

## Difficulties and Opportunities in Online Promoting and Selling Agri-Food Products

Elisa Pirlea

Mihai Anghel-Badescu

*The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania*

[elisapirlea@gmail.com](mailto:elisapirlea@gmail.com)

[mihai.anghelbadescu@gmail.com](mailto:mihai.anghelbadescu@gmail.com)

### Abstract

*The emergence of technological innovations in marketing are key factors of competitive advantage within companies in the agri-food sector. Internet within the global economic panorama, including in the agri-food environment, requires the raising of promotion standards over traditional marketing models. Caught up in this difficult situation, agri-food companies need to focus on them, mainly as an information provider. They need to be aware that they are dealing with a completely new customer who is an active part of the marketing process. As a scope, the objective of the paper is to analyse the contribution of innovations in marketing to the agri-food sector. Specifically, our paper is based on a review of a database of over 300 articles, collected from marketing and business magazines, covering a period of over 20 years.*

**Key words:** agri-marketing, online, promoted, difficulties, opportunities

**J.E.L. classification:** Q13, Q17, Q21

### 1. Introduction

Based on a classic interpretation, Deepak & Jieyakumar states in 2019 that marketing is defined as "a complex of activities of an agri-food company ranging from the creation of a product or service to their use by the buyer."

Although this definition is comprehensive, it is difficult to define unilaterally and definitively the concept of marketing, due to the constant and permanent evolution of consumer needs and customer preferences. According to Chandra, 2019, it is difficult to identify a single definition that is closely linked to the evolution of the reference context of the agri-food market. Here the company and the technologies used by it work through continuous adaptability to the requirements and needs of the market.

Due to the practical difficulties encountered in trying to fully reveal the concept and role of marketing, it is still possible to develop an evolution of marketing as a discipline. This captures progressive development from a classical to a modern paradigm.

### 2. Literature review

A significant difference between classical and modern theory is that the former is based solely on the model of stimulating the innovation market. It provides for the placing on the market only of products whose need has been clearly expressed by customers, according to Henson, 1995; Lineemann et al., 2006; Macfie, 2007. The latter also include the technological impetus for innovation. By placing on the market products and services that surprise customers either because they cannot express the need or because they do not. Imagine that they can be easily made according to Galati et al., 2016.

This strategy, although it poses obvious risks related to the lack of acceptance by the market characterises the current phenomena of rupture through the past. This happens frequently and with resounding results in terms of profitability for businesses. This success, of real value, is passed on to customers and the entire social structure, based on the increasing spread of digitalisation and its use. In particular, from the development of the World Wide Web on the Internet base of the early 1990s. Since then, an increasing number of companies have felt the need to use WWW as a new marketing channel (Jalilvand et al., 2011).

The progressive and unceasing affirmation of the Internet in the global economic panorama requires breaking from the traditional. Marketing models; the same marketing techniques that use the Web will therefore be very different from those applied to traditional Media (Sparkes & Thomas, 2001).

The Internet itself is just one of the digital media available today, along with emails and social networks. With their help, everyone can connect anytime, anywhere, thanks to a large number of devices. The internet and digital systems are gradually integrated with physical systems, which are traditionally closer to consumers. One case in this context is mobile payment.

Indeed, recently, China is constantly promoting a cashless company by introducing payments using QR codes into consumers' daily habits. According to a survey, 92 % of people in China's largest cities use WeChat Pay or Alipay as their primary means of payment. The rural population, about 47 %, also uses mobile payments very regularly. In 2018, about 83 % of all payments were made through mobile payment modules. This mode of payment recorded a 10 % increase in 2019. Two main factors that can be identified at the root of success are, first, the fact that the Chinese market is a mobile-first one. This highlights that the first device of most internet users is a mobile phone.

Second, credit card usage was low when Allipay and WeChat Pay mobile options were introduced for the first time.

For some time, there has been a widespread view that the Internet would cannibalise and replace all traditional business methods. In many cases, the internet integrates rather than cannibalise traditional business activities and modes of competition. Virtual activities do not completely eliminate the need to perform physical activities, but rather tend to amplify their cruciality. The Internet also creates new opportunities to meet customers' needs more effectively (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). The revolution was not only technological, but also cultural. In the last decades of the last century, people have felt the need for different ways to express themselves and to relate. Digital systems intercepted this need and provided the technology to meet it (Bruhn, 2008).

One of the most radical changes is that information exchange is becoming more and more decisive on the market, even more than the exchange of goods (e.g. Bruhn & Mason, 2002; Corporal & Monteleone, 2004). There are about 3.77 billion Internet users in the world and nearly 2 billion people working on various social networks and messaging apps. Thanks to computers, tablets and smartphones, all these people are able to connect to the network anytime and anywhere to get and deliver information, interact and exchange goods, services and opinions in a much faster, cheaper and more conscious way than before (Calantone & Vickery, 2010).

Consumers are less and less the weakest part of the exchange, due to the huge amount of information they can easily access at low cost. This raises awareness of the relative value of different offers (e.g. Gunes & Tekin, 2006). They expect to be able to choose from a wide range of more personalised products and services, comparing prices from different manufacturers and exchanging views with other consumers around the world. Consumers can access an increasing amount of information with reduced time and costs, and transaction costs are reduced. The limited traditional rationality of the consumer gradually leaves room for greater awareness. Digital systems have changed consumers' purchasing behaviour by providing them with more accurate and real-time information on prices, product availability, variants, methods and delivery times (e.g. Bruhn, 2007; Grankvist & Biel, 2001).

The context in which agri-food companies operate has been characterised in recent decades by changes and innovations that have inevitably changed the way they operate (Caiazza & Volpe, 2012). Factors such as globalisation (Sterns & Peterson, 2001), innovation (Avermaete et al., 2004; Caiazza, 2015; Caiazza et al., 2014; Stewart-Knox & Mitchell, 2003), internationalisation (Ayoç & Remaud, 2003; Bertolini & Giovannetti, 2006; Pritchard & Rama, 2005, pp. 219-252;

Testa, 2011), competitiveness (Caiazza & Volpe, 2013, 2014; Sahay et al., 2006), technology (Mohezar & cloud, 2014), preferences of new consumers (Jandt, 2006; Khan et al., 2013; Ronteltap et al., 2007) as well as trends in food science and technology.

As well as the requirements of the other actors in the supply chain (Kirezieva et al., 2013; Leat et al., 1998; Vermeiren et al., 1999), are just a few examples of factors that have changed the way they are and work in the agri-food sector.

The agri-food company, in this new context, must think of itself first, mainly as an information provider and must be aware that it is facing a new type of customer, which is becoming an active element of the marketing process.

Research has highlighted how simple it is to measure the influence of the characteristics of any product on the consumer's perception, on the product itself, which in turn affects his decision to use (Booth, 2014), as well as his willingness to pay (Sillani & Nassivera, 2015). Therefore, it is the information, content and services offered by the site that attracts the consumer to the agri-food company. On the other hand, it is the internet user who decides which sites to visit based on the content they are interested in and how and when to use the information (e.g. Huotilainen & Tuorila, 2005; Olsen et al., 2010). Therefore, the characteristics of the environment require a complete reversal of the marketing approach that is no longer selective push but attractive pull.

Doing web marketing means first and foremost placing the consumer in the spotlight before, during and after the buying process; establish a dialogue as sincere and loyal as possible, in which sale is not the primary objective but the natural consequence of the established relationship; abandoning a quantitative logic in favour of a qualitative dimension. The path from a sales-centered to a consumer-centered business model requires a significant change in corporate culture (Sheth et al., 2000).

As a result of these changes, the new food development process also needs to be changed. As highlighted in literature, in order to succeed in an increasingly competitive context, agri-food companies need to develop new product success values vis-à-vis consumers (Jacobsen et al., 2014). At the beginning of the new product development process there are customer needs, which are understood by the agri-food company through market analysis. The information derived from it gives impetus to the conception and production of products or services that meet the identified needs.

The agri-food company sets a price, promotes a product or service by informing its customers about its characteristics and distributes them on the market. In a modern perspective, however, marketing goes beyond the limits of the agri-food company and monetary exchange and extends its range of actions to other topics (Saguy & Srotinskaya, 2014; Stanton & Burkink, 2008).

Another topic of our research, which saw increased attention in the new decade, is related to the concept of the brand, which in fact will link a double thread to that of consumer trust and loyalty: almost a quarter of the articles under our analysis revolve around this concept.

The software used for the clustering process returned 4 groups of articles for analysis, which are summarised under the label, keywords and number of component elements.

The first cluster is the largest of the four clusters: In fact, there are 138 articles that refer to the Web Analytics tag. This concept refers to the detection and tracking of user behaviour by software, for statistical and strategic purposes, and can generally be defined as "the assessment of a variety of data, including web traffic, web-based transactions, web server performance, usability studies, user-submitted information and related sources to help created a generalised understanding of the online visitor experience" (Pakkala et al., 2012).

The usefulness of this process is based on the belief that in predicting consumer behaviour, it is reasonable to assume a stable link between "offline" attitudes and online activity, and that today an increasing number of consumers rely on online content when they want to have accurate information about a particular brand.

It is also an analysis that allows overcoming a quick and superficial approach, for example, in the study of brand sentiment, allowing for deepening the standard classification of positive, negative and neutral user judgement. This simple scale is not able to provide more accurate information about the polarity of positive or negative attitudes towards a brand or even about the reasons for such approaches (e.g., De Veirman et al., 2017; Ferreira & Barbosa, 2017; Sohn et al., 2017).

Focusing only on the number of positive and negative assessments, a brand manager is unable to determine which characteristics of the brand lead to a particular type of assessment, hence the need for tools, which are exactly those of Web Analytics, which allow justification and well-founded reasons for feeling (Mazlounian et al., 2013; Pakkala et al., 2012).

The second group, which includes 55 articles, received the Web 2.0 tag. This term means a second generation of websites, including community portals, wikis, communication sites focusing on cooperation and mutual exchange of ideas and values (e.g. Fauser et al., 2011; Kim & Park, 2017).

Singel (2005) defines the difference between the two types of virtual environment as follows: Web 1.0 was commerce. Web 2.0 is people.

The key concepts of evolution brought about by Web 2.0 are: • the site as a sharing platform, • active participation of users, • self-improvement of service due to contributions users, • focus on content, • continuous beta users become part of the quality assessment process and their contribution is the basis for future marketing developments, • develop a rich user experience.

Within the cluster, the Web 2.0 topic is addressed from 3 different perspectives, namely: Information, technology and community. If the creation and collection of information is still central, as in the "pre Web 2.0" era, it is the concept of community that has taken on entirely new importance (e.g., Clark et al., 2017): the main change is the ability to create content, which has allowed us to overcome the clear distinction between the roles of the editor and the reader.

The third group includes articles focusing on the concept of Customer Relationship Management CRM and its evolution over time (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2010; Mohamad et al., 2014), CRM is a strategic approach to marketing supported by marketing relationship theory Morgan & Hunt, 1994, a comprehensive process and strategy that allows an organisation to identify, acquire and cultivate a profitable customer base by building long-term relationships with it. As we pointed out at the beginning, the world of web marketing has as a priority an innovative management and different from the traditional channels of communication of the relationship with the client, and the importance of CRM must be read in this respect. The acronym CRM is also used in practice to define that category of software consisting of applications that help agri-food companies manage, analyse and optimise customer relationships.

Articles dedicated to this topic are mostly focused on new CRM technologies, applied to social media, which, by their nature, facilitate relationships with the consumer: Here is the key concept of customer engagement missing in previous CRM models. A correct implementation of CRM models has a positive impact on the performance of consumer relations, understood as the satisfaction and loyalty of consumers to an organisation: elements that lead to greater competitiveness and more efficient services and support to the customer. It is a key concept both in business to business logic in relations with companies and in the case of business-to-consumer. Among the 48 articles, some offer examples of CRM applications in the food industry. Noteworthy is the future-oriented example of CRM adopted by the Swiss company Nestlé (Rezaeegiglo et al., 2014).

The company, starting from the belief that health problems are becoming an increasingly important problem, has begun to produce healthy foods and beverages in Japan as a "customised nutrition" provided through the company's own online platform "Nestlé Wellness Ambassadors". With the help of CRM and its online platform, the company collects valuable data about the digital health of its users. They, in turn, get their DNA tested there and a home test kit, along with a personalised nutritional analysis of all meals made using artificial intelligence. In this way, the company provides individual guidance for healthy nutrition and a healthy lifestyle.

The last cluster focuses on the concept of brand value or brand capital, one of the fundamental intangible resources for an agri-food company (e.g., Iaia et al., 2017; Sturiale et al., 2017). The idea of increasing brand value is inherent in the concept of marketing and advertising, even in its original sense and therefore with traditional communication channels (Kerin & Sethuraman, 1998; Paasovaara et al., 2012).

The radical transformation of the media world over the past decade has seen the birth of social media and blogs that have gradually become established on the net: the cluster articles we analyse focus on the role these new communication channels play in creating brand value and on differences and relationships with traditional channels. In addition, in the world of social networks, the content created by the company and generated by users coexists (Aspasia & Ourania, 2015).

Now, the impact of the global exchange of information between consumers on social platforms can no longer be neglected and should therefore be rethought in a logic that no longer considers marketing communication as the exclusive prerogative of the agri-food company, but the fact that, on the contrary, to create and improve the value of a brand must necessarily take both contributions into account.

### **3. Research methodology**

In the research, 329 articles were examined. First, data on publication trends were analysed in the analysed period 1997-2020.

After the first analysis, we focused on the space where these articles were published. Finally, we focused on keyword analysis, key concepts and main topics that were indicated by the author.

Of the 329 articles examined, 203 articles have been published since 2014, accounting for about 61.67 % of the total. If we consider a timeframe up to 2012, the items under examination are 254, or 77.34 %. And if we expand by 2005 we reach 300 articles 91.05 %. This proves that the subject has developed in the last decade mainly due to the existing technological advance. Also, during this time, the attention of publications in specialised journals increased. In general, the attention to web-marketing is a directive of the new millennium, the proof being only 3 articles from our research that were published by the year 2000, 0.77 %. The volume of articles published annually has been significantly increasing since 2010. If we tried to simulate a total number of items based on possession data, we would reach the result of an increase of about 10 % compared to 2017.

The evolution of publications shows what we pointed out at the beginning of the analysis: the number of publications increased considerably in the new decade.

Of the 329 articles analysed, 82, about 25 %, belong to the magazines dealing with marketing in its most varied forms. The specialised articles that have found their space in specialised online magazines and publications account for 39 or 12 % of the total, a number less than the one previously found, but still significant of the total.

The journal with the most publications on the subject was found the Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, with 33 articles 4.6 % of the total, followed by the Journal of Business Research, with 13 articles 1.8 % of the total, and Journal of direct, data and digital marketing practical with 7 articles 1 % .

### **4. Findings**

Based on the results of our analysis, four main pillars of web marketing in the agri-food industry can be identified. The first pillar is to track user behavior through software for statistical and strategic purposes. In predicting consumer behaviour, it is reasonable to assume a stable link between offline attitudes and online activity. Consumers of agri-food products are increasingly expressing their demands for attention and personalised services (e.g., Cardello et al., 2007; Cast iron et al., 2008; Frewer et al., 1997; Frewer et al., 2003; Grunert et al., 2003), companies use web marketing to provide memorable, satisfying and relevant experiences for consumers.

Optimising consumer experiences through web marketing is a way for agri-food companies to use this treasure of consumer information and interact with consumers in new ways. Specifically, they may use consumer information to continuously model their brand. In fact, future companies will use the information to encourage their consumers to contribute and stimulate brand evolution. Customer information needs to expand its brand relevance. As part of their efforts to optimise consumer experiences, agri-food companies will have the opportunity to expand their offerings beyond the scope of products to include services. To this end, the second pillar has also become important, focusing on a new virtual environment based on the second generation of websites, including community portals, wikis, communication sites focusing on cooperation and mutual exchange of ideas and values.

The third pillar includes Customer Relationship Management CRM, which is a strategic approach to marketing supported by the theory of marketing relationships. This is a comprehensive process and strategy that allows an organisation to identify, acquire and cultivate a profitable customer base by building long-term relationships with it.

Agri-food companies must further promote consumer experiences in order to achieve consumer privacy. This means engaging with consumers in new ways to shape your experiences on every occasion.

In fact, leaders will help consumers become active participants in creating the privacy that underpins loyalty and trust. Consumer experiences and consumer privacy will be the winning formula for marketing companies in the new.

## 5. Conclusions

Currently, advertising technologies, marketing technologies, e-commerce platforms, CRM systems, and sales and service applications operate in isolation. They will need to be integrated and then orchestrated to provide the most comprehensive vision of the consumer. In addition, the complexity and volume of customer contact points, along with the proliferation of marketing technologies, will require agri-food companies to collaborate with IT to create and manage brand value. This leads to better alignment between marketing and IT operations. Collaboration with IT will become increasingly important as agri-food companies rely more on consumer data to strengthen consumer experiences and consumer privacy. The value of future analysis will be its ability to help marketers predict consumer behaviour and create more accurate forecasts. Efficient data ownership and management is essential for consumer knowledge. These considerations lead to the need to improve web marketing strategies in providing, in particular, better communication and accurate information to consumers. The progressive establishment of these trends will not lead to the disappearance of traditional marketing, but it will necessarily have to be complemented by new strategies aimed at building customer relationships. Each business function and process must be closer to the consumer and be defined according to how they add value to the relationship. Practitioners and academics investigating these topics should take into account the different behaviour of consumers. Indeed, their behaviour varied by country, region, age and other factors. This implies the need for better research, as there remains a lack of in-depth analysis and comprehensive statistics in this regard.

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