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Interaction with customers using website tools: analysis of Lithuanian manufacturing sector

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Abstract

The development of information and communications technologies (ICT) and new marketing channels have led to the changes in marketing and the emergence of new scientific problems. The specific aspects of nowadays virtual space reveal the growing importance of the communication and the relationship with the customer. The rapid development and dynamic changes in the markets forces companies to search for the most efficient tools and innovative ways of communication with users on the Internet which would allow an increase in interaction. This is important for every business, however, the current paper will deal with specifics of the manufacturing sector. The aim of the article is to analyze and identify specifics of implemented web tools for interactive communication with customers in the Lithuanian manufacturing sector. The following methods were employed: the comparative analysis of the scientific literature, observation, and data analysis.

Keywords: internet marketing; online advertising; e-business; e-consumer; Lithuanian e-market study.

1. Introduction

The information revolution has a huge impact on the economy. It should be noted that the traditional business processes are being transferred to the virtual space, new forms of business emerge, the number of tools for communication with customers is growing, and etc. The generation of users to which the Internet becomes a part of the daily routine (e.g., they do not imagine any other way of searching for information and do not see their lives without being in the social Internet spaces, such as social networking sites, blogs, online interest groups, etc.) is

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growing (Pabedinskaitė & Davidavičius, 2012; Kiškis, 2009; Powers, Advincula, Austin, & Graiko, 2013; Sharma & Sheth, 2004; Urbanas, 2012). Thus, the digital content – including social media – is pervasive in daily life, its influence on consumers' lives is unquestionable and powerful (Powers, Advincula, Austin, & Graiko, 2013), and considering the existing situation, it is particularly important for the organizations to take more active measures in order to represent themselves in the virtual world. Therefore, understanding the technology-driven change in marketing has critical importance to marketers, as it bears new customers, new brands, new markets, and new market leaders, new market channels and marketing tools (Tiago & Tiago, 2012). The data presented by Oxford University's Internet Institute (2013) indicates the growth of e-space, the Internet World Stat data shows that there was 518.512.109 Internet users in the continental Europe in 2012, and at his is 21,5% of all Internet users in the world. Despite that not all enterprises exploiting advantages of online marketing as a new interaction channel. The peculiarity of this field is that the object and subject are changing rapidly (these changes are caused by many factors such as economic, cultural, social, political, technological environment), so regular research and analysis of market and environmental changes are needed. These circumstances frame the topicality of this subject.

In order to understand the changes determined by the development of IT, the research of e-space of Israel, Holland, Germany, Lithuania, Russia and Ukraine has been carried out. The purpose of this article is to identify peculiarities of using e-marketing tools for interactive communication with customers in the manufacturing sector of Lithuania, and present them in comparison with practice of other European countries. The following methods were employed: the comparative analysis of the scientific literature, observation, and data analysis.

2. Related work

2.1. The growing potential of the web market

The Internet market is relatively young, but it is growing at a high speed, providing potentially new opportunities for business in communication with consumers. Despite the initial purpose of the Internet (communication via e-mail messages and the exchange of digital information) the pioneers of the Internet marketing (Marc Andreesen, Ken McCarthy, Craig "Buz" Buszko, etc.) revealed the growing potential of a new market to reach consumers and to provide them with useful information (Liu, 2010). Afterwards the dynamic development of IT as well as changes in the Internet marketing followed.

Fig. 1 highlights the main e-space development stages, which is important for further analysis. The first stage of the Internet marketing was e-mail (the first e-mail dispatched in 1971), and e-mail itself is the first Internet marketing tool. Later, companies started to create web sites and generate visitors flow. In year 2000 simultaneously with the search systems formation (Yahoo!, Google), the irritating blinking banner advertisements era came, and it finished with the introduction of the option for the user – "to disable the intrusive advertising". Thus, the move was made to new, science-based "permission" marketing. The subsequent emergence of Web 2.0 technology stage determined the transformation of the Internet market into the global society, in which special attention is paid to the relations marketing aimed at the establishment of contact with the client, the promotion and maintenance of customer loyalty. However, it has not solved the problem of irritating marketing tools. Many authors describe the years 2000–2004 as a transition from mass marketing to personalized one (Liu, 2010; Sharma & Sheth, 2004; Sheth & Sisodia, 2002; Urbanas, 2012). Constantinides, Lorenzo-Romero, & Alarcon-del-Amo (2013) classify social networks, which they define as the second generation network applications that allow creating individual virtual networks, as a part of Web 2.0 technology. The field of social networking is currently becoming one of the most rapidly growing markets in the Internet environment, connecting millions of users worldwide. In summary, the potential of the Internet market to reach consumers is growing; new means of communication that change the essence of the market emerge, moving from Web 3.0 to Web 4.0 technologies. It should be emphasized that the Internet and a breakthrough it made in business performance has a great influence on changes of money, communication and exchange platforms, that it encourages the development of the global e-markets, where the efficiency of activities can be measured by success of usage of e-marketing tools and the Internet penetration (Chinn & Fairlie, 2012; Davidavičienė, 2012; Pabedinskaitė & Davidavičius, 2012; Sun & Wang, 2012).
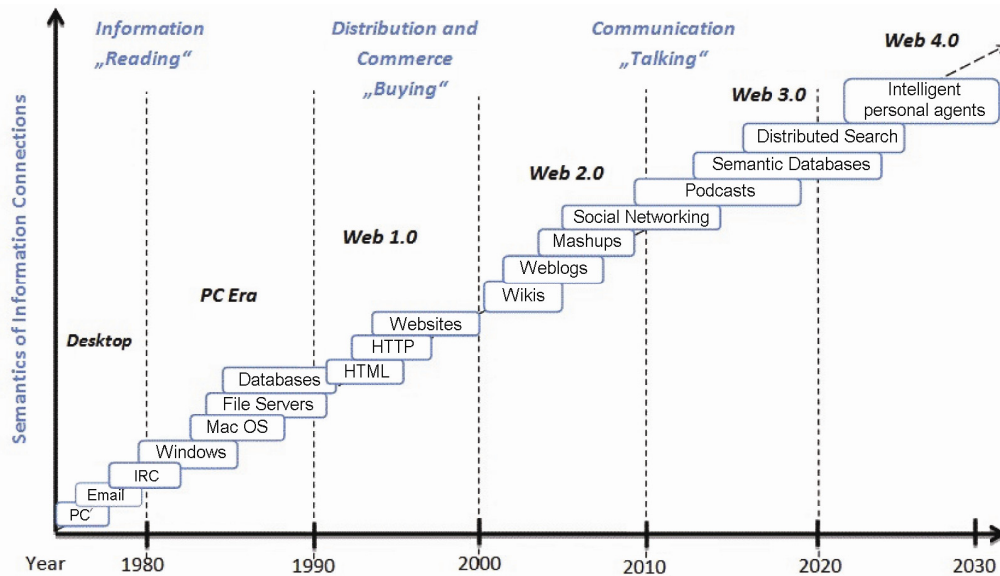
Fig. 1. Evolution of Web technologies (Source: Adapted from Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012; Spivack, 2007)

In parallel with technological development and marketing changes the communication specifics should be analyzed. The classification of marketing communication proposed by Kiang, Raghu and Shang (2000) reveal the main issues that should be taken in to account during the research from the e-business point of view:

- *the communication channel,* that can be used for the exchange of information between the seller and the buyer in order to: obtain, process and transmit information; enhance interactivity and comprehensible experience; collect information about customers by means of various surveys and contests for the development of new products, relations and adaptation for personal needs
- *the transaction channel*, that can be used for sales activities in order to: improve the visibility and to reach a wider audience; increase income by cross-sale; simplify transactions process by reducing the complexity of tasks, document processing and transactions costs; personalize advertising and sales for individual clients and to increase flexibility
- *the distribution channel,* that can be used for physical exchange of goods and services in order to: avoid storage costs, and other costs; in order to shorten the distribution chain and to reduce costs

The three channels mentioned above emphasize the main trends, but in e-marketing communication in manufacturing sector extremely important are such questions as alternative communication channels, e-logistics, social communication and social networks in B2B communication. Main authors working in related areas will be overviewed in next chapter.

2.2. Previous studies in e-business and e-marketing areas

In order to provide sequential research of web tools for interactive communication with customers used in Lithuanian manufacturing sector, it is important to identify the current trends in exploration of e-business and e-marketing areas. Research in e-business and e-marketing can be divided into such main areas:

- *Studies on quality measurement of e-commerce* and *quality of website structure measurement studies* (Alba, Lynch, Weitz, Janiszewski, Lutz, Sawyer, & Woodm, 1997; Cao, Zhang, & Seydel, 2005; Dholakia & Zhao,

2009; Guseva, 2010; Janda, Trocchia, & Gwinner, 2002; Santos, 2003; Taylor & Kaya, 2010; Aladwani, 2006; Barnes & Vidgen, 2003; Loiacono, Watson, & Goodhue, 2007; Parasuraman, 2005)

- ***Studies on web site communication elements*** (Virtsonis & Harridge-March, 2008; Alper 1999; Ghose & Dou, 1998; Olsina, Godoy, Lafuente & Rossi, 1999; Judd, 2006)
- ***Studies of web advertising efficiency*** (Cutrell & Guan, 2007; Pabedinskaitė & Davidavičius, 2012);
- ***Studies of e-commerce behaviour*** (Alzola & Robaina, 2010; Dennis, Merrilees, Jayawardhena, & Wright, 2009; Hashim, Ghani, & Said, 2009; Su, Li, Song, & Chen, 2008);
- ***Studies on Social Media (SM) usage in B2C communication*** (de Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012; Sachs-Hombach, 2005; Soares, Pihno & Nobre, 2012; Stephen & Galak, 2012; Zhang, Dubinsky & Tan, 2013) and ***Social Media (SM) usage in B2B communication*** (Pabedinskaitė & Davidavičius, Culnan, McHugh & Zubillaga, 2010; Riemer & Richter, 2010);
- ***Studies on ICT or website security*** (Radovanovic, Radojevic, Lucic, & Sarac, 2010; Stewart, 2004).

Number of studies on Social Media in different industries were conducted (Barnes 2010; Senadheera, Warren & Leitch, 2011) as well as social networks (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Google+) in social communication were analyzed (Dave Chaffey, 2011; U. M. Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Klein Pearo, 2004). Social networks could be described as communities, defined as groups of people who have common interests and identified in academic literature as an element of web site communications (Farquhar & Rowley, 2006, cited in Virtsonis & Harridge-March, 2008). According to Levina and Vilnai-yavetz (2013), Barnes and Mattson, 2010, who analyzed the e-behavior of Fortune 500 companies, focused only on a limited set of industry categories, so more detailed analysis in order to reveal the B2B communication peculiarities in e-environment needed. Hence, providing services or especially selling goods, sharing experience and knowledge in e-space by B2B model is harder, than in B2C sector because of lack possibilities of first-hand experience in quality assessment caused by the nature of services (Frieden & Goldsmith, 1989, cited in Virtsonis & Harridge-March, 2008). In the next capture detailed analysis of B2B internet marketing specifics will be provided.

2.3. The specifics of Internet marketing in B2B communication

The Internet offers marketers the widest spectrum of advertising tools and formats, use of which depends on the specifics of the target audience, its behavioral patterns, cultural aspects, habits etc. Many of issues faced by Business-to-Business marketers can be addressed through the internet's interactivity and availability (Virtsonis & Harridge-March, 2008). Business-to-Business marketing is about meeting the requirements of other businesses, and Hague et al. (2006) have emphasized the fact that B2B is a more complex decision-making unit in comparison with B2C, which is one of the main challenges in B2B marketing as well as issues with products which are more complex, so B2B marketers needs to have full knowledge and technical expertise in providing technical details to the customers. Wright (2006) has identified the following features of B2B: decision-making structure is complex and the process involves a lot of people; decision-making could be delayed, depending on the purchase value; rational reasons for ordering; high value of product/service, contacts, projects and consulting; the final consumer probably will not be a decision-maker; since the process time increases, suppliers have the access to decision-makers. In this context, the dissemination of the information related to a product or a company in the e-space that could be reached by the target audience is particularly important. Also, an important aspect of B2B communication is company's image and prestige, which is often reflected in the consumer response and by the company's visibility in e-space.

Online advertising can be classified in to: search advertising, display advertising, classified listings and e-mail based ads (Burns, Lutz 2006; Evans 2008; Evans 2009). Jensen (2008) argues that no accepted framework for categorization of online advertising exists and suggests a way to categorize these tools into six major disciplines in accordance with Chaffey, Chadwick, Johnston, & Mayer (2006), where they are categorized by the way they are generally used:

- *search marketing: search engine advertising (SEA); search engine optimization (SEO).* Search marketing is an encompassing term to denote all the techniques that can be utilized to make a certain website visible in the search

engines (Chaffey, Chadwick, Johnston & Mayer, 2009). The search results page is divided into the organic search results that are based on the relevance of the web page to the keywords entered by the user (SEO) and the paid search results which are clearly demarcated text advertisements (SEA) that also look like search results (Evans, 2009; Lee, 2007). The sponsored search is a mechanism to compete the negativity related to interactive advertising. Those ranked after the top five usually are treated as ineffective

- *online public relations: portal presentations; blogs, RSS, podcasts; social media; community C2C posts; wikis; micro*-blogging. Online public relations includes all the activities performed by a company to maximize favorable mentions of its company, brand or website in a range of third party websites such as blogs, social networks and etc., where the target audiences of the company are likely to visit (Chaffey, Chadwick, Johnston, & Mayer, 2009; Chaffey, Chadwick, Johnston, & Mayer, 2006; Pabedinskaite & Fiodorovaite, 2012)
- *interactive advertising: display ads, banner ads; rich media; websites, microsites; online games; video* marketing. Interactive advertising can be defined as the use of online display advertisements such as banners, skyscrapers, and rich media in order to achieve brand awareness and encourage click through to a target website
- *online partnerships: link building; sponsorships; affiliate marketing; co-branding.* The most commonly used tools of *online partnerships* are: link-building, sponsorship, co-branding (an arrangement between two or more companies where they agree to jointly display content and to conduct joint promotions using brand logos or advertisements), affiliate marketing (a scheme where a company pays another affiliate for links that are generated via the affiliate's website to the company's website)
- *opt-in e-mail: cold (rented list); co-branded e-mail; 3rd party e-newsletter; houslist e-mail.* Types of e-mail advertisements: e-mail newsletters, e-mail discussion lists, the subscribed e-mail marketing channels. E-mail is a great form of communication, however, it is the least effective when it comes to marketing
- *viral marketing: web/e-mail prompt; pass along e-mails; incentivized e-mails; gene-rating media mentions.* Viral marketing is an advertising method that encourages people to pass along a message. Terms as *buzz marketing, word-of-mouth* are used as synonyms of viral marketing in the literature. Viral marketing is an efficient way to distribute a message to a wide audience and facilitate building a list (Blumberg, Forman, & Miller, 2005)

The conducted studies give vision of Internet advertising tools, but for the research of the Lithuanian manufacture sector e-marketing peculiarities just some of the internet marketing tools of website communication were chosen: form of contact (mail, phone, contact form, chat) and social networks. This paper targets and investigates the Lithuanian manufacturing sector enterprises and compares them with European countries in the use of SM, e-marketing tools, and e-commerce specifics.

3. Framework

3.1. Research design

This research is explorative in nature and aimed at investigating and describing the usage of web site communication elements of the manufacturing sector in Lithuania in comparison with EU counties. The observation method was chosen for the research of enterprises of various sizes (they were sampled according to the industry). In cases where the manufacturing enterprises were represented by a homepage, the homepage has been investigated further for aspects.

Manufacturing enterprises, having websites were selected: manufacturers of Fashion industry (producers and marketers of clothes, shoes, jewelries and cosmetics), drugs companies (drug producers), hi-tech companies (producers and marketers of software and hardware), products and services for kids (clothing, food, toys, etc.), food products makers and marketers. The research data analysis was performed according to main 5 groups of criteria:

1. Presentation of company, products and services.
2. Readiness to initiate sale using online payment channels.
3. Personalization possibilities – website interactivity (registration form).
4. Form of contact (mail, phone, contact form, chat).
5. Usage of social networks.

3.2. Research Sample

The findings are based on the analysis of the data of the wider research result, conducted in the framework of European Commission funded TEMPUS project "ECOMMIS". Initially the online presence of 2379 enterprises from six European and non-European countries and 27 industries, focusing on different e-solutions in B2B and B2C communication were analyzed. Table 1 presents the countries and regions and the number of enterprises surveyed accordingly. 90 Lithuanian and 196 EU manufacturing enterprises of various sizes and from different manufacturing industry areas were extracted and analyzed towards their use of Internet web tools for interactive communication with customers.

Table 1. Overview of the research sample: per country and regions

Region	Country	Number of enterprises
Middle East	Israel	400
Western Europe	Germany	400
	Netherlands	400
Eastern Europe	Lithuania	511
	Russia	400
	Ukraine	268

4. Findings

Research revealed that the usage of e-tools in some cases significantly differs between Lithuania and the EU countries. The cross-country analysis revealed that Lithuania is leading in the percentage of manufacturing enterprises using at least one e-tool, while the EU countries are leading in the intensity of e-tools, especially of social media tools, usage. Main findings, showing the picture of the e-space of the country are:

- 62% of Lithuanian manufacturing businesses have the English website version, while in the EU only 33% of companies have the English version of the website
- Only 71% of Lithuanian manufacturing companies' websites has detailed information about products and services, while in the EU: 85% of websites are providing detailed information
- 70% of the analyzed Lithuanian websites do not provide a possibility to pay online, while in the EU only 36% of websites do not accept online payments
- 83% of the EU websites have a phone number listed, while in Lithuania 97% of websites have a phone number. 94% of Lithuanian companies provide a contact email on the website, in the EU: only 64% of companies provide a phone number. Most Lithuanian manufacturing companies may be contacted using a regular mail (physical or mailing address), 81% of websites provide a regular address. In the EU only 28% of websites provide this information
- Online chat is not very popular in Lithuania manufacturing sector and the EU, but in the EU 11% of websites use this function, while in Lithuania online chat is available only on 8% of websites
- Only 4% of websites of Lithuanian manufacturing sector have social links, while in the EU 24% of websites have „social" links: links to their profiles in social networks or „like/share" buttons. Only 40% of Lithuanian websites have a page in Facebook social networking site. In the EU 69% of companies have profile in Facebook (Facebook page style presented in Fig. 2)
- 38% of Lithuanian companies use a Facebook page for representation of business information, while in the EU – 61% use a Facebook page for company representation and 6% – for information and service
- 25% of Lithuanian websites have a registration form, offering a website visitor to register and get further information or customize the website content. In the EU 58% of websites provide a registration service
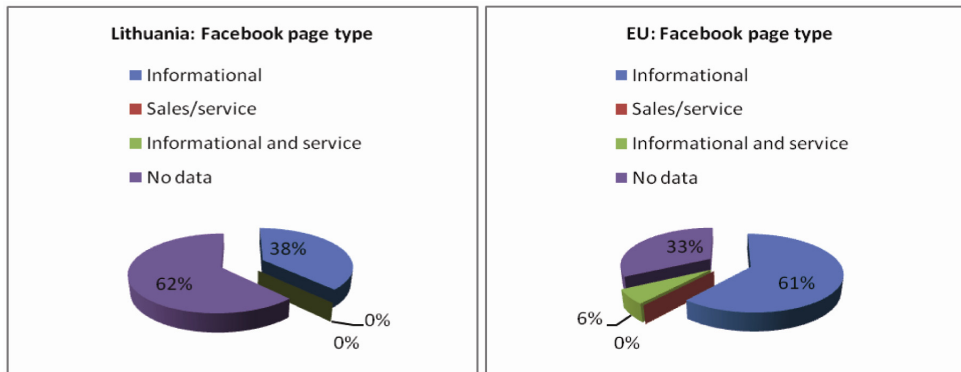
Fig. 2. Types of Facebook pages of companies

- In Lithuania 6% of manufacturing companies websites have links to current customers, in the EU this value is the same – 6%
- 44% of Lithuanian manufacturing companies websites provide link to business partners, in the EU – only 22%
- In general, the most popular Social media channel is Facebook followed by Twitter and YouTube (24.1%)

Also, it was noticed, that top companies (named in top 100 rankings) use Social media more intensively, and the results show the importance and position of the Social media and it is considered an important instrument in self-presentation of enterprises. These findings confirms that information connections are moving from web 2.0 area to web 3.0, according to Fig. 1, presented in 2.1 chapter of this article.

The Lithuanian business websites' weaknesses recommended to improve are: provide links to companies' products and/or services; provide detailed information on business products and services; enable online payments; provide phone number, email, enable online chat and use contact forms; communicate using social networks: create ability to like/share/recommend the website and/or products and services; enable online presence in social networks, using interactive Facebook pages, create additional value for registered website users.

5. Conclusions

The speed of e-markets growth is high, so the potentially new opportunities in communication with consumers provided by it are vitally important for business. The dynamic development of IT as well as changes in the Internet marketing dictates the need for constant research and analysis of the markets and B2B communication changes. Since the Internet offers wide spectrum of tools for advertising, communication and interaction, as well as formats, use of which depends on the specifics of the target audience, its behavioral patterns, cultural aspects, habits etc., the research area become complex, and needs systemic approach.

This paper explored the usage and adoption of e-marketing tools on the websites of enterprises in the Lithuanian manufacturing sector in comparison with the EU countries. The focus of the research was on the question of how manufacturing businesses use web communication channels, present information on websites and which e-marketing tools for communication are commonly used in Lithuania and in the EU countries.

The results confirm that Facebook is the most popular social media channel. It was found that all industries use at least one of the social media tools.

The weaknesses of website of Lithuanian manufacturing sector which were identified are: lack of provide links to companies' products and/or services, as well as lack of detailed information on business products and services provided. There is relatively low extent of implemented tools for online payments. The social media for B2B communication is not enough exploit. So, Lithuanian companies, operating in the manufacturing sector, should pay additional attention to trends of the EU business websites and not only enable the English version of the website, but provide sufficient and detailed information about business products and services and enable efficient communication using modern technologies; enable online payments and ability to customize website (e.g. create additional value

providing additional information to the registered website users) and participate in social interaction with customers, efficiently communicating via social networks.

Research once again highlighted the importance and need of constant research of usage peculiarities and choice of e-marketing tools in order to identify trends and form the models which ensure efficient B2B communication in the web.

Acknowledgements

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