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Social Media Strategies in the Retail Sector: Analysis and Recommendations for Three Multi-National Retailers

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ABSTRACT

During the last twenty years (1995-2015), the world of commerce has expanded beyond the traditional brick-and-mortar high street to a global shop front accessible to billions of users via the Worldwide Web (WWW). Consumers are now using the web to immerse themselves in virtual shop fronts, using Social Media (SM) to communicate and share product ideas with friends and family. Retail organisations recognise the need to develop and adapt their strategies to respond to the increasing use of SM. New goals must be set in order to identify how companies will integrate social media into current practices. This research aims to suggest an advisable and comprehensive SM strategy for companies operating in the global retail sector, based on an exploratory analysis of three multi-national retail organisations' existing SM strategies. This will be assessed in conjunction with a broader investigation into social media in the retail industry. From this, a strategy will be devised to improve internal and external communication as well as knowledge management through the use of social media. Findings suggest that the use of SM within the retail industry has dramatically improved collaboration and communication processes for organisations as they are now able to converse better with stakeholders and the tools are relatively simple to integrate and implement as they benefit one another.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing~Social media** • *Information systems~Internet communications tools*.

Keywords

Employee Collaboration; Knowledge Management; Retail Sector; Social Media Adoption; Social Media Strategy; Stakeholder Communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world of commerce has diversified dramatically in the last twenty years (1995-2015) from traditional 'brick-and-mortar' shopfronts to online retail outlets where WWW users are now able to purchase products and services from the comfort of their own

home or on the move via internet-enabled computers, mobiles and, most recently, wearable devices. e-Commerce has grown in to a trillion dollar industry and to date, approximately 40% of WWW users have purchased goods or services online; to put that in to perspective, 1,200,000,000 / 3,000,000,000 (1.2 billion) people have made purchases online via either desktop, mobile, tablet or a wearable device. e-Commerce offers an attractive opportunity for retailers who typically sell their goods via high-street commercial units or mail order catalogues, including 1) an increase in geographical selling opportunities: e-Commerce creates a global storefront which is open 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year to a market of 3 billion potential customers; 2) growth in new customers through improved visibility and reach via search engines and social media campaigns; 3) reduction in overhead costs, including workforce, marketing and commercial real estate *inter alia*; and 4) improved analytics of consumer buying habits and purchasing trends.

In 2014, 12% of all retail sales were made online and this number is continuing to grow at a rapid rate [1]. PricewaterhouseCoopers [2] forecast an 'Increasingly digital retail environment' as shoppers now have 'infinite visibility into product choice'; they argue that the key reason behind this is the explosion of social media sites and their power to connect customers with one another. This provides greater control over purchasing whilst an increasingly personalised shopping experience to the end user. The importance of these trends and forecasts is that they reinforce the necessity for organisations in the retail sector to use SM and highlight the relevance to the sector. Whilst online shopping becomes more common, SM presence and investment for retailers should similarly increase as the two coexist and will benefit one another. This has been the case for large retail organisations, such as Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart as their combination of SM tools, especially through the 'Social Media Trinity' proposed by Safko [3], has supported their growth in online sales and directed followers to products or offers with ease.

This paper aims to critically analyse the existing use of SM sites within the Retail Industry (RI) against Safko's [3] 'Five Steps to Social Media Success' in order to offer an industry-focused strategy for companies operating within the sector. An in-depth study into social media's impact on Internal Communication (IC) and External Communication (EC), as well as Knowledge Management (KM) will be provided. We examine existing literature in section 2 in conjunction with an analysis of three dominant retailers: Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart. The reasoning for choosing these three retailers as case studies is based on their high-ranking in the 'Top 250 Global Retailers' report, produced by Deloitte in 2015 [4]. Additionally, these firms provide a wider scope, as Tesco and Wal-Mart operate predominantly through

brick and mortar shopfront, whilst Amazon is predominantly an online retailer. In 2013, the global retail sector accumulated revenues of $4.4 trillion solely from the top 250 retailers with the average individual organisations' revenue reaching $17.42 billion [4]. These figures demonstrate the sheer size of this industry and one common tool used by such companies is SM.

1.1 Web 2.0 and Social Media

Web 2.0 is currently disrupting the methods used by retailers to communicate both internally and externally with consumers and between employees. McKinsey and Company acknowledge that the greater integration and use of Web 2.0 in the corporate environment, the higher the measurable benefit is for an organisation. Fuchs [5] describes Web 2.0 as "…web-based platforms that support online social networking, community-building and maintenance, collaborative information production and sharing, and user-generated content production, diffusion, and consumption." In recent times, platforms such as Blogs, Wikis, RSS Feeds, Microblogs and video sharing sites have been created and become an integral part of everyday life for the majority of the 3 billion daily internet users [6]. As a result, businesses are becoming aware of the power of SM and the need to integrate it into their operations. Retailers are experiencing numerous benefits through using SM, including: greater insight into consumer feedback and preferences towards new and existing; streamlining of internal communication processes; and a reduction in cost of face-to-face communication. Historically, however, SM is viewed as a marketing tool [7]. Over time, organisations are seeing the benefit of it towards organisational IC, EC and KM [8].

With the potential to improve communication, motivation and innovation, amongst other measures, SM is being implemented at a rapid pace within the retail sector. Supporting reasoning behind this can be seen in the UK where, in 2014, 4.4 million people were employed within 539,000 retail businesses [9]. The sector is expected to continue to grow, reinforcing the need for continued investment. This is due to several factors, including the fact that workforces and supply chains are becoming increasingly diverse. Along with this comes the international dispersion of employees and customers supporting the need to improve communications and knowledge management through the use of SM.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Knowledge Management and SM

Knowledge management is described by Groff and Jones [10] as actions undertaken by a company, in line with corporate objectives, to make the best use of organisational and employee knowledge. Effective KM can support an organisation's competitiveness and success. Zhang [11] highlights the importance of creating new customer knowledge as well as effectively managing existing customer knowledge. It is evident from the literature that traditional KM systems (KMS) were difficult to implement, manage and analyse and often only larger organisations could afford to utilise them [12]. KMS were also often inflexible in customization, difficult to use and maintain by smaller organisations. This view is supported by Kaplan [13] who explained that employees were the reason behind the low adoption levels of KM systems, as they did not have time to use them or were trying to protect their jobs. With Web 2.0, companies of all sizes can employ cloud-based solutions which provide remote working for employees working in dispersed teams.

Literature also supports the argument that with the existence of SM, effective KM is now easier to implement and manage, with the potential of becoming very valuable. Hemsley and Mason [14]

argues that SM enables faster, easier and more widespread sharing of knowledge whilst also building networks. In a study by Mason and Barzilai-Nahon [15], they found that organisations who block the use of SM in the organisation are negatively impacting the levels of innovation, knowledge seeking and the amount of connections made. In some studies, SM has been found to outperform traditional media tools and is developing organisations from e-learning to social-learning [16]. Although it is evident that SM tools are essential for success with modern day KM, they must not be underestimated as 'easy to implement'. According to O'Dell and Hubert [17] it requires change from all levels of management and a shift in culture. In detail, this means managers and supervisors must support the use of SM and encourage the creation of content amongst other employees.

Different platforms provide different roles, as wikis, for example, exist to support content creation, whilst blogs can be used for content sharing. Social networking sites, such as Facebook.com can be used for connecting people and networking between colleagues [18]. Therefore, depending on the organisations strengths, weaknesses and needs, a selection or a mix of these SM tools should be implemented to strengthen and enhance KM within a company. Numerous Enterprise 2.0 products now exist in order to support KM initiatives. Industrial products include Salesforce Chatter, Yammer and Basecamp which are predominately offered as one-off packages or as a Software as a Service (SaaS) solution, which may be deployed across various business functions within an organisation or supply chain; these tools allow employees to better communicate, collaborate and share information and knowledge with dispersed and co-located colleagues. Tesco, for instance, have recently developed a smartphone application for staff which helps manage stock levels and informs them what to do if there is an issue with stock, as well as informing them of new offers [19]. As a result, Tesco is capable of improving both internal and external communication.

2.2 International Communication and SM

Internal communication can be described as "the planned use of communication actions to systematically influence the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of current employees" [20]. With the rise of SM and its worldwide integration into businesses, IC has evolved simultaneously as new channels and platforms have been created, making the use of communication tools within an organisation much easier. Leonardi et al. [21] describes this combination as Enterprise Social Media (ESM) which is defined as 'web-based platforms that allow workers to 1) communicate messages with specific coworkers or broadcast messages to everyone in the organisation; 2) explicitly indicate or implicitly reveal particular coworkers as communication partners; 3) post, edit, and sort text and files linked to themselves or others; and 4) view messages, connections, text, and files communicated, posted, edited and sorted by anyone else in the organisation.

The benefits that can result from using SM to improve IC include an increase in job satisfaction, productivity and retention and these can lead to improved motivation and potentially profit [22]. Bell [23] suggests that Yammer is the most effective ESM tool, as it replicates popular platforms such as Facebook but is orientated towards the use within businesses. Successfully used by retailers such as IKEA and 7-Eleven, Bell [23] highlights that Yammer makes communication across departments much easier and faster. Thomas [24] suggests a similar case for Twitter and emphasises its customisability. Overall, it is evident that by utilising SM for IC, communication can be improved but caution must be made to supporting rather than controlling its use [25].

2.3 External Communication and SM

Literature suggests that when an organisation uses social media for EC, that it is predominantly targeted at stakeholders [26]. Freeman's Stakeholder Theory [27] describes such stakeholders as anyone "who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives" which includes customers, shareholders and suppliers. Argyris and Monu [28] argue that the primary function of EC is to build relationships with customers and to increase loyalty. Research [29] suggests that the utilisation of SM in support of EC speeds up communication and also improves its effectiveness and reach. In a study conducted by Krüger et al. [29] it was found that Facebook and Twitter were the most commonly used SM tools for EC, however this was based solely on German companies. Therefore, its generalisability should be questioned and accounted for, before relying upon it. In a survey based on 2,100 companies, Harvard Business Review [30] found that the most common SM tools used for EC included social networking sites, micro-blogging, wikis and video sharing. Argyris and Monu's [28] 'Eight Affordances' represent the competencies of SM tools which include: Presentability; Self-Expression; Monitorability; Reach; Engagement; Connectivity; Recordability; and Availability. These cover activities of SM with EC such as engaging with stakeholders, collecting data from stakeholders and facilitated monitoring of EC efforts. In conclusion, literature supports the use of SM for EC as it offers a number advantages such as improving the relationship between organisations and stakeholders, as well as providing value from data mining.

3. ASSESSMENT OF WEB-BASED TOOLS AND APPLICATIONS

Based on an analysis of Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart's social media practices completed by the authors, as shown in Table 1, it may be seen that trends emerge with regard to their use. The main lesson recorded relate to their use of Facebook and Twitter, both of which are included in Safko's Social Media Trinity [3] which are argued as key factors for SM success. All three companies have a significant presence on these platforms and their reach and audience is noteworthy. Pinterest is also utilised by the companies, although their presence is not as prominent as compared to the other tools they use.

To assess the use of Facebook and Youtube, both platforms offer analytical services (Facebook Insights and Youtube Analytics). Similar tools exist for Twitter, such as 'Hootsuite' and 'Tweetdeck' which not only provide an analysis of the companies' activities, but also offer the ability to manage posts and content. The impact of such analytical tools is that a retailer is able to roughly examine their Return on Investment (ROI) as these applications provide numerical data in many filterable forms such as 'conversions' or 'click-throughs' that help review content and customer engagement. Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart all incorporate SM into a variety of aspects of their business in order to make it a success. This can be emulated by educating the upper management and hiring generation Y or millennials, as SM has been an integral part of their life [3]. Furthermore, combining young interns with the existing marketing team can significantly support the implementation process.

Table 1. Tesco, Amazon and Wal-Mart: Social Media Activity

Organisation	Social Media Website	Reach	Accounts	Purpose: IC / EC / KM
Tesco	Facebook	1. 1.9 million likes 2. 70,000 likes 3. 1.8 million likes	1. Tesco 2. Tesco Mobile 3. Tesco Lotus	1. Recipes/Promotions/Customer Support *(EC)* 2. Promotions/Info/Entertainment *(EC)* 3. Promotions/Customer Support *(EC)*
	Twitter	1. 382,000 followers 2. 34,800 followers 3. 61,800 followers 4. 80,800 followers 5. 559,400 followers	1. @Tesco 2. @TescoNews 3. @TescoFood 4. @TescoOffers 5. @TescoMobile	1. Recipes/Promotions/Customer Service *(EC)* 2. News about Tesco *(EC)* 3. Tips/Recipes/Promotions *(EC)* 4. Deals and offers *(EC)* 5. Promotions/Info/Entertainment *(EC)*
	LinkedIn	1. 170,000 followers	1. Tesco PLC	1. News/Customer Support/Company News/Promotions *(IC & EC)*
	Inform App	1. 500,000 employees	1. Tesco Inform App	1. Support staff with stock levels, product and general information *(IC & KM)*
	Yammer	1. Restricted Access	1. Tesco Yammer	1. Connect colleagues and helps them work together *(IC & KM)*
	Pinterest	1. 40,200 followers	1. Tesco	1. Tips/Recipes/Promotions *(EC)*
	Youtube	1. 6,447 subscribers 2. 2,679 subscribers 3. 32,373 subscribers 4. 4,468 subscribers 5. 14,4881 subscribers	1. Tesco 2. Tesco PLC 3. Tescofoodandwine 4. Tesco Technology 5. Tesco Lifestyle	1. Offers/News/Recipes *(EC)* 2. Entertainment/News/Adverts *(EC)* 3. Recipes and Tips *(EC)* 4. User guides and reviews *(EC & KM)* 5. Life-hacks/Smart how-to and tutorials *(EC)*
Amazon	Facebook	1. 26.5 million likes 2. 5.5 million likes 3. 5 million likes 4. 3 million likes	1. Amazon.com 2. Amazon.co.uk 3. Amazon Fashion	1. Customer Support/News/Promotions/Customer Stories *(EC)* 2. Customer Support/News/Promotions/Customer Stories - but UK orientated *(EC)* 3. Promotions/User Guides/Product Suggestions *(EC & KM)*

	Twitter	1. 2.7 million followers 2. 40,000 followers 3. 1.6 million followers 4. 534,000 followers	1. @amazon 2. @amazonhelp 3. @amazonuk 4. @amazondeals	1. Promotions/Videos/News/User Guides **(EC)** 2. Customer Support **(EC & KM)** 3. Promotions/Videos/News/User Guides - UK orientated **(EC & KM)** 4. Daily Offers **(EC)**
	Pinterest	1. 27,700 followers 2. 9,700 followers	1. Amazon 2. Amazon fashion	1. Themed lists of products **(EC)** 2. Categorized fashion lists **(EC)**
	Youtube	1. 71,758 subscribers 2. 55,727 subscribers 3. 1,702 subscribers	1. Amazon 2. AmazonWebService 3. Amazon.co.uk	1. Recipes/User Guides/Promotions **(EC & KM)** 2. Video User tutorials **(EC & KM)** 3. Recipes/User Guides/Promotions **(EC & KM)**
Wal-Mart	Facebook	1. 32.7 million likes 2. 1 million likes 3. 570,000 likes	1. Wal-Mart 2. Wal-Mart Canada 3. Wal-Mart Brazil	1. Recipes/Promotions/Customer Support **(EC)** 2. Recipes/Promotions/Customer Support **(EC)** 3. Recipes/Promotions/Customer Support **(EC)**
	Twitter	1. 737,000 followers 2. 24,500 followers 3. 236,000 followers 4. 16,400 followers 5. 16,300 followers 6. 22,100 followers	1. @walmart 2. @walmartcareers 3. @walmarttoday 4. @walmartgiving 5. @walmartlabs 6. @walmartnewsroom	1. Customer Service/Promotions/User Guides **(EC & KM)** 2. Recruitment opportunities and tips **(EC)** 3. Recent news stories **(EC)** 4. Charity-related news **(EC)** 5. Big Data + Social + Mobile **(IC, EC & KM)** 6. Corporate announcements **(IC & EC)**
	Pinterest	1. 64,200 followers	1. Walmart	1. Categorised and themed lists of items/Promotions **(EC)**
	Youtube	1. 105,612 subscribers 2. 10,991 subscribers 3. 1,326 subscribers	1. Walmart 2. Walmart Corporate 3. Walmart Community	1. Money-saving and time-saving tips, New product launches, Entertainment ideas and inspiration **(EC)** 2. Corporate news and activities **(IC & EC)** 3. Connecting staff and customers **(IC & EC)**
	Blogging	1. 20 bloggers	1. Wal-Mart moms	1. Connecting mums to share stories/Promotions **(EC)**.
	My Wal-Mart	1. Restricted Access	1. Mywalmart.com	1. For staff to keep track of hours, benefits and connect with other associates **(IC & KM)**

3.1 Purpose and Activities

As can be seen in Table 1, all three companies use Facebook and Twitter for similar reasons including: to offer promotions; respond to customer complaints and suggestions; to share news, customer stories and recipes; and to host and manage competitions or money-saving promotions. All have a significant presence on their SM accounts and communicate on a daily basis. The majority of their use is for external communication and KM, but for internal communications they tend to use Yammer or their own adaption of this system. Their use of these various platforms, therefore, supports the integration of SM throughout the organisations to benefit and support IC, EC and KM.

To implement a similar SM approach within a retail organisation, Safko [3] recommends that a firm's existing marketing efforts must be analysed. From this, a ROI analysis should be conducted in relation to the amount spent on PR, marketing and sales. The value of this is that it can then be roughly compared to the ROI from the SM campaign. It must also be noted at this point that the two marketing methods should be combined wherever possible and not run independently, as Safko [3] argues that this is an essential factor for SM success. This is evidently seen with Tesco, Amazon and Wal-Mart as their SM platforms are integrated into many aspects of their business, including operations and marketing campaigns. An example of this is that they all include their user accounts on television adverts so that customers know they have a SM presence and are aware of how to follow them. One of the most successful examples of this is Amazon's integration of its online store with Facebook to provide customers

with recommendations and to 'discover your Friend's 'favourites and likes'. This campaign increased sales for Amazon for several reasons, including the fact that customers were exposed to new products and were socially incentivized. Finally, there is an increase in purchases during holidays and birthdays. The advantages of utilising SM are evident, however Safko [3] does argue that a firm must assess its current resources and evaluate any requirements needed to implement SM into an organisation. This is primarily related to staff, as mentioned in section 3, but also relates to resources, such as email databases or knowledge about SM amongst existing staff.

To summarise, although setting up a SM account is quick and simple, its purpose and target audience must be established with an educated and conscientious team behind it. Therefore, caution must be taken and an assessment of an organisation's existing assets is advisable. For it to be successful, it ought to be embedded into as many parts of the company as possible and have the support of all staff, especially senior management. Some of the key reasons for failure in SM success include: 1) lack of detailed SM strategy; reluctance from employees and managers to adjust to SM initiatives; and a lack of data analysis tools, meaning that insightful data can often be ignored or neglected.

4. IMPACT ANALYSIS

In order to assess the impact of SM as a whole or for certain SM campaigns, there are various tools and/or services that can provide statistics and in-depth data analysis of SM activity. These web analytics tools are mainly used to optimise the web usage for

customers. The results are not simply used to analyse a firm's ROI, but can also provide insight into why customers are not purchasing or completing orders. This is called on-site analytics, however there is also off-site analytics which can measure potential audiences' for companies with a SM presence. Such data can originate from the frequency, reach and yield of a SM campaigns. Safko [3] suggests to use a mixture of the following data analysis tools: Google Analytics; Facebook Insights; Hootsuite; Tweetdeck; Seesmic Desktop; Tube Mogul; and Youtube Analytics. These tools focus around the primary SM platforms or the SM trinity, but can be used to analyse other sites such as Youtube. Entire reliance on the results from such analytical software must be taken with caution as confusion can occur from using multiple tools. Furthermore, the information used to provide results is forever changing so results are instantly outdated. However, these analytical programs are of value and are widely used across retailing organisations.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Web 2.0 and Social Media have become an influential and very powerful technology that over 23% of the world's population use [31]. As a marketing tool it requires low investment compared to traditional methods whilst also having a greater reach at a faster rate. It has proved to convert WWW browsers into buyers and dramatically increase online sales and brand awareness. The benefits are arguably endless, however this research has provided strong support towards SM benefiting IC, EC and KM.

Literature suggests that SM may improve connectivity and communication internally and externally for organisations as it is easy to access, widely used and saves time. Analysis of three dominant retailers, Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart supported this theory, as the study showed their extensive use of SM tools and the benefits experienced. It was discovered that KM was previously difficult to adopt, but since the creation of SM and other web-based collaboration tools, companies have experienced improvements in KM. They have also witnessed workforces that are more willing to contribute towards KM systems as they use SM outside of the working environment. Although the primary findings collectively support the use of SM for retailers, there were limitations found that need to be considered. These include issues relating to implementation policies to keep staff aware of the risks and dangers of SM and to represent the company at all times when using SM. Finally, internal tools, including externally-hosted sites such as Yammer, appear difficult to assess and analyse due to the security limitations set by the software which limits access from web analytic tools.

5.1 Recommended Strategy

A survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers [32] in 2011 found that 43% of CEO's recognise that their strategies will develop to respond to the increased use of SM by customers. Steiner and Miner [33] define strategy as a formulation of basic organisational missions, purposes and objectives. One of the main purposes of a strategy is to set goals and targets and plan how the company will go about achieving them. This would be achieved in line with set out policies to guide or limit any actions undertaken. It must also be noted that a successful SM strategy is planned for the long term rather than short term as it takes time to build and create a following and SM presence.

Based on the findings of our research, it would be advisable to first assess the applicable resources available that may support the use of SM, such as marketing and staff engagement. Once all resources are acknowledged, the requirements of initiating a SM

strategy must be assessed to discover disparities that may exist between what is needed and what is available. Once these 'gaps' are filled, which may mean recruiting interns or consultants to educate existing staff on SM, then a plan can be developed with regards to how the organisation will use SM and for what reasons. To achieve this, incorporating the Marketing, Human Resources and IT department is essential as SM should not be run as a silo to other operations, but rather integrated throughout the firm wherever possible.

Our findings support the use of the following platforms for retailers to improve EC and IC: Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Pinterest. As for KM, Yammer or a similar tool is advisable but the above platforms can also support KM, as was the case for Amazon.

Once the appropriate tools are determined then an action sequence should be developed with clear goals and targets to be met. These goals should be in line with the corporate strategy and its mission statement. Daily activity has proven to be effective in gaining followers and retaining attention and, therefore, each platform should serve several purposes. Amazon, Tesco and Wal-Mart are all examples of this as their Facebook pages offer promotions, tips, recipes and a point of contact for customer support. Depending on the type of retailer, a mix of these types of content have proven to be effective at gaining followers, attention and converting browsers into buyers. In conjunction with using these SM platforms, analytical software should also be implemented to examine the effectiveness of campaigns or posts. This will also provide an overall review of the effectiveness of the SM implementation as a whole.

Finally, it is advisable to have plans in place in case any hacking occurs to avoid disruption. If the implementation of SM is unsuccessful and the ROI is unrewarding then it is advisable to have an exit plan in place. This could include: not immediately deleting all accounts as some, such as blogs, still direct traffic to your site as their content is still of interest to some. As for Social Networks, hiding the account will avoid copycats, rather than deleting it all together. Finally, website redirection tools could be used to deliver remaining traffic to other, active sites.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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