable time.

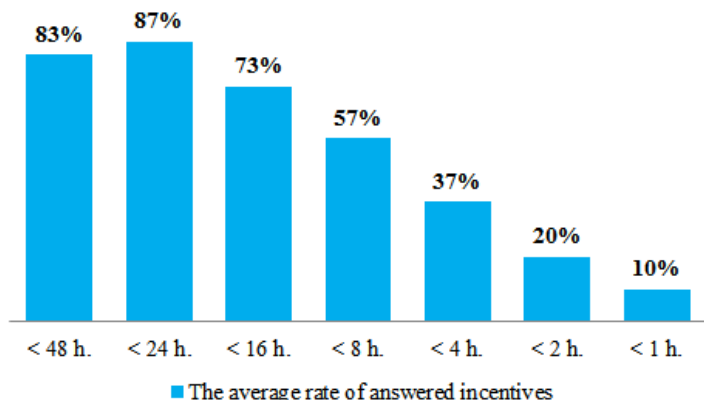


Figure 8 Reaction time of answering messages directed to the profiles of brands
Source: Own work based on Simple Measured (2013)

The relevance of specific departments of customer support brands in an environment of social networking sites is generally confirmed by the fact that 42 % of social media users expect a reply of the customer support within one hour (Baer, 2013). In the case of an analysis of the author Bellegghema (2013), which was performed on a sample of 2,450 respondents from different corners of the world, the

share of customers expecting a relevant response to their message through the social networking site Twitter until 4 hours was represented by 54 %.

6. CONCLUSION

Global brands now begin to realise that mere presence on social networking sites is no longer sufficient. Current trends or results of the analyses (McNaughton, 2012; Conversocial, 2013 Pew Research Center 's Internet & American Life Project, 2013 Simple Measured, 2013 Baer, 2013 Belleghem, 2013) prove that the implementation of customer support or even the existence of specific profiles for customer support of the brands on the social networks is now more than a competitive advantage. We dare to state that it is in some cases even essential. Generally, it applies that through the profiles and pages on social networking sites in order to build relationships with customers is possible to get and create a community of fans of the given brand. Page or profile of the brand in turn creates a space which enables users to effectively and immediately communicate all relevant activities. Therefore, it is possible apply a system of functioning social networks within the customer support on the model of public management, where the target group is not formed by potential and existing clients but the population of the region itself. Twitter profile of regional government would therefore as a communication channel in our opinion represent a suitable complement of the communication mix of the given organisation. Together with classical and established forms of communication with the citizens, it would represent an innovative and flexible channel which would solve the general questions of the citizens. Social networking sites in relation to customer support should be perceived as a part of building a positive image and at the same time the relationship between the customer and the brand or organisation. Implementation of customer support allows a flexible way to react to the stimuli, questions and issues without compromising the reputation of the brand.

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