Inbound Marketing - the most important digital marketing strategy

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Abstract: *Digital marketing has a major importance in the marketing strategy of any company regardless of sector, size or country of origin. Thus, more than ever, in order to remain competitive, companies are forced to exploit this form of marketing, which essentially can bring huge benefits at low costs. The main form of digital marketing is the inbound marketing, which represents an organic marketing form, based on the close relationship between the company and its prospects or customers, who have expressed their interest in the company's products voluntarily (based on subscription to newsletters, blog, social networks, etc.) and who have been attracted and involved by a high quality of the content marketing.*

Key-words: *Inbound marketing, digital marketing, social networks, SEO, email marketing*

1. Introduction

In Marketing, since its coming into being until today, the attention paid to the consumer has been one of its foundations. Therefore, the entire Marketing strategy has always aimed to inform the customer, to get his interest regarding the company and its products, to help him take the purchasing decisions and to make him loyal to the company's brand.

If, in the case of traditional marketing, the attention paid to the consumer has sometimes been dethroned by the attention given to the product into the company's marketing strategy, in the case of digital marketing, the focus remains on the consumer, on his correct identification, on his needs, in order to lay the basis of effective communication strategies towards him.

In this context, a marketing strategy that only uses content marketing to boost the product sales is not effective because the "golden rule" practiced by companies says that the content marketing should be focused 80% on the consumer's information and education, and only 20% on the sales' growth.

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Therefore, digital marketing primarily involves the creation of a relationship of trust and loyalty with the customer and inbound marketing becomes the main aspect of the digital marketing.

Inbound marketing allows an open and "smart" communication towards the customers who turned their attention to the company's products or services and creates a personal relationship with them by promoting content adapted to their needs.

"Since 2006, inbound marketing has been the most effective marketing method for doing business online. Instead of the old outbound marketing methods of buying ads, buying email lists, and praying for leads, inbound marketing focuses on creating quality content that pulls people toward the company and product, where they naturally want to be" (Hubspot, 2016).

Essentially, inbound marketing is adapting the content to the "buyer persona" who came naturally and voluntarily to the company. That's why, in this context, the definition of the "buyer persona" plays a central role, since if it's not identified correctly, the entire marketing strategy will become a fiasco.

2. Definition

Inbound marketing is a form of marketing that requires a very careful targeting of the audience and a custom communication with it via high quality content.

Thus, "inbound marketing is the strategy of connecting with potential customers through materials and experiences they find useful. Using media like blogs and social networking, marketers hope to entertain and inform viewers with content they seek by themselves" (Marketing-Schools.org, 2016).

According to Hubspot, (an inbound marketing software platform that helps companies to attract visitors, convert leads, and close customers), means:

- **"Content Creation and Distribution** - create targeted content that answers prospects' and customers' basic questions and needs, then share that content far and wide.
- **Lifecycle Marketing** - promoters don't just materialize out of thin air: they start off as strangers, visitors, contacts, and customers. Specific marketing actions and tools help to transform those strangers into promoters.
- **Personalization** - tailor your content to the wants and needs of the people who are viewing it. As you learn more about your leads over time, you can better personalize your messages to their specific needs.
- **Multi-channel** - Inbound marketing is multi-channel by nature because it approaches people where they are, in the channel where they want to interact with you.

> ▪ **Integration** - Content creation, publishing and analytics tools all work together like a well-oiled machine - allowing you to focus on publishing the right content in the right place at the right time" (Hubspot, 2016).

In conclusion, "inbound marketing turns strangers into customers and then promoters of your business" (Huify, 2016).

3. Inbound marketing forms

Inbound marketing forms are: topical blogs**,** social media campaigns, mailing campaigns**,** Search Engine Optimization (SEO)**,** viral videos**,** web-based seminars (Webinars), etc. (Marketing-Schools.org, 2016).

3.1. Custom emails

Usually people would rather open emails received from a person than emails coming from an auto "no-reply" address. In this case, the best Newsletter content could never be fully exploited, if it's not sent by a real name of an important person in the company. Moreover, this method allows those who received the newsletter to reply to the sender with their feedback.

People also open the emails with titles that capture their interest and click on a link that also leads them to a page containing information that they deemed useful. Conversely, if the mail's content is not customized to the "buyer persona" and it does not resonate with him/her, he/she will unsubscribe from the Newsletter, and his/her confidence in the company's ability to understand and satisfy his/her needs stops at this point.

Therefore, in inbound marketing, the recipients of a mailing campaign must be homogeneous and correctly set up and the content must be adapted to them in order for the mailing campaign to become successful.

3.2. Blog posts

Articles published on the company's blog play a significant role in defining the company's image across the prospects and the competition, and their quality can attract or lose customers.

The quality content on a topic of interest for the customers will increase their level of trust and loyalty towards the company. On the opposite, if the content is improper and ineffective, it will affect the company's image, which will appear unprofessional in the communication towards the customers.

Therefore, articles must be carefully written based on the SEO analyses and must follow the interests and needs of the audience in order to provide all the necessary information to influence their purchasing decisions.

Thus, "89% of consumers turn to Google, Bing or another search engine to find information on products, services or businesses prior to making purchases" (Brafton, 2012) and "81% research online before making big purchases" (RetailingToday, 2013).

Moreover, "61% of customers read online reviews before making a purchase decision", (Charlton, 2015) and "67% of consumers are influenced by online reviews" (Hinckley, 2015).

3.3. SEO (Search Engine Optimization)

SEO has a dominant role in the digital promotion strategy, since it influences the positioning of digital channels available to an organization such as: web sites, blogs, social network accounts, etc. So, web pages can be optimized to become "the most attractive" for the search engines in order to be first displayed when searches are performed using browsers.

It should be noted that SEO involves the existence of unique quality content which respects some content rules in order to be indexed properly by the search engines.

"Positioning on the first page of the search engines is vital given that 80% of those who perform a search using Google (the most used search engine in the world) access only the links listed in the first page of Google. More the page is listed above, more it will attract a higher number of users." (Optimizare Plus, 2016).

SEO involves the use of the most searched keywords by users and identified using Google Analytics tool.

3.4. Display advertising

"Display advertising conveys its advertising message visually using text, logos, animations, videos, photographs, or other graphics. Display advertisers frequently target users with particular traits to increase the ads' effect. Online advertisers (typically through their ad servers) often use cookies, which are unique identifiers of specific computers, to decide which ads to serve to a particular consumer. Cookies can track whether a user left a page without buying anything, so the advertiser can later retarget the user with ads from the site the user visited" (Patil, 2014:188*).

"As advertisers collect data across multiple external websites about a user's online activity, they can create a detailed picture of the user's interests to deliver even more targeted advertising. This aggregation of data is called behavioral targeting.

Advertisers can also target their audience by using contextual and semantic advertising to deliver display ads related to the content of the web page where the ads appear" (InfoSolution, 2016).

"Advertisers may also deliver advertisements based on a user's suspected geography through geotargeting. A user's IP address communicates some geographic information (at minimum, the user's country or general region). The geographic information from an IP can be supplemented and refined with other proxies or information to narrow the range of possible locations. With mobile devices, advertisers can sometimes use a phone's GPS receiver or the location of nearby mobile towers. Cookies and other persistent data on a user's machine may provide help for narrowing a user's location further" (Srinivas, 2015).

"The Display network offers advertisers the option of placing visual banner-style advertisements on websites that are part of the Display network. The Google Display Network reaches approximately 90% of global internet users, a vast potential audience" (Wordstream, 2016).

3.5. Social networks

Social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, etc.) are a specific environment for inbound marketing, because with them, prospects can be identified by the company and the communication is customized depending on the type of network used and the audience.

In this case, the content promoted within the inbound marketing strategy plays a central role, because the success or failure of the marketing strategy depends on its quality.

Moreover, "according to Fleishman-Hillard, 79% of consumers said they Like or Follow brands on social networks to get more information about the company and its products and services" (Brafton, 2012).

4. Advantages and disadvantages of inbound marketing

Inbound marketing allows several **advantages** such as:
-   it allows a direct, permanent and long-term relationship with the customer;
-   it defines fast and accurately the "buyer persona" profile;
-   it allows to achieve better results in terms of the benefits / costs report compared to the traditional marketing;
-   it permits to develop a content strategy based on specific topics (keywords) identified with SEO and Google Adwords, for which there is a real interest from the prospects;
-   it represents an advanced form of marketing that relies on the creation and distribution of high quality content.

Even if the advantages of inbound marketing are very important, this form of marketing presents also some **disadvantages such as:**
-   it is more demanding and complex than the traditional marketing;

- it requires the use of Internet, so that the people who don't use it cannot become the target audience;
- it allows a segmented communication and not a universal one.

5. Inbound marketing versus outbound marketing

Traditional marketing is associated with outbound marketing, which means that the marketing strategy pushes the products to the customers, while digital marketing is synonymous with the term of inbound marketing, which mainly aims to win the target interest.

In fact, outbound marketing aims to promote the products and services to the audience directly, while inbound marketing helps to highlight goods and services indirectly, in the context in which the consumers identify themselves as the company's target.

Inbound Marketing is primarily a content marketing as it is the element that can capture the consumer's attention, pushing it towards the purchase.

That's why, the entire strategy of marketing is becoming a content marketing strategy and the lack of quality content inevitably leads to the failure of the company's digital marketing strategy.

Therefore, in inbound marketing, identifying the target and adapting the communication to its needs, expectations and interest play a vital role.

Moreover, outbound marketing is an invasive form of marketing, while inbound marketing is a permissive one, since the consumer agrees to be identified and targeted, and he is not disturbed by the company's communication to him. Newsletters, social networks (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn,...), webinars, etc. involve the voluntary subscription.

Inbound marketing efficiency is superior to the outbound marketing efficiency because it allows a better targeting of the audience and a better adaptation of the company's communication to it. For example, if persons have subscribed to the newsletter, the conversion rate is 750% higher than the newsletter addressed to people who haven't shown an interest in the company or its products / services (Gregg, 2015).

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, "thanks to the Internet, consumer behavior has changed drastically over the past decade. People have become adept at tuning out traditional marketing messages. Research shows that 86% of people skip television ads, and 44% of direct mail is never opened. In addition, 84% of 25-to-34-year-olds have left a favorite website because of intrusive or irrelevant advertising" (Bigshot Inbound, 2016).

Moreover, "the total democratization of media, the total addressability of marketing communications have made it possible for individuals to express their own free choice for every product and service they want to buy. The control over the consumption of media is an empowering of a new world, where is possible the transition from TV to online, from mass media to micro media, from mass marketing to permission marketing" (Duguleana, 2008: 31).

In this context, the importance of inbound marketing has grown with the changes in the purchasing behavior of the consumers who, in order to obtain information and reviews about the products they intend to buy and to save time and money, prefer to purchase products online.

Therefore, companies that succeed through a SEO and content strategy to rank well on the first page of the search engines, providing necessary information to the customer, are the "winners" of the "digital war" using the inbound marketing tools.

Moreover, the success of inbound marketing was felt not only in the business field but also in other sectors such as the political or the public sector in general, as appealing to the tools of this personalized and direct marketing form, politicians, public figures, NGOs are approaching their audience, reducing the physical distances and streamlining their communication towards them.

In a competitive global environment such as the online environment, inbound marketing is certainly the most effective form of marketing practiced by organizations.

Therefore, this form of non-intrusive marketing that relies on promoting high quality content within carefully considered, thought out and developed marketing strategies, is preferable compared with the traditional marketing which seems to slowly lose effectiveness in a dynamic and deeply customized field such as the online environment.

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