ASPECTS REGARDING THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN QUALITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH

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Abstract

In order to carry out an efficient marketing activity, it is well known that entrepreneurs have to find out, first of all, where and how consumers spend their time, what are the communication channels and forms they prefer and then try to interact with the customers on their territory and on their own terms. The forms of communication that are gaining momentum currently, are taking place online, especially in the social media. A growing number of consumers have become open towards and familiar with social media, sharing their opinions daily through these means. Since the emergence of the social media phenomenon, its use has grown and has become widespread in a short period of time. In response to this phenomenon, social media marketing has developed at a similar pace and in a similar direction, and this is also reflected in the existing opportunities for using social media in qualitative marketing research.

Keywords: *marketing research, social media, consumer behavior, qualitative research, social marketing.*

1. Introduction

In order to carry out an efficient marketing activity, it is well known that entrepreneurs have to find out, first of all, where and how consumers spend their time, what are the communication channels and forms they prefer and then try to interact with the customers on their territory and on their own terms[1]. The forms of communication that are gaining momentum currently, are taking place online, especially in the social media. A growing number of consumers have become open towards and familiar with social media, sharing their opinions daily through these means.

Since the emergence of the social media phenomenon, its use has grown and has become widespread in a short period of time. In response to this phenomenon, social media marketing has developed at a similar pace and in a similar direction.

Thanks to the progress of information technology and the spread of broadband internet connectivity, consumers have now the opportunity to see the stimuli used, usually, in the context of a qualitative research and share important data like images and videos alongside text messages. Making these exchanges, marketers can get a significant amount of symbolic data without the inherent disadvantages of field work, without the high costs and logistical restrictions caused by the transport of persons and the timing of meetings. In these circumstances, all the compromises that occur in organizing and carrying out a traditional qualitative research can be reduced by using the blogosphere as a data gathering medium for the qualitative research.

2. The development of marketing through social networks

Lately we can easily observe that social networks, blogs and other online communities seem to thrive everywhere around us. Nowadays, people use social networks as a primary source for an extremely broad range of information, a phenomenon that keeps gaining momentum. Apart from social networks, people are used to communicate on forums, too; the people they meet there are strangers, but they share the same passions and interests. Online, people communicate sincerely, they share their thoughts openly, and the barrier between an introvert and an extrovert keeps getting slimmer. At the same time, "blogging", as an activity has become widespread and keeps growing, experts from various fields holding it today under close scrutiny.

The beginnings of social media date back to 1979, when Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis from Duke University created Usenet, a system that allowed worldwide conversations between people, by the online posting of public messages. However, the era of "Social Media" as we understand it today started probably about 20 years earlier, when Bruce and Susan Abelson founded "Open Diary", a social networking website that brought together the users of online journals in a single community. At the same time the term "weblog" saw its first use; a year later it was truncated into the term "blog", when a blogger jokingly turned the noun "weblog" into the sentence "we blog". Later, widespread access to high-speed Internet along with increased popularity of the concept of social media, led to the creation of social networks such as MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2004.

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[1] Hornby, J., 2012, *The case for conversational marketing*, The Knowledge Exchange, SAS Institute Inc., 7 November 2012, http://www.sas.com/knowledge-exchange/customer-intelligence/featured/the-case-for-conversational-marketing/index.html

All these led in turn to the invention of "social media" as a term and determined the importance that social media has today. The most recent addition to this term has been the so-called "virtual worlds" - computer simulated environments, populated by three-dimensional avatars; a well-known example being Linden Lab's creation, "Second Life".

In early 2009, the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, equivalated Facebook to a nation claiming that it was the eighth largest country in the world. Since 2014 though, Facebook has exceeded by 1 billion users the limits described previously, reaching the position of third largest country in the world, right after China and India, and before the United States.

It hasn't been long since social media has overtaken email at the top of the online activities, placing itself first in this moment, an assertion that will surely remain valid in the foreseeable future, considering this field's development.

Marketing has reacted to this progress accordingly developing a new specialization - marketing activities through social networks (social media marketing). Thus, according to a survey made by TWI Surveys Inc. on behalf of the Society for New Communication Research, the investments in marketing activities through social networks and conversational marketing will have exceeded the investments in traditional marketing activities as early as 2012.

The explosive growth in using social media and blogging suggests that the society has reached a certain degree of "comfort" in carrying out these activities. This is also revealed by the results of the study "Intel UltraYou", commissioned by Intel and conducted by Mercury Research, according to which Romanians spend, on average, 31 minutes a day to update their social networks accounts, surpassing the European average in this field. Among the existing social networks, Romanians prefer Facebook, which is the most popular network in our country, followed by Hi5, Google+, Netlog and Twitter. 39% of them post at least once a day on these channels and postings consists mainly of photos (69% of the respondents), while 66% of the respondents post opinions, and 62% various information[2]. On the other hand, according to Facebrands, in Romania there are approximately 7.8 million Facebook users[3].

3. Qualitative marketing research characteristics

Researchers in the field of marketing have intensively used in the past few decades, focus groups and in-depth interviews in order to cover the need for information of qualitative nature. These methods are based on the premise that the respondents are aware of the reasons behind their consumer behaviors under certain circumstances, and that they're also willing to share them[4]. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research involves questioning a nonprobabilistic sample of a relatively small number of consumers, carried out either within individual in-depth interviews (intensive interviews) or group discussions (focus groups).

These qualitative research techniques can contribute to the achievement of a wide range of objectives. Qualitative research can be used either following a quantitative research in order to understand in depth the findings of the latter, or before a quantitative research in an early stage in order to explore and gather information about an area that will be subject to quantitative research that will take place in a later stage. Also, qualitative researches can be made as stand-alone studies, and not as completing stages before or after a quantitative research. On these occasions, making this type of research suffices to achieve the objectives set in the early stages of the research.

Regardless of the place that the qualitative researches occupy within an integrated research program, the above mentioned techniques stand out from those specific to quantitative researches, primarily through the information obtained, data that reflect the abundance of elements (symbolically speaking) that form the basis of the consumers' needs and wishes, and of the criteria governing brand choice decisions, beyond the estimates and inferences made on a representative sample of target population parameters.

However, qualitative research methods, while achieving effectively the objectives they were designed for, have some inherent disadvantages. These methods are somewhat artificial, because they involve extracting the respondent from his role as an actual consumer, during the interview. This is a common disadvantage of standard qualitative research methods, which as such removes the possibility to gather data in a natural setting, as is the case of observation. Also, the presence of the interview moderators is considered invasive and inappropriate. Moderators ask questions for which they hope to receive honest answers, trying at the same time to limit the respondents exposure to the influence caused by moderators' presence (such as, for instance, social desirability). At the same time, qualitative research methods rely heavily on people's memory, considering that the vast majority of surveys require respondents to recall relevant experiences and express opinions based on these memories.

[2] Fantaziu, I., 2012, *How much time do Romanians spend on Facebook*, evz.ro, 10 October 2012, http://www.evz.ro/detalii/stiri/Ct-stau-romnii-pe-Facebook-1004927.html

[3] FaceBrands.ro – Romanian brands on Facebook, accessed February 1, 2015, http://facebrands.ro/

[4] Stanciu, M., 2006, *Consumption patterns research methods*, Review of Economic Studies and Research, vol 42, Romanian Academy, http://www.iccv.ro/romana/articole/Modele%20consum%20metodologie.pdf

There are voices saying that the days of researches based on focus groups and in-depth interviews are numbered[5]. In this respect, new instruments are being proposed to be used in marketing research, such as mobile applications that enable researchers to observe the consumer during the process of decision-making regarding his purchase. Unfortunately, these tools are quite invasive, up to the point where the consumer would not agree to participate in such research. On the other hand, qualitative research still provides a series of essential information that cannot be obtained otherwise. Also, current changes of the online environment offer new opportunities to improve the methods of qualitative research, with technology eliminating the disadvantages listed above.

4. New opportunities for carrying out qualitative researches online

The use of new technologies for improving the marketing research process is not a novelty. Looking back to its development we can observe how in the past decades technological progress has improved the conditions in which the marketing research is carried out, improvements that concern its effectiveness, costs and process control.

As we all well know, in the beginning, the only method to collect data for marketing research was the personal one, and once the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) appeared, a series of key research coordinates saw improvement. CATI offered researchers a better control over the data collection process, a systematic treatment of the respondents, a more accurate measurement of the phenomena, a better use of sampling and a better management of the quotas structure, a better representation of the sample in relation to the target population, a faster delivery of data and, last but not least, much lower costs in relation to the personal survey. Then the online research appeared which led to even greater improvements that further lowered research costs. However, quantitative research was the one to benefit the most from technological improvements. There are no reasons why the technological progress cannot be used today to the benefit of qualitative research.

It is well known that blogging and social media allow the handling of information in text, video and audio form; people can both gather information and post it in order to share it with others. These activities are comparable to those made in the process of qualitative marketing research, being characterized by the presence of the interview or focus group moderator who addresses a series of questions to probe participants' behavior. Simplifying further, we can say that qualitative research is a discussion between the moderator and the participants, fueled by a series of questions and answers exchanged between them. Sometimes the moderator presents to the participants certain "things" to which they are asked to express their attitude and opinions, and other times, the moderator requests the participants to show certain "things" so that they can be seen, heard and/or discussed. All these lead us to the conclusion that there are a number of similarities between blogging-specific activities and qualitative research-specific ones. These similarities support the use of the computer and the Internet to conduct the activities specific to marketing qualitative research. To achieve this it is necessary to change the traditional methodology that has dominated the qualitative research for decades in a row, replacing the personal probing of individuals with a survey conducted through online environment. This change should not encounter great difficulties if we take into account the comfort level reached by the people in using this communication environment.

One of the obstacles that might occur in the way of this goal can be represented, according to some, by one of the major disadvantages of using the Internet, i.e. the impersonal nature of communication, a characteristic improper to qualitative research. In these circumstances, the main question that a specialist in the field must answer is whether some critical human particularity is lost while using the Internet, out of the emotions conveyed by the respondent. Not long ago, communication made by means of personal computer was considered poor, cold and shallow. Unlike personal communication, the online one has long been regarded as poor in social cues and characterized by the inability to convey non-verbal information such as voice inflections, facial expressions, posture, body language, etc. In time, however, the society has adapted and developed new ways of expressing these non-verbal cues in written form, using for this purpose new symbols and electronic paralanguages such as emoticons, special strings of characters, deliberate misspellings, absence or presence of corrections, use of capitalization, and even use of images and sounds.

On the other hand, carrying out a qualitative research online allows minimizing and eliminating many of the flaws and shortcomings inherent in traditional qualitative research, and even improving on some aspects. Thus, a website used in research can be designed in such a way as to have a similar look and content with the social networking websites Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn, and where the population of interest can easily navigate and the respondents are able to fulfill their responsibilities related to the survey and receiving in return the incentives that usually accompany the qualitative research. At the same time, the moderator can post on the website the content of the interview guide drawn up for that research and the recruited participants can access it, see the questions

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[5] Stephens, D., 2011, *Death of the Focus Group: Research Meets Mobility*, Retail Prophet, 5 February 2011, http://www.retailprophet. com/blog/advertising/death-of-the-focus-group-research-meets-mobility/

posted by the moderator and respond to them appropriately.

All the elements that make the qualitative research carried out online a viable method, become more relevant when we bring into question two existing realities: widespread Internet access and the ubiquity of digital technology, all of them causing a high level of interpersonal computer communication convenience and readiness for people.

It is clear that the current technology offers specialists the opportunity to identify consumer attitudes and opinions within the marketing research, through the use of images, videos and other stimuli. Consumers are also equipped to provide researchers with the same type of stimuli, while they can upload content on research websites, as they do on Facebook or Youtube, to be seen and analysed by qualitative research experts. People feel comfortable and willing to use their mobile phones to take pictures, make videos which they then send to friends via email, upload them on social networking websites and blogs, and then access those websites to express their opinion on a particular topic using their personal computers or smartphones, without feeling intimidated to express their honest opinion in the presence of strangers.

In addition to traditional qualitative researches, the Internet provides a strong sense of anonymity to survey participants and unwanted influences upon the answers (social desirability) are minimized online. Therefore, the qualitative data collected from the online environment tend to be extremely sincere given that respondents feel safe in an anonymous and private environment, having no fear of telling anything to the moderator. Consequently, these data have a much greater validity than those collected in the focus group sessions that use face-to-face interactions. And more than that, depending on the nature of the survey, the respondent's home may actually be the most natural place for the behavior submitted to the survey, representing thus the best place for data collection. People normally participate in online surveys, because the Internet is an environment where they feel comfortable. An environment familiar to the respondents correlates with the quality of information they provide and the sincerity of the opinions expressed. In contrast with the comfort offered today by the online environment, standard facilities used in traditional focus groups or in-depth interviews are simulated and artificial and do not create all the conditions where people can speak and be listened to. These facilities are limited to one room with audio and video recording equipment, and a one-way mirror behind which the experts are observing. In all cases, the respondents are completely isolated from the environment where the behavior submitted to survey happens naturally.

Another advantage of the focus group conducted online is represented by the fact that respondents do not waste time to get used to the ambient of the room, with the recording instruments or with the other respondents; they only need to become familiar with the moderator and the rules of discussion he proposed.

Regarding the amount of data obtained, the design of an online study allows participants to speak at the same time; the guide containing specific research questions is posted on the website, requiring only the authentication of the participants within a period of time announced during their recruitment. This eliminates the limits of traditional qualitative researches that, due to the way in which they are organized, do not allow the participants to speak simultaneously, but only one at a time. In the typical focus group, the respondent has approximately 10 minutes to provide the information that expresses his opinion during a two-hours-long discussion, while an online participant has 10 times more time to accomplish this.

There is another important advantage of online qualitative research, besides the aforementioned ones. This advantage refers to automatic data transcription and its correlation with quantitative data collected during recruitment, which allows the classification of text and other data into subgroups for comparative purposes. At the same time, all the logistics required by organizing traditional focus groups and in-depth interviews (transport, scheduling, room arrangement, coordination, etc.) are no longer needed online, where no time is consumed with traveling away from the office, home and family. Conducting qualitative research online also leads to a drastic cost reduction, stemming from the way research organizing and implementing takes place. Thus, according to the comparisons made by the experts in the field[6], with six focus groups of nine participants each and lasting two hours, the required costs for an online qualitative research amount to only a third of the traditional costs, taking up to 40% less time (which also includes data analysis and drawing up a comprehensive report of research results) and generating more than twice the amount of information of a traditional qualitative research.

Concluding this presentation, we can summarize the advantages of online qualitative research in comparison with the traditional one as follows:

- computer-mediated interaction promotes honesty, attentiveness and essay-type responses;
- time is used efficiently;
- enables the collection of larger amounts of data;
- respondents no longer have their answers influenced by the physical presence of other persons;
- data can be collected in a familiar setting and right when the studied event takes place;

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[6] Rubenstein, P., 2011, *Why (and How) the Growth of Social Media has Created Opportunities for Market Research*, The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist, Vol. 49, No. 2, October 2011, pp. 19-26, http://www.siop.org/tip/oct11/492_features.pdf, http://www.siop.org/tip/oct11/04rubenstein.aspx

- multimedia-data and text-data are collected and integrated;
- the data is better organized and easily sorted for subgroup analysis;
- automatic transcription;
- minimal logistics requirements;
- lower costs of research;
- research participation takes less time for the respondent.

In addition, the applicability of online qualitative research can be intensified through the application of new tools, such as *Concept Visualization*, a relatively new technique that involves outlining some design ideas for a product, while it is subjected to a focus group or panel. Therefore, during the development of an online qualitative research, a graphic designer takes the information circulated during the focus group sessions and drafts new product concepts with the help of specialized software. At the end of the research, the graphic designer will have a set of drafts which may constitute the development or innovation portfolio for a product[7].

The information obtained via online qualitative research can be used by companies for the development of new products and services concepts, idea-gathering for promotion campaigns, the development of competitive advantage, the development of branding strategies, new consumer experiences, brand naming ideas, product packaging ideas, etc. In addition, online qualitative research can contribute to the identification of problems relating to various activities such as customer support, packing, distribution and product display, and last but not least, it allows the company to better understand their customers' perceptions and motivations.

3. Conclusions

A growing number of consumers have become open towards and familiar with social media, sharing their opinions daily through these applications. Thanks to the progress of information technology and the spread of broadband internet connectivity, consumers have now the opportunity to see the stimuli used, usually, in the context of a qualitative research and share important data like images and videos alongside text messages. Making these exchanges, marketers can get a significant amount of symbolic data without the inherent disadvantages of field work, without the high costs and logistical restrictions caused by the transport of persons and the timing of meetings.

Market research specialists have long accepted that in order to achieve certain research objectives, a series of compromises regarding its organizing and conducting methodology must be done; it is rare that such compromises don't exist. In this case, the compromises involve setting a balance between quality, speed and cost. And yet, compromises can be reduced by using the blogosphere as a qualitative research data gathering medium and through a viable methodology which provides qualitative research experts with access to human experience on a scale and reach immeasurable for now.

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