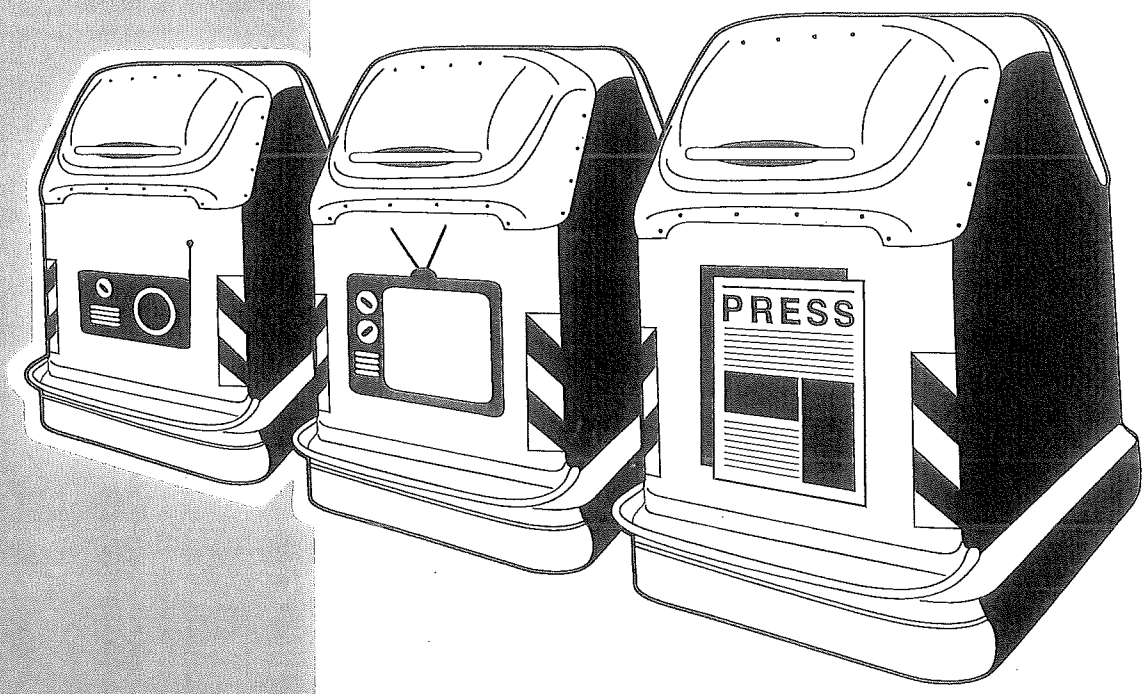
Trípodos
[EXTRA 2011]

LIFE WITHOUT MEDIA

VI International Conference
Communication and Reality



Facultat de Comunicació Blanquerna
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LIFE WITHOUT MEDIA

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VI Congrés Internacional Comunicació i Realitat

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Use of Social Media in Turkey in the Context of Brand Communication

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Due to the continuous increase in internet use in Turkey like all over the world and with the internet being an indispensible part of business life, brands have started using internet very commonly for miscellaneous purposes. One of the main purposes for which companies use internet is its public relations aspect. In order that corporate communication experts perform their work in a more effective, modern and creative manner, they have to use this new technology.

Today, corporate communication experts have started working on social media channels like social networks, blogs, micro-blogs, digital marketing, video sharing sites, podcast and RSS services in communication with the support of public relations and digital agencies, especially in the context of 'media relationships'.

Furthermore, companies making use of social media opportunities benefit from the advantages of communication with the target population, receiving feedback, increasing brand awareness, tracking target population and competitors, creating agenda, being talked of, creating a network, encouraging participation, improving customer relationships, providing support, decreasing marketing costs and increasing sales as compared to their competitors, and they stand out among many alternatives.

This study aims to examine how the brands and corporate communication managers using the power of social media effectively in Turkey benefit from the opportunities of social media in brand communication management. In this context, new developments introduced by leading brands of Turkey related to use of social media and marketing communication have been observed.

KEY WORDS: social media, social media environments, brand communication.

Rapid development of technology in the 20th century has created new concepts for the communication technologies. Introduction of internet technology to the business life and social life towards the end of 1993 has made computers a requisite tool for internet use, and its importance

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increased more and more as it became an indispensible information and data bank for the society (Holtz; 2002: 21). Therefore, in the late 1990s, new technological developments, invention of the internet, development of new internet based online technologies and consequent emergence of new digital platforms have created new mass communication methods.

In this period, companies quickly grasping the importance of technology communicated and interacted simultaneously with their staff, agencies, suppliers, customers and social partners firstly through e-mail, intranets and extranets. These local networks initially set up within organisations gradually transformed into online virtual communities in which people communicated, shared information and corresponded with each other through internet blogs, wikis and social networks (Fu, Liu, Wang, 2007: 675).

Social networks and other Web 2.0 platforms quickly gained recognition, and increasing liveliness and interactions caused by active performances of individuals created sharing of information, news, events, opinions, recommendations, photos and words. Besides, together with the improving technology, advertisement and public relations experts set up the facilities for online shopping and online corresponding on the web page through miscellaneous software and interactive applications, as well as promoting their products and services on these platforms.

Social Media Environment

Web 2.0 is the media system that facilitates two way simultaneous information exchange instead of one way information sharing. Web 2.0, which is a user based network, allows the user to participate in the application and express opinions. Extension of this facility is social networks, blogs and visual sharing sites. Content of these sites, which are under control of the user, may be arranged and modified (Tosun, 2010: 388-389). Therefore, user may be the producer and the consumer at the same time in these networks.

According to a research study made by Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007, social networks are mostly used by the youth. According to the same study, young people are called as "super communicators" as well as being frequent users of social networks, because they use all kinds of communication and mass communication channels as well as social networks to communicate with their friends and therefore today, they are the generation using communication most intensely (Lenhart [et al.], 2007: 22). Quick adaption of young people to social media and intense use of it made social networks an essential channel of advertisement and marketing for the companies taking young people as their target population.

Social networks, which are platforms for private or professional relationships between individuals, are also important for brand communication. Social networks represent interpersonal connections and the power of these connections (www.parliament.vic.gov.au/SARC/E-democracy/Final_Report/Glossary.htm). People participating in social network sites express themselves and socialise with their friends. Smart marketers attend these conversations with their own brands to benefit from opportunities of memorable interaction. This usually occurs in two ways as follows (Shih, 2009: 89):

- Through groups: Social network groups allow their members to introduce themselves together with their brands, learn more about the brands and share interests and opinions.
- Through "application program advertisements": Application program advertisements use platform applications to set up the connection between social network members and brands through companies.

Social networks may be categorised in a couple of groups (Dawley, 2009: 111):

- Social sites: MySpace, Facebook, Twitter.
- Photo Sharing Sites: Flicker, PhotoBucket.
- Video Sharing: YouTube.
- Professional Networking Sites: LinkedIn, Ning.
- Blogs: Blogger.com, Wordpress.
- Wikis: Wetpaint, PBWiki.
- Content labelling: MERLOT, SLoog.
- Virtual Words: SL, Active Worlds, There, Whyville, Club Penguin, HiPiHi.

There are brands in Turkey which use Facebook as an advertisement and public relations tool. However, instead of creating their own applications and connecting target population with games and similar applications like international examples, they exist as registered members in the Facebook. Examples are Koç Group, Olips, Cola Turka, Educational Institutions, Lösev, Turkcell, Akbank, i ecam, Türkiye Bankası and many travel agencies. Also small and medium sized enterprises and small businesses use Facebook for advertisement (Onat & Alikılıç, 2010: 1117).

Another communication tool frequently used by brands is blogs. Brands using blogs correctly reach their target populations easily and effectively, and they receive responses. Blogs are an effective brand communication tool for today's consumers who are continuously in search of information and who desire to communicate their demands and problems (Tosun, 2010: 389). Therefore, companies who are aware of such requirements of the consumers know about the importance of being in communication with well known and influential blog writers, and they integrate important blog writers into their media relations processes. Use of blogs in corporate communication eliminates the obstacles in communication with the target population, allows direct and first hand communication, and facilitates strong relationships.

One of the indispensible elements of social media is Twitter. This micro blogging platform with many users all over the world has become popular in Turkey after its entry into the agenda of the media. Twitter, which may be used on miscellaneous purposes by brands, is also used in our country in an increasing number of methods. Whereas Twitter is a platform creating new opportunities for marketing processes, it also allows effective use of conventional marketing methods.

Importance of Being in the Social Media for Brands

There are certain advantages and disadvantages of being in the social media for companies in respect to corporate communication.

Social networking sites are important channels for promotion of company activities, products and services and for creation of public opinion. Social media allows brand communication experts to reach larger target populations with lower budget, recognise target populations better through their interactive properties and therefore understand their expectations, inclinations, attitudes and reactions more easily. However, consumers become active participant of the brand instead of passive buyers through the social media which facilitates direct communication with the consumers during the initial brand creation stage. Therefore, consumers' becoming active facilitates brand loyalty and purchasing behaviour and provides effective communication of messages to the consumers (Tosun, 2010: 390). Thus, this kind of communication increases brand value and has positive impact on brand familiarity.

Social networking sites emerging as a new strong marketing channel provide new opportunities to marketers for hyper-targeting campaigns using profile information, and they connect group members by connecting to social networks within friend groups. Thus, mouth to mouth marketing spreads systematically over the existing customer data base and marketing gains a correct, personal and social dimension (Shih, 2009: 81-82).

Social networks are platforms of strong mouth to mouth communication like online groups and forums. Most of the daily talk about products and services occur and spread in social networks and social media sites, which are strong tools for learning what we need (Sernovitz, 2009: 142-143). Outputs like opinions and criticisms about products or companies obtained from these platforms provide testimonials for the consumers and feedback for the enterprises. Therefore, online social networks remove boundaries as global marketing tools and they create brand awareness.

Companies use viral marketing more commonly through social network advertisements and therefore they provide better recognition of their products and brands by recommendation among network members (Zuckerberg, 2007). On the other hand, companies may design attractive applications related to their products and brands and send these to target groups, and they may announce their new products and services on social networking sites.

Social networking sites also allow brand owners to discover what consumers think, and how they feel and behave in more focused and new ways. For example, Unilever used social networking sites to launch its Sunsilk brand in the United States addressing 25 year-old single ladies as the desired customer segment, setting up a platform in which Unilever could interact directly with its target customers and understand the needs and habits of its customers. Myspace profile of Unilever received more than 4000 online visitors in the first two weeks of the campaign. Thus, marketers may obtain understanding and expectations regarding habits and interests of the consumers (Corporate Executive Board, 2008: 7).

Sometimes it is disadvantageous for companies to appear in social media. As rumours and gossip that may hurt respectability of the company and similar publication and news spread very quickly like viruses, social networking sites should be watched out. Social networks continuously grow with new members every day, and marketing and communication messages of companies get lost, misdirect or feedback cannot reach the expected level due to the increasing noise in communication.

Research

Purpose and Method

This study aims to observe the points of view regarding appearance in social media channels in the context of brand communication for companies. In this direction, use of social media in brand communication and new developments in marketing communication applied by the corporate communication experts of the "Most Popular Companies of Turkey" selected by Capital Monthly Business and Economy Magazine in 2009 shall be examined. Thus, comprehensive interviews have been carried out with corporate communication experts of companies desiring to promote their brand and putting emphasis on customer satisfaction to make an assessment.

Population and Sample Group

10 companies have been selected from the "Most Popular Companies of Turkey" determined by Capital Magazine. However, only three of these 10 companies (Turkcell tracking innovations and technology in mobile communication simultaneously with the world, and two of the biggest holding companies of Turkey: Koç Holding and Ülker) have agreed to make a comprehensive interview.

Findings and Interpretation

As a response to the question "Which media platforms do you use most commonly?" two of the corporate communication managers of the three companies participating in the comprehensive interview expressed that they used social networking sites like Facebook, Friendfeed and Twitter, which have a privileged position both in Turkey and all over the world. They preferred these channels because of the two way data flow, and replying customer messages and creating a channel allowing the customers to touch their brand had great potential value as well as announcing all novelties to the customers. Another company stated that they used Twitter, Facebook, FriendFeed Youtube and DailyMotion platforms most commonly in social media. This shows that in parallel to individual internet users, also marketing and communication managers most commonly use Facebook and Twitter among all social media sites. Therefore, as social networking sites arise as a new model of enterprise for entrepreneurs, they are also attractive for big companies who would like to be recognised by consumers.

Regarding the question how brands in Turkey interpreted communication in social media and whether social media was used as an effective channel for brands to reach their target populations, all participants responded that social media constituted a direct and effective channel to meet with the customers, this was not a temporary trend or fashion, and brands had to adopt new PR behaviours as well as new channels. Besides, they indicated that appearing or not appearing in the social media was not the point, but the point was to be aware of how to do the job in the most correct and effective way. While realising all these, three main principles of conventional PR were being honest, laying concrete data and promoting the main subject of communication in an effective way; and management of the brand and respectability had to be taken

into consideration with great care. Another participant added that there was a small number "conscious" brands which had gathered a certain population in these sites and were in communication with these people through continuous brand messages. These explanations show that social networking sites are arising as a new model of enterprise for entrepreneurs and they are important in the aspect of brand communication which aims to influence the target population more easily and comprehensively due to their interactive quality.

Two of the participants answered the question "Do you think that social media has influence on consumer opinions related to products and services?" by indicating that today, many users searched for the comments related to products or services in Social Media platforms over the internet before buying a new product or service, and these comments and opinions had great influence on consumers. The other participant told that consumers were able to state their feelings, opinions and complaints about any product in their own Facebook pages and Customer Support Centre or the related department officially responded to these questions. This shows that today, the concept of "prosumer" created by combination of the concepts of "producer" and "consumer" is used to describe the mobile market which is called the internet. At the same time, each individual in this mobile market consisting of telescoping social networks is a "prosumer". Therefore, it is observed that there is a multi-channelled and unstable relationship between the brand and the consumer, consumers searched for the opinions of others before buying a product or a service; they used social networking sites to find out the opinions of others, and thus social networking sites acted as a channel for marketing communication.

Regarding the question "How do your employees represent your brand in the social media sites?" one of the participants indicated that company employees like the "Social Activity Group" took their professional sharing also to social media, and they were pleased with this situation. Data security and well manners expected from the employees were also important in social media and had to be shown great care whenever the brand was represented by the employees. Regarding potential risks and data security, they explained that they had training courses to improve the knowledge and awareness of employees about the "Points to Take Care of in the Social Media". The other two participants told that departments directly related to the business field (Marketing, Corporate Communication, etc.) were always connected to these web sites and they satisfied expectations and needs of consumers.

Regarding the question "How are social media methods used in marketing and communication?" participants replied that social media provided brands, products and services to be presented to right people in the right place, it played an important part in lives of consumers, therefore carrying out marketing activities and communicating with people using these methods became a must. The "digital era" we live in necessitated a new PR approach with its new techno-economic processes; conventional PR methods were far from satisfying expectations, and today, Social Media methods complemented "online PR" effectively in marketing and communication.

On the other hand, one of the participants indicated that they did not consider their existence in this new channel as a marketing tool, they considered social media as a channel of communication and interaction, and they intended to

present a new contemporary channel through which customers could touch their brand, communicate one to one with the personified brand image, share their opinions, directly manifest their complaints and suggestions.

These explanations show that social media methods are increasingly used for communicating with consumers, creating loyalty, managing brand image, and conveying the marketing message in the most effective way and social media is complementing "Online PR" in brand communication. On the other hand, it is understood that social networks and social media sites are mouth to mouth communication tools which are measurable and accessible; and outputs like opinions and criticisms about brands, products or companies obtained from these platforms provide feedback for the companies and they remove boundaries as viral marketing tools.

Regarding the question "Do you receive consultancy services from a professional company for using social media?" one of the participants replied indicating that they managed their brand by the "Social Media Group" constituted by representatives from different departments of the company in order to make their brand alive on this platform. Experts on social media and digital PR in their corporate communication departments and their agencies providing consultancy in communication watched developments in this area closely, and they made immediate and effective reactions online benefiting from the greatest advantage of internet, its speed.

The other two participants told that they worked with miscellaneous agencies to satisfy their different creative and practical needs as they had many brands and campaigns within the scope of the company, and they took consultancy services from opinion leaders and agencies from Turkey and all over the world.

Most important reason of the difficulty suffered by companies in using social media in their transition from conventional channels to interactive channels is the lack of expertise and experience. Therefore, it may be concluded that companies solicited support and competence of agencies at the point when they faced serious problems when they preferred to manage the process on their own devices.

As for the question about what their goals in using social media in brand communication are, two of the corporate communication managers replied as making opinion leaders talk about their company, creating online groups, evaluating consumer feedback, protecting their respectability in web, collecting complaints, appearing with positive content in search engines, communicating with the consumers, making seasonal advertisement and public relations campaigns, managing potential crises and announcing brand related activities online. The other manager indicated that they used facilities of social media regarding the goals mentioned above excluding brand positioning.

Regarding the question "Which advantages and disadvantages did your brand or company have by appearing in the social media?" all corporate communication managers replied as "Appearing social media provided a faster, easier and closer communication with our customers, and visibility of our brand increased; we were able to announce our products and services to our customers quickly and easily; before, it was not possible to communicate with consumers so closely at an individual level with other tools, and the most important point is that we were able to keep in step with the changing world".

In addition, one of the participants indicated that they had substantial advantages in unit costs regarding communication and brand loyalty by social media means compared to conventional communication tools and even other digital tools. Furthermore, they had no disadvantages of appearing in the social media up to now.

Regarding how they saw social media applications as a corporation and what they thought about the future of social media, two of the corporate communication managers stated that they observed the importance of social media against conventional channels by the examples they experienced, although social media has turned up very recently. They estimated that Social Media would be used in the near future much more actively and as they were aware that social media was a very important tool, they would use it more actively. The other participant reported that they corporately paid attention to social media applications which matched up with their consumer oriented approach and there was social media at the focal point of their communication in the digital world. Besides, there was yet a great deal of unused potential in the field of social media in spite of the quick growth and development in Turkey and all over the world.

Conclusion

Companies grasping the importance of attending to opinions of their target population have been searching for alternative channels in which they can mutually communicate with people, learn about their target population more closely and express themselves to their target population in the best way. At this point, social media appear as a powerful and effective means of communication. Social media, which is a new marketing field, may be used as a marketing communication channel with its reference groups containing many people and its influencers. These virtual groups form a large market place where valuable communication and interaction occur.

When marketing strategies for social media are being formed, whereas brands try to emphasise their creativity and originality, their main purpose is to communicate with the target population, receive feedback, increase brand awareness, track the target population, create agenda, be talked of, create networks, encourage participation, improve customer relationships, decrease marketing costs and increase sales. According to the results of the comprehensive interviews, companies benefit from the resources of social media to achieve the goals mentioned above. Especially the perspectives of marketing communication, public relations and advertising show that brands cannot be limited in using social media fields.

Companies using social media to demonstrate a product or a service over a web site at the same time are able to deliver their messages to their customers and manage media communication effectively by hearing expectations and needs of their customers, and they can track undesired articles to take precautions as well as achieving desired comments.

t may be concluded that number of internet users in Turkey and all over the world rapidly increases and the market share in the virtual medium grows. This growth in internet marketing increases the importance of social media

networks. According to the results of the comprehensive interviews, companies shall be more successful if they can manage comments, experiences and complaints of customers in the social media networks well, therefore they should base their brand communication strategies on these opinions. Besides, while reaching target population connections and doing media planning, companies are recommended to be aware of the fact that social media portals serve an important purpose. In this context, as well as carrying out public relations and advertising purposes, they may widen their area of influence through these media in which they can structure their brand image and respectability.

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