

Chapter 72

Interaction between Consumers and Businesses through Social Media: Trends and Future

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ABSTRACT

For a great deal of people, social media is the gateway to the Internet and it would not be feasible use of the network if it was not through them. Social media revolutionized not only the Internet but also the way people communicate and, consequently, the way consumers and businesses interact. Therefore, companies need to know and master the use of social media for competitive advantage. The current forms of interaction between businesses and consumers still leave much to be desired and it is not rare to find companies that make mistakes in the process of communication with their consumers through social media. This chapter aims to evaluate the communication channels based on social media used by businesses and consumers, showing successful and non-successful cases in the communication process and suggesting trends of usage of these channels more efficiently.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined as a group of Internet-based applications, built on the ideological and technological basis and Web 2.0, and which en-

able the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kling, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, it is possible to be considered as social media, any technologies or interactive practices, over the Internet, that enable sharing of content,

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opinions, ideas, experiences and media, making possible the exchange of information about a particular subject (Costa, 2005). The concept of social media can be defined more generally as a set of mechanisms and communication technologies that enables social interaction among its users (Diani & McAdam, 2003).

In recent years, social media have become the main form of Internet access. For most users, particularly for the younger users, the Internet is synonymous with social media and vice versa. If the popularization of the Internet represents a revolution in communication among people, the emergence of social media further potentiated this revolution. Messages previously sent via e-mail and mailing lists have been gradually replaced by postings on social networking and updates on microbloggings, which, quickly replicated, achieves a far superior range. It is the dissemination of information in all directions and at the speed of thought.

As the popularity of these communication channels grows exponentially, the interest of companies towards its usage increases, in order to strengthen its relationships with its customers and identify future business opportunities, which makes interaction between companies and customers more profitable. So social media have become the focus of several studies in this area and attracted the attention of managers, publicists and marketers.

However, a problem that arises is that a significant portion of business managers as well as marketing and advertising professionals is still dealing with social media as they do with traditional media. But however, unlike a magazine or television, where consumers can not directly interact with the transmission means to select the desired content, social media have interactivity and some given content can be ignored whenever the user wants, by simply deleting a message or ignoring a post. This feature allows consumers to filter the content submitted, selecting only what

they want and eliminating unwanted advertisement, commonly known as spam.

Moreover, as the company cannot control the content flowing through the network, social media are, somehow, like a mechanism for advertising, which can act positively or negatively in the construction of the image of a company. Therefore, the use of social media as a communication tool between businesses and consumers should be strategically planned in order to facilitate a healthy and sustainable relationship, where topics of interest to both parties are constantly discussed (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Greco & White, 2009). The main interest in the use of these channels is not the advertising itself, but the image that the company cultivates with its customers.

According to Owyang et al. (2009), most companies today still use social media combining the publication of news of general interest to the promotion of products and services offered. However, this kind of static content is not enough to create interaction between users, which is the main “fuel” for Web 2.0. The use of social media requires more dynamic postings, such as the transmission of news to disseminate humanitarian actions undertaken by the company, its involvement in social causes or the position of the company on controversial issues (Owyang et al., 2009).

Publications with this type of content provoke the consumer and urge him to share the content seen with other consumers. After all, it is easier for a client to resend a post about a high-impact social action performed by a particular company than a discount offer of a product or service. Moreover, the spread of news and discussion of the subject by several other consumers have greater strength than mere propaganda (Bacon, 2012; Barefoot & Szabo, 2009).

This chapter examines the use of social media by technology companies and proposes a set of trends to be considered by companies which intend to use social media in a satisfactory manner. After all, social media are not just another channel of communication, but an important and dynamic

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