

Integrating Online Marketing Strategies in B2B Companies

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Abstract

In the context of a highly dynamic business environment ,which is constantly changing due to the innovations brought by the rise of advanced technologies,companies are faced with the difficult challenge of permanently adapting their strategies in order to create differential effect for their brands,as well as to gain competitive advantage in the market, in an entirely new different marketing era.The rise of e-commerce has been directing the efforts of marketers worldwide towards the online environment, as we are whitnessing a „digitalization” effect in every sphere of activity.While B2C (Business-to-Consumer) companies have successfully adopted and used marketing strategies based on new technologies(more precise , they embraced online marketing techniques) , in the B2B context, these new approaches are still viewed with some skepticism , due to the perception of traders regarding their use in this particular business sector.

In this study, we set out to investigate, based on the existing academic literature and previous scientific research, the ways in which B2B companies can use online marketing techniques. Particularly, we will discuss the use of one certain online marketing method, namely, Social Media Marketing, widely known as SMM, which involves the use of social media platforms as a marketing communication tool. Furthermore, we will analyze, based on a case study of a B2B company, namely, the Maersk company (globally known as being a company with a long history and tradition behind , in the transport, logistics and energy services domain), the benefits that can result from integrating online marketing strategies in a business plan. The case study which we will present will highlight the ability to use social media platforms for marketing purposes, their approach being considered one of the most popular marketing methods of modern technology.

Key words:B2B marketing ,Online marketing,Social Media Marketing,Relationship Marketing

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1. Introduction

The ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 have allowed a true digital revolution in the field of marketing, causing professionals to "migrate" from the traditional space to the online marketing environment (e-commerce), which allows a two-way interaction with consumers ((Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The most popular applications used to support marketing activities are social networks (Simula, Töllinen and Karjaluo, 2013), considered to bring numerous benefits to companies such as efficient management of customer relationships , increasing confidence among potential and actual clients , building or consolidating brand image, improving the perception of the quality of services or products offered by a certain company, which can lead to customer loyalty, as well as strengthening the company`s position in the market, creating barriers for their competitors and many other advantages(Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides, 2011). The multitude of marketing benefits through social networks has led to the creation of a self-standing concept, known as Social Media Marketing (SMM).

It is a well-known fact that the commercial agents operating in the B2C (business-to-consumer) sector have recognized the benefits of using SMM. However, the enthusiasm is not yet fully shared by those who operate in the B2B sector, the adoption of these technologies has been noted to be happening in a rather slow pace, according to specialists (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Swani, Brown and Milne, 2014). Academic literature associates this slow approach of social media marketing strategies with the perception of marketers regarding the characteristics of B2B companies, that are considered incompatible with these medias (Buehrer, Senecal, & Bolman, 2005; Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto, & Jayawardhena, 2012). More specifically, the American Marketing Association (AMA) defines the concept of B2B as a business that markets its products or services to other companies; the nature of interactions between business partners, which theoretically is considered to be limited to professionalism, seriousness and other such traits, considers that social media sites are irrelevant in B2B marketing, some considering them „frivolous” (Swani and Brown, 2011; Michaelidou et al., 2011). According to recent statistical data, marketers do not recognize the importance of these sites in the B2B context. Specifically, as of May 2015, only 41% of B2B marketers considered LinkedIn as an important platform for marketing activities, 30% rated Facebook as a relevant component of their marketing activities, while less than 20% recognized Twitter as a marketing communication medium for companies (Richter, 2015). Although statistics indicate an initial reluctance of B2B marketers to use social media for marketing purposes, more and more scholars are fervently claiming that these platforms will have a growing importance in the future, influencing the vision of B2B companies (Brennen & Croft, 2013).

The importance of this study is given precisely by these considerations: the perspective of using online marketing techniques, respectively of social media platforms for B2B companies, their impact, as an effect of integration into the strategic plan of B2B companies, analysis of the role of online marketing in the future of the respective companies, the benefits as a result of approaching these strategies. With this paper, we propose to contribute scientifically to present studies, as well as to fill certain gaps in previous academic literature, aiming to offer a clearer view on all the key aspects mentioned, as well as to gain insight into the factors that could stimulate the adoption and use of marketing techniques through social media, by exploring the case study that will be presented later; by evaluating the obtained results we want to highlight the beneficial effects of SMM on B2B companies.

2. Literature review

According to the American Marketing Association (2015), B2B companies are defined as businesses which market their products (and services) to other businesses, as opposed to B2C companies, which sell their products directly to individual consumers. Taking into consideration the market dimension of the B2B sector, it can be stated that there are fewer organizations involved in B2B commercial transactions than there are consumers involved in B2C interactions (Lacka & Chong, 2016).

The nature of the interactions between B2B business partners and B2C companies and its customers is another differential element, the communication can be characterised as being more direct and intense in the B2B sector, taking into consideration the smaller number of organisations involved (Jussila, Karkkainen & Aramo-Immonen, 2014). The B2B business philosophy is based on building trust and establishing a solid relationship between partners, the aim being conserving a database consisting of loyal clients. For this reason, a proper marketing strategy is considered vital for a B2B company to become successful.

Although B2B marketing strategies were carried out in a traditional environment (offline), over the past few decades, experts have integrated online marketing techniques (platforms) in their strategies (Brennan & Croft, 2012). At first, these platforms, consisting of company websites, for instance, were limiting the communication between business partners. The focus has been shifted towards the use of online communications channels, allowing a two-way interaction between B2B partners (Lacka & Chong, 2016).

An increased attention among marketers is directed, nowadays, towards social media platforms, which are regarded as being a powerful marketing tool. This fact is confirmed by Brennan and Croft (2015), who reported that there is an extensive interest in the use of social media by

practitioners in the field; therefore, B2B companies are starting to plan their marketing budget, taking into consideration the implementation of social media-based marketing strategies for their companies (CMO Survey Report, 2015). This growing interest for B2B Social Media Marketing may come as a result of marketers becoming more and more aware of the positive impact of using the abovementioned platforms. To confirm these statements, in the section below, we will highlight the advantages of implementing Social Media Marketing in the B2B sector, as well as identifying the barriers of adopting such strategies, viewed from a company perspective.

3. The use of social media marketing in B2B companies: benefits and barriers

It is a fact proven by previous research that social media websites can be successfully implemented in B2B marketing activities, including a better management of relationships between the company and its customers (Moor, Hopkins & Raymond, 2013); also, it can constitute an efficient method for attracting and gaining new business partners (Michaelidou et al., 2011), as well as new business opportunities (Breslauer & Smith, 2009), leading to a better market position and, implicitly, a stronger brand image. Engaging in bidirectional communication through social media, resulting in better, faster interaction can be strongly appreciated and can help build relationships between industrial partners (Jussila, Karkkainen, & Leino, 2012).

A permanent interaction between producer and clients can help companies to adapt their offer accordingly, adjusting it to consumers' needs and requirements, following the suggestions/feedback received through social media. We may add a number of tremendous advantages conferred by SMM, which include better knowledge of consumer behaviour and buying patterns, identifying and establishing a target audience which the company can focus on, and the ability to respond promptly to clients' solicitations or respond properly in a situation crisis, building and improving their trust, which can lead to loyalisation). All these advantages are linked to an increased performance and higher sales revenue, and a better investment return (Lacka & Chong, 2016).

Efficient management in terms of customer relationship, establishing trust between partners and gaining loyalty are crucial factors in B2B transactions. Among the above-mentioned directions in which SMM can be applied in B2B marketing strategies, we cannot overlook the importance of the role it has in brand building, creating a strong brand identity (Michaelidou et al., 2001), and all the advantages that come along with brand status and powerful brand equity, such as: high level of awareness (which implies recognition and recall of the brand), perception of higher quality in consumers' minds, favorable associations with the brand and finally, brand loyalty (Aaker, 1993; Keller, 2003). In the context of the globalization phenomenon which defines the modern business environment, it is safe to assume that a brand can achieve a high level of awareness worldwide with effective use of social media.

At an organisational level, studies have emphasized that social media creates a two-way communication and virtual co-creation (Simula et al., 2013), facilitating interorganisational collaboration (Moor et al., 2013; Lacka & Chong, 2016), leading to a better management of product portfolio or creating innovative product offerings, which can differentiate the company from its competitors (Bughin et al., 2009; Jussila, Karkkainen, & Leino, 2013). Increase of sales and reduction of product distribution time can be achieved with the use of social media (McKinsey, 2013).

Although it is understood from the above-stated facts that the use of social media platforms in marketing purposes provides a multitude of advantages for B2B companies, adopting these types of strategies is still met with skepticism by professionals in the respective sector. This can be partially attributed to misunderstanding of the concept of Social Media Marketing (Lu, Zhou, & Wang, 2009; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Järvinen et al., 2012), which can create a negative attitude towards it, resulting in failure to acknowledge the benefits that can arise from using it in the B2B context (Buehrer et al., 2005). Also, another common misconception is that SMM is irrelevant in the B2B sector, and that it suits only B2C companies.

Another reason which makes B2B marketers reluctant in adopting Social Media Marketing strategies can be the lack of control over communication carried throughout these platforms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Their opinion is that, due to this lack of control, information exchange via these sites enhances the risk of company confidential information leaking, which can have a

profound negative impact on the future of the business (Kaplan și Haenlein, 2010; Simula et al., 2013).

A study conducted by Swani & Brown (2011) reveals that B2B marketers share a common belief that social media websites are incompatible with the nature of the B2B sector, in which the industrial partners are highly involved in the acquisition process. Generally, B2B partners usually require individual approach and face-to face interaction (direct communication with their partners is always preferred, due to the fact that negotiation can be a key element in most cases of B2B transactions), which cannot happen via online channels (Lacka & Chong, 2016). Some B2B marketing professionals consider that online marketing communication can be considered impersonal in these types of businesses. Thus, they are faced with the constant struggle of deciding whether or not they should implement such marketing strategies in their business plan, how will they adopt these strategies and whether or not they will obtain favorable results.

Despite the existing barriers (impediments) which can prevent the use of Social Media marketing in B2B companies, it is revealed by existing research that there are some innovative marketers who embraced these new marketing technologies, establishing their companies' presence in the social media environment. Moreover, they intend to make greater investment efforts and increase the budget for SMM (Van Den Bulte & Wuyts, 2007; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Veldman, Van Praet & Mechant, 2015). There is a slow, but steady growth in the recognition of the value of using SMM among B2B marketing professionals and creating marketing strategies around them is currently turning into a trend (Swani, Milne & Brown, 2013; Brennan & Croft, 2012; Lacka & Chong, 2016).

4. Case study: Maersk Company

In this paper, we will be taking into consideration a case-study approach in which we will analyse the Social Media marketing efforts of a global logistics service provider, namely the Maersk Group, based on information provided by a previous research journal conducted by Katona & Sarvary (2014), describing the entire process of the company's social media marketing strategy and its outcomes.

A.P. Møller - Mærsk, globally known as Maersk, is a Danish multinational conglomerate with activities in the fields of transport, logistics and energy. Since 1996, Maersk has become the largest container and supply vessel operator in the world (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maersk>). The continuously growing industry of container transport between 2001 and 2006, as a result of globalization and outsourcing, was a good year for Maersk, as they acquired different companies to build a solid global base. In addition, they have invested in increased ship capacity. With the financial crisis of 2008, there was a decline in the market, the company had excessive capacity and they were in a vicious cycle of price competition. This was not the position Maersk Line wanted to be in and due to the pressure generated by the current business environment, management sought to differentiate it as a premium brand. With this objective in mind, they needed to develop a customer experience that would make them stand out in the face of competition.

Therefore, in 2009, they initiated a customer initiative and hired Beyond Philosophy (a reputed advertising company) to help guide them, work with their team, and provide a range of tools and techniques to help them implement a new customer experience in the shortest and most efficient time periods.

The first step was trying to understand the current Maersk Line experience. This provided valuable insights into customer experiences and ways to improve them and thus determined the extent to which Maersk focused on consumer activity. Following this experiment, the recommendation from the specialists was to focus more on the emotional side of the clients' experiences, rather than the analytical approach, focused on the management of the transactions they were used to. They were also advised to establish a target in making customers sense the following feelings in their experience with the company: trust, safety, satisfaction, through different actions and managerial approaches. All these objectives could be obtained through social media networking.

5. Launching the SMM strategy

The decisive moment of launching Maersk in social media was met with internal and external skepticism, everyone having the general perception that the conservative image they created for themselves and the company's field of activity is incompatible with such a marketing approach, catalogued as „frivolous” or „playful”. Therefore, for those involved in the strategy development it was a real challenge. In developing the social media strategy for Maersk Line, the four areas that were emphasized were: communications, customer service, sales and internal use (Katona&Sarvary, 2014). The objective was to strengthen the customer relationship and to understand the opportunities to get a better exposure in other environments, better engagement of employees, increase brand awareness, etc. To get a better relationship with its customers, Maersk started to think like a B2C company, stating that while they are a B2B company, its customers are also represented by people who, like in B2C businesses, would like better interaction with the company.

6. Building Social Media presence

Initially, the company's Head of Social Media, Jonathan Wickmann, began posting content that were deemed unappealing, but then discovered the digital archive of Maersk Line with 14,000 photographs of ships, seascapes and harbors, which no one had used. "I knew I could share them and add stories," he said. This rich history of the company was something they could share that was unique.

Such photos were mixed with other posts, such as: "Maersk Line increases with the best permanent reliability percentage of 82.9% in the third quarter, according to the new Drewry report on program reliability". Among these posts were added more photos under titles such as "Management", which included photos of the management team in several scenarios. Wickmann laid the foundation for the public and users who liked to take pictures with Maersk ships around the world, posting on the company's official social media accounts the photos of Maersk ships photographed by professionals or enthusiastic amateurs, thus creating a community in the online environment.

In the first 11 months, Maersk Line attracted over 400,000 people on their Facebook page. Many of the "likes" were from employees. This was part of a strategy designed to engage the company's 25,000 employees so that they could help achieve viralisation among their friends. Taking into consideration that seven thousand of Maersk Line's 25,000 employees are navigators, and Facebook has become an important channel for them to connect with colleagues, people at home and by accessing the company's Facebook page, family and friends will gain a better understanding and improve their knowledge regarding the significance of the company and of the field they work in. The company publishes pictures of their employees' daily work, including critical situations, such as pirates approaching the bay of Aden or dramatic images of voyages conducted under terrible weather conditions (Katona&Sarvary, 2014). This was an opportunity to reveal to the public the risks associated with working in this activity domain. The Maersk Line Facebook page is followed by NGOs, Maersk Line employees and potential employees, competition, suppliers, or shipping enthusiasts.

While actively posting on Facebook, Wickmann started launching Maersk Line on other social media platforms, such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Until the fall of 2013, Maersk Line was live on 10 different social platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, Instagram, Vimeo, Flickr, Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram).

Overall, the company used Facebook to engage with followers in a very visual and conversational way, with Twitter as a news station and LinkedIn as a platform to target professionals in the field, as well as for recruitment purposes. Instagram and Flickr. Instagram was one of the key elements in the social media marketing strategy for Maersk. Initially, it started as a leisure activity, and the use of it was for sheer enjoyment; they had a variety of photos they wanted to share while using the retro filters available on Instagram to make the photos look older or classic. Later, they realized that there is more to it than that - by inspiring people around the world to take pictures of our ships and containers, using the hashtag #maersk, they accessed the most

visible part of the company, exposing it to the public(Katona&Sarvary,2014).

7. Conclusions

In this extremely dynamic business environment, characterised by rapid and continuous innovation due to the "technological explosion", B2B companies need to adapt their marketing strategies according to the new market trends, to fulfill the needs of its consumers. By implementing social media marketing, Maersk managed to build communities among professionals, employees and current or potential clients. The image of the company has been improved, gaining personality (through posts related to employees, work environment, activities undertaken, projects, social involvement, etc.).

Through the SMM activities (Social Media Marketing) that contributed to a favorable image of the company, employer branding took place, so the companies increased their chances of recruiting new employees, to receive feedback from current and former employees, making it possible for the company to reassess HR policies. The creation of content has led to a better information of the clients, offering a clearer picture on their field of activity.

The conductors of this marketing initiative mentioned some qualitative aspects of Maersk's socializing efforts. In the first year of social media on the Maersk Line, they received numerous emails from colleagues around the world, consisting of positive feedback and their thoughts about implementing social media into their marketing strategy. Nowadays, Maersk Line has a prominent presence on social media. The people involved feel more proud of the company they work for and have the possibility to share it with their friends and family. Internally, Maersk's Q4 2012 study, "The Next Step: How to Unlock the Full Potential of Social Media," showed that of the surveyed and non-customers (followers and non-followers), 67.1 percent of respondents said that Maersk's presence on social media had improved the perception of customers regarding the company's brand image (Katona&Sarvary,2014).

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