A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REGARDING THE MARKETING COMMUNICATION TOOLS USED IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: *Starting from the meaning of the communication process in marketing, the authors try to identify its role in assuring the continuity of the management process in what concerns the relationships between all the partners of the company, on the long term. An emphasis is made on the role of online communication and its tools in relationship marketing. In order to validate some of the mentioned ideas the authors have chosen to undertake a qualitative marketing research among the managers of some Romanian tourism companies. The qualitative part of the study had as purpose the identification of the main tools which form the basis of the communication with the beneficiaries of the touristic services, of the way in which the companies use the online communication tools for attracting, keeping and developing the long term relationships with their customers in the virtual environment. The following tools have been analyzed: websites, email marketing campaigns, e-newsletters, online advertising, search engines, sponsored links, blogs, RSS feed, social networks, forums, online discussion groups, portals, infomediaries and instant messaging. The chosen investigation method was the selective survey, the research technique – explorative interrogation and the research instrument – semi structured detailed interview, based on a conversation guide.*
A very important fact is the classification resulted after the respondents were requested to mention the most efficient tools for attracting customers and for maintaining the relationships with them. Although the notoriety of the online marketing tools is high, there are some tools that are known by definition, but are not used at all or are not used correctly; or are not known by definition, but are used in practice.
The authors contributed by validating a performing methodology of qualitative research, a study which will open new ways and means for making the online communication tools used for touristic services in Romania more operational. It is to be mentioned that the chosen domain of application has not yet been researched within the national literature.
The qualitative research results will form the basis for a quantitative study among the consumers of touristic services in order to identify their opinion in what concerns the usage of online marketing tools by the tourism companies in maintaining the relationships with them.

Keywords: *Relationship Marketing, CRM, Online Marketing Communication, Market Research*
JEL Classification: *M31*

Introduction

The new communication media have registered an exponential development among the delivery - reception methods of the information between people. Marketing which is viewed as the analysis and action on the market has not remained immune to the major challenges determined by the occurrence and development of the virtual communication – based on the internet applications. The strategic vision, that marks the evolution of contemporary marketing, assures a long term relationship between the companies and their market (Pop 2006: 36). The efficient administration of the companies moves the central focus of the marketing

action towards assuring the continuity and administration, on a long term basis, of the relationship with all the partners involved in this process.

Having as target to make this activity continuous and bivalent, the company assures the success of the messages it wants to send and receive. In the modern business environment the online interaction has different multiple advantages starting from smaller costs, time efficiency for the participants, a secure transaction framework and a friendly communication environment. The knowledge and most important the usage of the online communication tools in what concerns the management of the relationships with all the stakeholders of a company must be monitored permanently by using the marketing research means.

Marketing communication facilitated by the online tools

The literature referring to the new marketing communication tools is one of the most developed in the field. A large number of the analyzed aspects start from the communication mechanism and concentrate over the management of this process according to the particularities that the digital economy imposes over the speed of transmission, delivery and responses of the recipients to the messages with which they are "overwhelmed". As a consequence, the term of *online marketing* is defined more clearly (Meyerson and Scarborough 2008), which not only covers the communication area, but also focuses on it. The major changes that affected the technological, legislative, social and economic environment (Smith and Taylor 2004: 216 and next) generate an entirely new face of the communication act.

The Romanian reader can benefit of a systematic approach of the marketing aspect in the digital era by having access to the translated reference books in the field, such as Kotler et al. or Gay et al. (Kotler, Jian and Maesincee 2009; Gay, Charlesworth and

Esen 2009). It is requested to diminish the role of internet into communication due to the fact that this remains mainly a communication method in which"... the value is represented by the message not the nature of the transmission" (Gay, Charlesworth and Esen 2009: 389). The customization, the distribution of the message or the access at request of the user, makes it easier for the message to be personalized. This fact transforms the new tools of online communication in real relationship marketing tools, the later having as purpose a long term relationship between all the stakeholders and the products, services or brands of an offering company (Gummesson 2008: 36-40).

Relationship marketing, in its turn, also faced at the beginning of this millennium new developments creating a real interface for a highly anticipated field, the one of the demand holder's reactions - representing the *network marketing* (Schebesch, Pop and Pelău 2010: 37-45; Bruhn and Koehler 2010; Roullet and Droulers 2010). All these developments reflect a significant change of the relationship between the participants in the selling and buying acts, their transformation from receivers and senders in *partners* in the process satisfying the of needs. The implication of the consumers in the production and distribution of the tangible goods and services, which satisfy their needs, becomes an important step in the entire process. Communication no longer belongs only to the one that offers, it sometimes even takes place without involving that person, having unexpected effects on the act of selling and purchasing (Trusov, Bucklin and Pauwels 2009: 90-102).

Once the global coordinates of the online strategy are settled, it is necessary to carefully select the communication and promotion tools because the moment a user accesses a company's website, he / she can be an actual or a potential customer.

The online marketing mix (Adler 2010: 14) includes plenty of components and requires the following steps: *planning, implementation*

and *control*. During the *planning* phase there are established the tools that will be used and the channels through which they will become operational. The most well known and used tools are the: websites, emails, e-newsletters, search engines, sponsored links, blogs, RSS feds, social networks, forums and online discussion groups, portals, infomediaries and instant messaging (Pantea and Vegheş 2008: 202). The *implementation* phase presumes that, once the tools have been chosen, decisions related to the design, characteristics and frequency of use must be taken. During the final part, the *control*, the marketing activities are monitored carefully, interfering if necessary. During this step the results can be partially measured, and if necessary, the instrument can be withdrawn. Finally, the results will be measured and conclusions will be drawn for future actions.

Methodological notes
In order to validate some of the ideas mentioned above, it has been chosen the organisation, development and interpretation of the results of a qualitative research among the managers of tourism companies from Romania. The term of *tourism company* will be used from now on in order to refer to any travel agency / tour operator or touristic services provider, no matter if it is a hotel network (national or international), hotel, guesthouse, transport company (national or international), air travel company, railway or maritime company. The touristic services represent one of the services' domains that are well fitted for the introduction and generalization of the online marketing communication tools. The qualitative part of the research has focused on identifying the major tools that form the communication basis with the consumers of touristic services; the method in which the tourism companies from Bucharest use them or intend to use them in the future and on stating hypotheses regarding the way in which the potential customers are attracted and how the relationship with them is maintained.

The *four objectives of the research* (O1-O4) have focused on identifying the major virtual tools that the travel agencies use in order to attract potential customers, on the communication with the former or actual consumers of touristic services, on identifying the way in which the respective companies use the online tools and also on the reasons they are chosen for identifying their usage. The researched online marketing tools were the following: website, e-mail marketing campaigns, e-newsletter, online advertising, research engines, sponsored links, blogs, social networks, forums, online discussion groups, portals, infomediaries and instant messaging.

The chosen *investigation method* was the selective survey, the *research technique* − explorative interrogation and the *research instrument* − semi structured detailed interview, based on a conversation guide (Pop 2001: 86-87; Cătoiu et al. 2002: 207). The period when the research took place was 7-25 February 2011.

The main hypotheses of the research:
H1. The companies operating on the tourism market in Romania use virtual marketing tools in order to attract potential customers and to maintain the relationship with the present clients.

H2. The majority of online marketing tools are known and used more and more by the companies operating on the tourism market in Romania, implicitly by their managers.

H3. The tourism companies use / combine certain online marketing tools in order to attract potential customers to their websites and also some online marketing tools for maintaining and developing the relationship with them, the majority of the respondents being satisfied with the results obtained after using the tools.

H4. In the future, the marketing strategy of the tourism companies will also include online actions for attracting customers and for maintaining the relationships with them.

It has been achieved the interviewing of *18 representatives of tourism companies* (10

representatives of travel agencies, 4 hotel representatives, 3 from transportation companies and one airline company representative), these companies have an updated website and the headquarters in (or also in) Bucharest.

The *interview* had an average length of 40 minutes. The registration of the answers given by the respondents has been done by recording on magnetic tape, in case of 16 companies, the rest expressing their will to answer in writing to the questions from the interview guide.

The working tools that have been used to *analyze and interpret the data* obtained from the interviews are: *content analysis* (Bardin 1977: 43 şi next), *semantic differentiation* (Cătoiu et al., 2002: 152-154) and *Likert scale* (Plăiaş et al. 2008: 361-363).

Main results obtained and their implications

The presentation of the main results, obtained after analyzing and processing the data, will be done taking into account the objectives and hypothesis that formed the basis of the research:

O1. *Identification of the relational means and tools used by the travel agencies and touristic services providers from Romania to relate with their customers;*

In case of the majority of the respondents there have been noticed different views in the answers and the main problem raised by all was referring to the effects of the actual economical-financial crisis on the economy, which brought major changes in the strategy of the companies and in the way they are allocating the afferent communication budget. All the interviewed tourism companies have a website where they present their offers, the details referring to the touristic services they provide; the website being unanimously considered very important for *attracting customers*. Other means of attracting customers mentioned by the company representatives were the commercial messages sent by email to the database with customers (natural or legal persons), the company newsletters, the sponsored links and also the presence of the company on social networks.

After attracting customers, the majority of companies consider important to retain these customers, *keeping and developing the relationship*, which they have with these people who benefitted from their offered services. One tool mentioned by all companies as being used in order to relate with the customers was the newsletter, which helps them inform the customers regarding the new offers, promotions, projects or new events, contests or surveys. The databases for the newsletters are made mostly by legal persons, being harder to create a database with natural persons. In this category, the companies have also mentioned sending emails with a commercial content, the presence on the social networks or the presence of a chat window on the website which gives the customer the possibility to contact directly a company representative. Based on these answers, H1 hypothesis is validated.

O2. *Identification of the degree to which the online marketing tools are known and used by the representatives of tourism companies for relating with the customers;*

To a very high proportion all the company representatives have stated that they know all the online marketing tools. A few of them stated that they do not know for sure what means email marketing and the difference between this tool and the newsletter; RSS feed is rather known by its name rather than the way it is used; the instant messaging was another unclear topic for some and this is why there were mentioned examples such as "Yahoo Messenger", "Skype", the chat window, etc. The H2 hypothesis is shown as being true.

O3. *Determine how travel agencies use online marketing tools and the degree of satisfaction obtained after their employment;*

The respondents were asked *how and for what purpose* they use each of the online

marketing tools. Based on the answers there can seen an alignment of the views regarding the purpose and the usage methods of the online tools: *the website* is in general the first contact of an internet user, potential or present customer, with the company, in the virtual environment; this is why it is very important to manage it correctly and to keep it functioning in a proper way, the website being used for presenting the company, its offers and important news; *email marketing and e-newsletters*: these two concepts have been confused a lot by the representatives during the interviews, in terms of their purpose and of the way they are used; thus based on the answers of the respondents, we can state the fact that there is a disaccord between the theoretic definition of the concepts and their practical use by the tourism companies; though both tools have been recognized by the company representatives as being used for attracting customers and also for maintaining the relationship with them; *search engines*: all the respondents consider vital for their company to be shown among the first results after generating a search, their website to appear on the first pages of the search engines after the customers introduce some key terms; *sponsored links*: all their users (one third of the respondents) declared themselves to be very satisfied with the number of viewers attracted to the website by the sponsored links that appear mostly on the search engines; *blogs:* the providers of tourism services do not have company blogs, but intend to use this tool in the future; *RSS feed*: none of the respondents mentioned this tool among the ones their company is using; *social networks*: no matter if it was a travel agency or a touristic services provider, all of the respondents acknowledged the growing importance of the social networks; *forums and online discussion groups*: none of the participating companies has an integrated forum in the company's website, only one third of the respondent companies offer their customers the possibility to add comments on

their websites; *portals and infomediaries*: only of few of the company representatives that stated their opinion believe that these tools can help in attracting customers, but less for maintaining the relationship; *instant messaging*: all the company representatives that use instant messaging stated that they use this tool for attracting new customers and for maintaining the relationship with them, though only approximately 30% of the customers who have benefitted from touristic services contact the company afterwards.

All the company representatives declared themselves *satisfied* and *very satisfied* of the results obtained after using online marketing tools in order to attract customers or maintain the relationship with them; hypothesis H3 is confirmed.

O4. Identification of the companies' future steps / strategies in terms of the relationship with their customers;

The same as it was until now, in the future the marketing strategies will have as a core concept the customer and all the company's actions will take place around him. Managing the relationships with the customers will be a mix between the attraction and loyalty methods using traditional tools, the well established online ones and also the "new" online tools (social networks, blogs which might be used to interact with the customers). Hypothesis H4 is validated, the respondents being certain about their need to maintain the relationship with the customers in the online environment, without ignoring or substituting the offline actions.

Conclusions, limits and future directions of research

As a result of the interviews it has been established that from the online marketing tools presented to the respondents, only three of them are used just for *attracting customers* (the search engines, the online advertising and the sponsored links), the others being used in the same time for *attracting customers* and *maintaining or developing the relationship* with them (website, email

marketing, e-newsletter, blog, RSS feed, social networks, forums, online discussion groups, portals, infomediaries and instant messaging). Of a major importance is the classification resulted after the respondents were requested to mention the most efficient tools for customer attraction and maintenance of the relationship with them. As a result, the most efficient online marketing tools for *attracting customers* are: company's website, search engines, sponsored links, e-newsletters, email marketing, social networks, online advertising; and for *maintaining the relationship with the customers:* the website, e-newsletters, email marketing, social networks and instant messaging.

Despite the fact that the notoriety of the online marketing tools is high, there are some tools that are not known as a concept, that are not used at all or not used properly; or are known as a concept, but used in a wrong manner in practice. Though the term of infomediaries is specific for the tourism market, the ones in the business do not know its definition, but they know how it works. The term of instant messaging was also not very clear, being necessary to give examples; RSS feed tool is known better by name rather than implementation. The biggest problem is the confusion that appeared during the interviews between two tools highly used by the companies, email marketing and e-newsletter. The difference between these two concepts was presented in a previous work of the authors (Pantea and Pop 2010: 738-739).

The exploratory research is recommended in case it is wanted the better understanding of a certain phenomenon, in comparison with the descriptive or causal research which is chosen for testing specific hypotheses or for studying the differences between variables (Malhotra and Briks 2007: 201 and next). *The limits* of the present qualitative research are represented by the fact that it had an exploratory character aiming to understand what happens inside the studied field and to study the social phenomena without "explicit outcomes" (Schutt 2009: 344 and next).

The results of the present qualitative research will form the basis for a quantitative study among the consumers in order to determine their opinion related to the way the online marketing tools are used by the tourism companies.

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