

# New approaches to customer support in terms of online internet environment

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**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to describe specific aspects of social media and networking as a marketing communication tool. In assessing the direction of the issue the article summarizes the theoretical background of the issue of social networks as a part of social media. Based on analyzes of the current situation the article describes the use of social networks and their use as a tool for customer support. In this respect the article focuses on globally popular social networks like Facebook and micro-blogging social network Twitter. Another aim of the article is to evaluate the opportunities this issue brings for marketers while pointing out the pitfalls.

**Keywords:** trends; customer support; business; social networks; e-marketing

**JEL Classification:** M30; M31

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## 1. Introduction

It is not necessary to emphasize that current trends in the online environment of the Internet favor social networks. Social networks can be seen as a part of modern social media. These social networks are a platform that provides efficient and sophisticated space to carry out marketing activities of companies and organizations. Marketing staff of companies that provide services or offer products on the market is increasingly starting to use social networks as an effective tool for customer support. Companies' profiles on social networks are a forum for discussion of users about their popular brand, and, conversely, social networks offer companies an effective platform, one might conclude that it is a communication channel, for the implementation of marketing communication in the online environment. Companies providing services or selling products are increasingly starting to use profiles on popular social networks as a form of direct communication with their customers and potential customers. It is now possible to follow a trend where these organizations are starting to use these profiles as a tool for customer support in a great extent.

## 2. Literature review

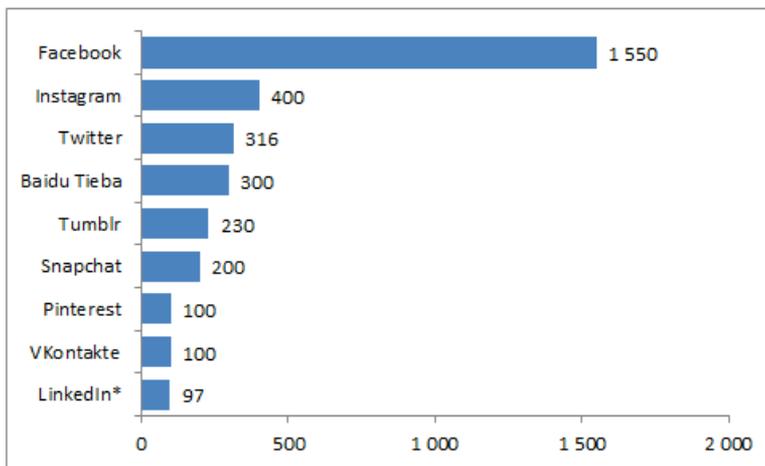
Web 2.0 offers technologies and tools that allow users to express their views directly in real time, i.e. online. We call them social media. These social media, including social networks, are different from the classical mainstream media. On social media everybody can generate content or comment on it. Social media can have a text format or an audio/ video format or they can even be in a form of images and other visual forms that connect communities of people (Scott 2010). According to Kurtz (2010) social media as a set of internet applications allow you to create and share content among users. These are media that are designed for social interaction and include and shape new trends and applications. Karliček (2011) in this context notes that social media is a phenomenon that emerged in the early 21st century, and its essence are on-line applications that support the creation of informal networks and allow the user to generate and share various digital content such as opinions, texts, links, photos, videos or music. The nature of social media in terms of customer support is described by Janouch (2010), who argues that social media play a very important role in today's electronic marketing. It should be stressed that power of traditional advertising is declining and word-of-mouth form of advertising is gaining power again. This situation is from the point of view of customer support considered relevant. According to Kurtz (2010) the cooperation with the online community in terms of social media brings in benefits in the form of customers' views, ideas and knowledge on subjects, which go far beyond complaints about products or services. Social media fundamentally altered how businesses communicate with other organizations, communities and individuals. It should be explained that social networks as a part of social media in general are a service-based websites that allow individuals to create a public or semi-public profile within a closed system, establish a list of other users with whom they are related, see and examine the connection established by other users within the system. The nature and distribution of these connections may differ from web site to web site (Boyd - Ellison 2007). Blanchard (2011) in this regard states that social networks are a communication tool similar to a phone or email, which is used for stem corporate functions including public relations, marketing, management, customer service and market research. Stern (2011) argues that the above definitions can be expanded. He states that social media represent everything that allows anyone to communicate with anyone, in other words, the user-generated content distributed via easily accessible internet tools. The nature and possibilities of social networking allows businesses to use a variety of marketing activities which can be applied in the context of customer support. According to Bednar (2011) the most important are the following:

- Pre-sales product/service support services – advertising focused on a product or service, familiarizing people with its general characteristics,
- After-sales support – problem solving and communication with clients, provision of necessary service,
- Problem solving and crisis communication - focuses on customer issues relating to the business; in the case of crisis communicate relevant information to target groups in order to reduce the impact of the crisis on the image of the business.

## 3. The current state of issue

Social networks as a part of modern social media have been affecting our online time for a long time. This fact is underlined by the results of the analysis conducted by Statista (2015a). The analysis, the results of which were

published in August 2015, examined the most popular global social networks in terms of the number of monthly active users. Based on the results of the above analysis, the social network Facebook dominates with 1,550 million of monthly active users. The second place belongs to Instagram, a social network focused on sharing photos, with 400 million of monthly active users. It is worth noting that the social networking site Twitter, also known as micro-blogging service, achieved during the reporting period 316 million monthly active users. Another popular and phone-only social network that is placed at the front positions is Snapchat – a website that shares short videos between its users. As a surprise comes professional social network LinkedIn with 97 million monthly active users.



**Figure 1. Number of active users of social networks globally on 08-2015 (in millions)**

The results of the survey conducted by the marketing agency Conversocial (2013) published in October 2013 also favor the view that social networks are a relevant communication tool in terms of customer support. Published data indicate that 81 % of the top 100 online retailers respond to customer's queries through the social network Twitter. Nearly 80 % of businesses deal with the customer support through the social network Facebook. Interestingly enough, 50 % of retailers solve the complaint (problem solving) in an environment of social network without redirecting it to the department or responsible employees.

From a demographic point of view social networks are definitely varied. The results of the analysis of Pew Research Center (Statista 2015b), see Figure 2, speak of the growing interest of adult Internet users in social networking sites. The analysis in question provides an overview of the development of the share of social network users in the United States above the age of 18 years. As Figure 2 indicates, the proportion of adult social network users in 2015 accounted for 76 %. When comparing the proportion of adult users between 2010 and 2015, we can see a growth of 24.59 %, representing a value of 15 percentage points. When comparing the proportion of adult users between 2005 and 2015, the proportion increased by 950 % from 8 % in 2005 to 76 % in 2015.

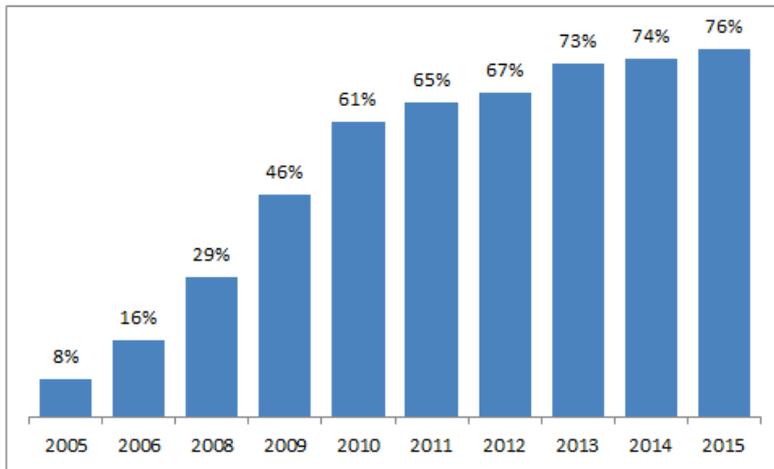


Figure 2. The share of adult Internet users in the United States using social networks

The motivation of businesses behind their use of social networks is explained by the analysis conducted by the Office for National Statistics (Statista 2015c). This analysis focused on businesses operating in the UK in 2012. The results of the analysis showed that the main reason why businesses use social networks is the need to build their image or to place their products on the market (33.10%). For 23.40% of the businesses the main reason why they use social networks is a feedback from/ to their customers or potential customers. This activity can be characterized as a form of customer support (Figure 3).

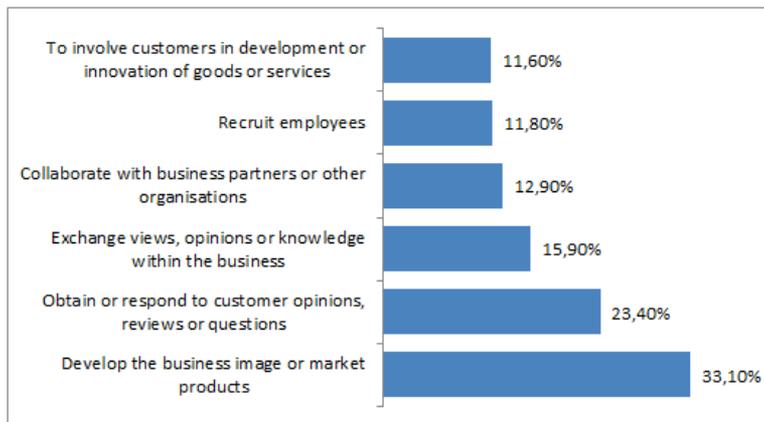


Figure 3. The reasons leading to the use of social media by businesses in the UK in 2012

Socialbakers's analysis (Ross 2015) which focused on the issue of customer support in the area of social network Facebook provides another interesting viewpoint. The most significant finding in the analysis is the percentage of users' questions answered by businesses on Facebook in Q2 2015. The figure states 76%. As stated in the relevant Figure 4, the figures grew by an annual rate of 13.43%, i.e. 9 percentage points. Interestingly enough, in Q4 2011 only 5% of user questions were answered on Facebook (Figure 4).

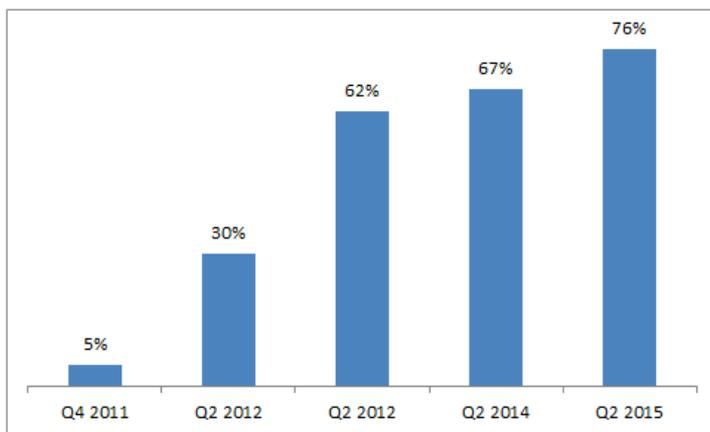


Figure 4. The proportion of answered users' question on Facebook.

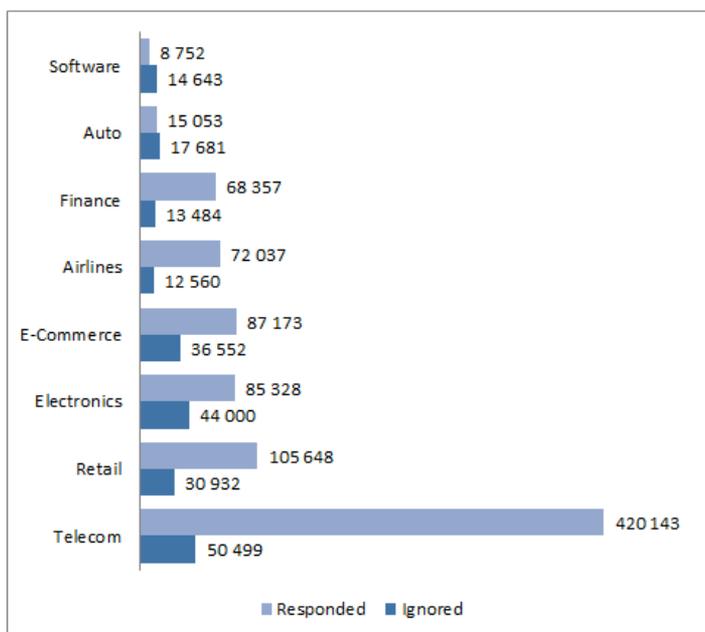
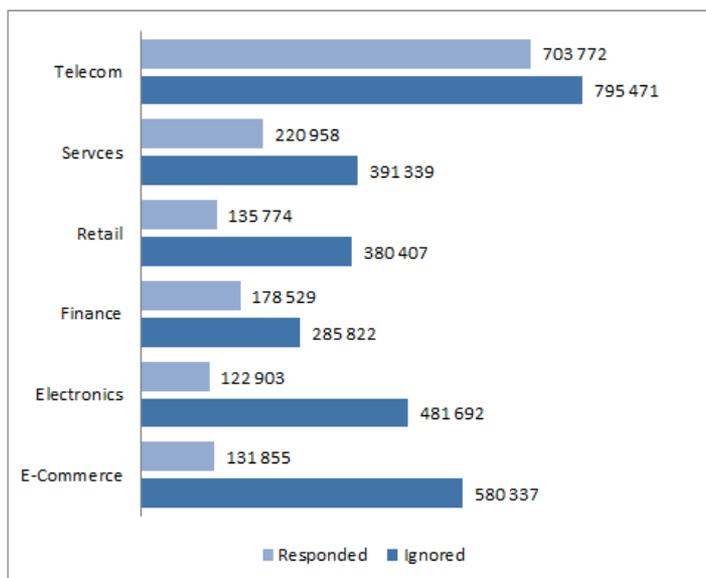


Figure 5. Prehľad štruktúry používateľských dotazov v rámci Facebooku za Q2

The analysis of Socialbakers (Ross 2015) also focused its attention on the ratio of answered and ignored queries on the social network Facebook for the individual business segments. This part of the analysis is based on more than 1 million user queries posed on Facebook pages of 25,760 businesses. Figure 5 shows that the highest number of queries as well as answers to these queries, 89.27 %, (420,143 answers) was recorded in the telecommunications segment. Following the above Figure 5 it is possible to emphasize that in the case of brick and mortar shops the share of answers to queries amounted to 77.35 % (105,648 answers). Interestingly enough, the proportion of answers was lower for e-commerce (70.45 %) than for brick and mortar stores.

The above mentioned analysis also analyzed the structure of user queries on the micro blogging social network Twitter. However, in the case of social network Twitter the ratio of answered and unanswered queries is quite the opposite to what we see in the case of the social network Facebook where answers extensively dominated in several categories of business. In the case of the social network Twitter in all tested categories businesses "ignored" a significant proportion of user queries.



**Figure 6. The structure of user queries on Twitter for Q2**

As stated in Figure 6, the best ratio of answered and unanswered user queries was recorded in the telecom segment with 53.06 % of answered queries. On the other hand, the sector of e-commerce was able to answer only 18.51% of user queries. A comparable proportion of answered user queries was recorded in the finance segment (38.45 %) and services (36.09 %). From the above it can be concluded that businesses active on the social network Twitter face a higher number of user queries and they fail to solve them relevantly. The reason for this situation may be an insufficient amount of employees, lack of interest in user queries, the lack of appropriate and relevant processes and monitoring tools.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of any business that sells its products or services in the online environment is to promote their products and services and among all existing and also potential customers. The priority of businesses should be customer satisfaction. However, not all of these businesses realize that the key to this goal is fast and efficient communication with customers. In this case it is possible to highlight the importance of social networks as a part of modern social media from the point of view of customer support. Customer support is to be regarded as an important tool of competition and also as a factor affecting customer satisfaction, which with the advent of social networking takes on a new dimension. Social networking in relation to customer support should be seen as an inseparable part in building a positive image and also as a possibility of a deeper insight into how interaction with target groups really works. These facts are valuable data important for further decision making processes. It should be noted that nowadays mere presence on social networks is not enough. It is even possible to argue that in some cases it is even a necessity. The profile on a social network is a space where it is possible to efficiently and immediately communicate all relevant

activities related to business processes. Based on the above, we can conclude that customer support allows flexible communication with existing and potential customers.

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