

Importance of Customer Support in Terms of Social Networks

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to describe the specific aspects of social 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 the analyzes the article describes the current situation using social networks as a tool for customer support, and focuses on the most significant social networking site Facebook. Another aim of the article is to evaluate the opportunities this issue brings for marketers in terms of using regional governments while pointing out the pitfalls of the issue.

Key words: Social Networks, Facebook, Customer Support, Regional Governments

1. INTRODUCTION

Technologies and social networks are intensively dominating the marketing field. If an entity wants to sell itself or its product, it must be able to reach potential customers in places where they usually gather. Social networks create specific form of visibility only very few media provide, and influence people through communities in which they belong and feel good. Marketers working for companies that provide services, offer products, and even government entities, are increasingly starting to use social networks as an effective marketing communication tool and also as a form of customer support. One such a tool is Facebook, which is in our domestic conditions the most popular social network. This social network can now be considered a breathing ecosystem with a diverse range of user communities, organizations and brands seeking to exploit the potential of this platform and communicate effectively with their target groups.

2. THEORETICAL BASIS

Social media are tools enabling users to exchange ideas and opinions and to discuss and share their experiences online (Beal - Strauss 2008). A concise view is provided by Treadaway - Smith (2011), who define social media as a set of technologies that capture communications, content etc. between individuals, their friends, and their virtual relationships. Thanks to these technologies, Internet users can easily create content and share it with others. Social media form an infrastructure thanks to which users can become publishers of a content that they themselves and their friends are interested in.

It is necessary to emphasize the fact (Van Dijk 2012) that through social media, especially social networks, customers or the general target audience can exchange views on the brand and its products, or describe specific experience that may not always be positive in a matter of a few seconds. It is just natural that people particularly focus on negative phenomena. Regardless of the truth or falsity of the content created by consumers, these posts get attention of other users and can significantly influence or change their views and attitudes towards the brand.

In practice, social media can be divided according to different criteria and different perspectives. As the most accurate we consider Janouch's division (2011):

- Social networking - blogs, video, audio, photos, chats, discussions, etc..
- Business networks - connecting people from business, mainly senior management.
- Social bookmarker systems - information sharing - mainly articles - through public bookmarks.
- Sites where a vote is taken on the content quality - by voting, articles can climb up to the top position and thus more people read them and more voting takes place.
- Reports - web sites where comments are displayed and people can share the content and also add comments.

According to Blanchard (2011) social networks are a communication tool like phone or email, which is used for stem corporate functions including public relations, marketing, networking management, customer service and market research. Aspects of social networks such as precise targeting and social filtering allow organizations to reach the right people with the right conversation at the right time. Social networks allow people more control over their work with the web and use friends to find content that is interesting and important (Shih 2011).

Based on the above, we can summarize the key features of social media (Bednař 2011; Tredaway 2011; Bačík - Fedorko 2013):

- provide feedback,
- social media are not only a source of information but also a way to exchange and search for information or to create links between members of social networks,
- are a place for applying various types of advertising,
- help to generate new customers,
- spread the reputation and feedback on products.

Peacock (2010) adds that today, social networks are one of the most used aspects of the web and in a span of just couple of years they have expanded significantly. Many businesses, organizations, communities and families use social networks to promote themselves and their interests and to communicate with each other. Social networks rely on users who build their own network of contacts on this network. Social networks have two main functions. First, they allow users to connect with each other and thus build a network of contacts and, secondly, they allow people to build communities where they can cooperate and share posts. These features allow the dissemination of information and content by users themselves.

Facebook, as the most popular global social networking site, has become a universal communications application. For its popularity it is used by many traditional media to communicate with their audience. At the same time it is now an essential platform for promotion and public communication. Companies, institutions, non-profit organizations, they all are now on Facebook. The presentation here becomes more and more necessary (Cooper 2011). As reported by Porterfield et al. (2013), Facebook can change existing marketing efforts of companies by offering them a platform to grow their audience and fans, allowing them to create deeper connections with customers and discover new possibilities for strengthening relationships with loyal customers.

Janouch (2011) states that thanks to these options, this social network is a unique marketing opportunity for any company. As a number of fans grows, it is possible to obtain more and better information about products, services and a company's image. In terms of marketing it is very important to communicate and gather views, wishes, and demands of the followers. Facebook is a good place to chat about the products and brands. Through this interaction, companies can build better relationships with customers, and customers can provide a valuable feedback.

3. CUSTOMER SUPPORT IN A SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social media marketing success goes hand in hand with the quality and possibilities these communications platforms offer to their users. This global trend has not spared Slovakia, where the amount of active Facebook users reaches more than 2 million users, representing 37.6% of the total population and 47.57% of internet users (Socialbakers, 2013).

Nowadays, social networks are used by almost every fourth person on earth (around 1.73 billion users). There is a clear growing trend of the user base, where in 2013 the annual increase by 18.00% is expected. It should be noted that in 2013, 67.70% of Internet users worldwide will use social networking at least once a month, prospects for 2017 predict 78.80% of Internet users using the services of social networks at least once a month (eMarketer 2013).

The results of the survey dealing with the customer support in the area of social networking, conducted by the marketing agency Conversocial (2013), and published in October 2013, supports the idea of social networks as a relevant communication tool in the field of customer support. Published data indicate that 81% of the top 100 online retailers response to customer support stimuli through the social network Twitter. Nearly 80% of companies consistently deal with customer support ideas through Facebook.

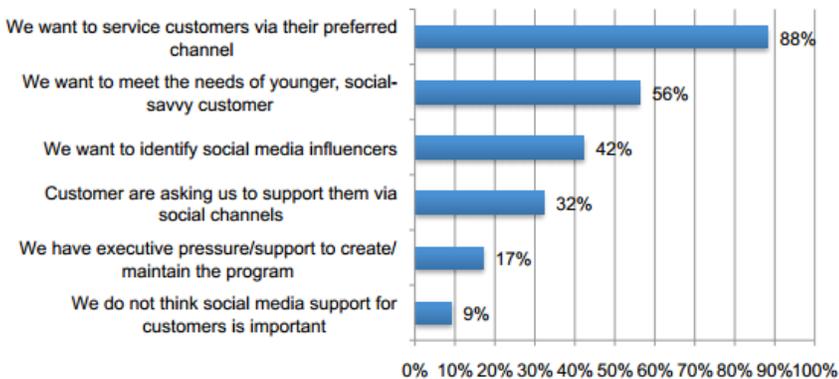


Figure 1 Why is it important to offer customer support in an environment of social networks
Source: TSIA, 2014

The analysis published by Technology Services Industry Association (2014), based on 1900 responses of globally operating B2C subjects, answered questions about the reasons what led the organizations to provide customer support on social networks. 88% of those surveyed said they want to be closer to their customers - target audience for their communication channel. 56% of those surveyed said they wanted to be closer to younger customer groups.

4. FACEBOOK AS A CUSTOMER SUPPORT TOOL

The current marketing importance of Facebook is emphasized by the results of a study conducted by Forrester Research, whose author, Gina Sverdlov (2012), using regression analysis, shows that the value of Facebook fans as customers is higher than the value of those who are not fans. The study also points out that in the case of Facebook fans, they are more likely to realize a purchase in up to 79% of cases, those who are not on Facebook are likely to purchase a product in 41% of cases. Also, in our opinion, a significant finding is that 74% of Facebook fans are more likely to recommend a product or a brand to their friends while there is a only a 38% probability that non-fan would recommend a product or a brand.

The general meaning of the Facebook in terms of marketing activities is to be found in the analysis of the organization Platt Retail Institute (2013), which aimed to highlight the importance of individual communication channels as cost items in comparison with the perceived importance of the communication channel. As a basis for the analysis was chosen a survey conducted in 2013 on a sample of 859 respondents from among members and non-members of the AMA (American Marketing Association), regardless of geographic location of the company. According to the results of the analysis, Facebook ranked at the top of the social networks in terms of the level of interest (Chart 2). Social networks like LinkedIn, Twitter recorded the numbers above 30%. YouTube recorded a significant gap when compared to remaining social media with more than 25%.

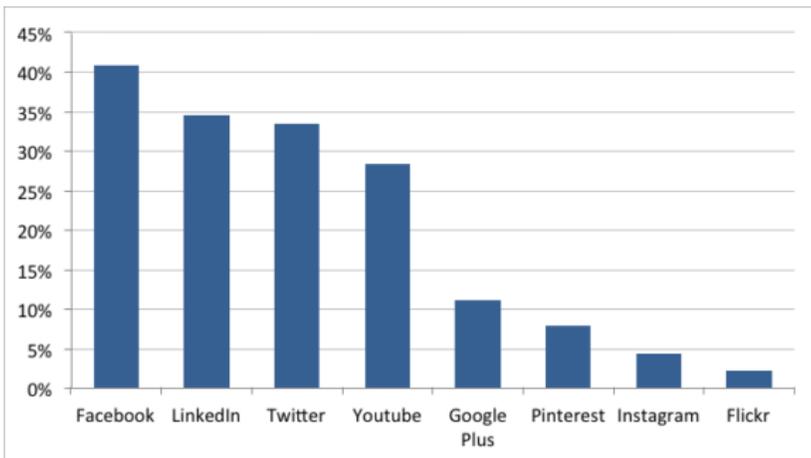


Figure 2 The importance of individual social networks
Source: Platt Retail Institute, 2013

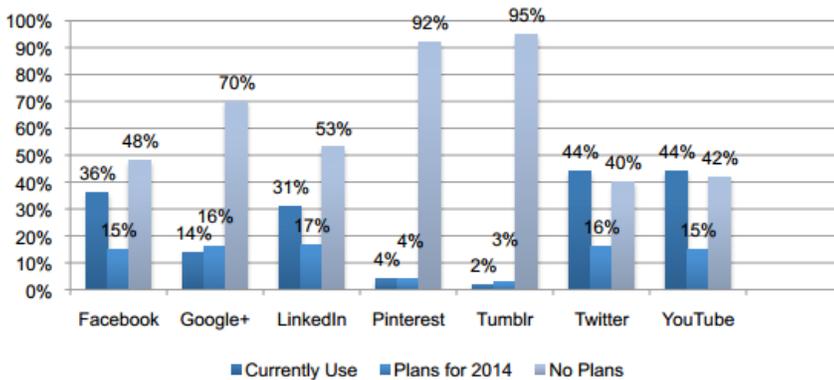


Figure 3 Social networking in relation to customer support
Source: TSIA, 2014

The aforementioned analysis of the company Technology Services Industry Association (2014) provides an insight into the approach of B2C entities to various social networks as tools for customer support (see Chart 3). At the time of data collection, Facebook was for the purpose of customer support used by 36% of respondents. 15% of respondents plan to implement Facebook in a portfolio of communication channels for customer support. It should be pointed out that Twitter, which use is in our conditions negligible, was at the time of data collection used by 44% of researched entities.

5. CONCLUSION

Customer support is an important instrument in a competitive struggle and also a factor affecting customer satisfaction, which with the advent of social media takes on a new dimension. Social networking in relation to customer support should be seen as a part of building a positive image and also as a deeper insight into their views and attitudes and how the interaction with target groups works. This fact is really valuable for organizations in their further decisions not only in the sphere of business but also in the case of general government - regional authorities. It should be emphasized that at the global level brands are becoming more and more aware that mere presence on social networks is no longer enough. The current trends and analysis results show that providing customer support, or even the existence of individual customer support profiles of brands on social networks, is now more than a competitive advantage. We dare to say that in the near future, with the changing preferences of the target audience when choosing the right communications channels, the online environment and especially social networking environment will in some cases be an essential part of brands' marketing strategies.

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