ASPECTS REGARDING THE USE OF FACEBOOK WITHIN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY – A CASE STUDY IN ROMANIA

I. B. CHIŢU[1]   R. G. ALBU[2]

Abstract: *Throughout Romania, in tourism, as well as in other fields, the promotional activity has been marked by profound changes. An increasing number of potential tourists are present in social networks, posting holiday photographs and impressions, getting informed about possible destinations, accommodation, restaurants or simply plane tickets. Starting from these considerations, the paper herein aims at highlighting a few aspects on the use of Facebook as promotional communication channel within the hospitality industry.*

Key words: *promotion, Facebook, hospitality industry.*

1. Introduction

The Internet has become an integral part of daily life, being used by a large part of the population as primary source of information, as communication channel, as a way to promote or simply make known one's ideas, thoughts and personal opinions or the corporate values, mission and objectives; or as a modality to make commercial transactions, and the examples may continue.

Since the advent of the Internet, the communication modalities resorting to this channel have continuously diversified, from the electronic mail to the promotional activity conducted by various companies on the Internet, on to social networks, which seem to be increasingly more used over other communication channels.

Based on the aforementioned, on the overwhelming figures as regards the evolution of the Internet users' number in Romania, this paper aims at outlining a few considerations on the new communication modalities used by the companies in tourism, namely social networks, with emphasis on the most largely used network, which is Facebook. The choice of social network as a subject of discussion was underpinned by their growing importance as communication channel, resorted to by companies in their marketing strategies, and also by their use in terms of relational marketing, falling under the current trends related to the preoccupation of the companies to create and maintain long-term relations with potential or current customers.

In late December 2012, in Romania, according to statistics, there were over 9 million Internet users, a situation indicating an Internet penetration rate in

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[1] Dept. of Marketing, Tourism and International Relations, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.
[2] Dept. of Management and Economic Informatics, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

our country of approximately 44.1%, even higher than 47, if we refer to the preliminary data of the latest population census. [6]

The number of Internet users in Romania has seen an exponential growth, in the period 2000-2012, from 800.000 persons to 9.642.383 persons.

This evolution fits into the one registered globally, the number of Internet users in 2012 being of 2,4 billion, which means an Internet penetration of 34.3% and it is estimated to reach, by 2015, a number of 3,4 billion (48% penetration) [4,p.49]. On June 30, 2012, throughout Europe, there were, according to Internet World Stat, more than 518 million Internet users, which means a double penetration compared to the world average, respectively of 63.2%. In the European Union, the Nordic countries rank best, with Internet penetration rates over 90%, Greece, Bulgaria and Romania being situated on the opposite side, with rates around 50%.

In Romania, according to a study carried out by GFK Romania in relation to the Internet use habits over two years, 2010 and 2012, the highest rate is recorded among the persons aged between 15-24 years old (83%), followed by the age group 25-34 years old (71%) and 35-44 years old (62%). The major boost, in 2012, compared to 2010, was registered in the age groups 35-44 years old (15%) and 45-54 years old (8%). [7]

In contrast to the year 2010, increases on residential areas are registered; this way, the rural area was marked by a greater rise (11%) than the urban area (6.7%); whilst the penetration rate has however remained low in the rural areas, much beneath the European average (33%), in the urban areas being of 61%.

Considering these figures, it stands to reason why companies increasingly turn their promotional efforts towards the online environment, from one's own personal page or presentation site, to Internet advertisements, to the presence in variegated search engines and one's own pages on social websites.

2. Use of Facebook in Romania

The experts currently reckon that online advertising must be integrated in any promotional campaign, on the one hand considering the impact on the target customers, due to direct communication, and on the other hand due to the much lower costs (or even free of charge) as compared to classical advertising (TV, mass-media advertisements etc).

There are several social networks Facebook, GooglePlus, Badoo, MySpace, YouTube; nevertheless, Facebook seems to be the most popular worldwide. Created in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a student at Harvard University, Facebook was designed as social network within the campus. It extended afterwards to other higher education institutions and high-schools; in 2006, all persons older than 13 years old were allowed to register, and News Feed was introduced, a feature incorporating all mentions written by friends on a wall. The boost of this phenomenon led to a movie about its creation, "The Social Network", which was awarded three Oscars. [8]

In Romania, the "Facebook phenomenon" is ever-present; there are nowadays 5,988 million users, signifying a penetration of 27,27%, our country ranking this way 31st worldwide. Among the online population of our country, Facebook is present in a proportion of 69,8%. The Romanian population's ever-rising interest in the social networks, especially in

Facebook, has been proved by the exponential growth in the number of users, for instance they increased by nearly 1 million persons last year.

As regards the distribution by age groups of the Facebook-"consuming" Romanian population, in the situation described by statistics, a reversal is displayed, compared to the last year, the age group 25-34 years old (1.8 million persons) ranking first, followed by the segment 18-24 years old.[9]

Within the Facebook social network, in addition to personal pages, official pages have also been designed by companies which post promotional offers, popularise various competitions or events; also some public persons' official pages and even pages dedicated to national-interest topics (for instance Rosia Montana).

According to the latest data, most users of Facebook network in Romania live in Bucharest, respectively 1.325.160 persons, representing a percentage of 25,54% of the total number. The capital city is followed by Cluj-Napoca, Timisoara and Iasi, each with over 4% of the total [10].

There is a site, Facebrands.ro, monitoring the activity on Facebook and also making the top of the Romanian brands, created on the basis of the users' affinities and not on the raw traffic served by the site. This site contains statistics made on a number of 20.669 Facebook pages divided into 50 fields, from *Local Business, Art and Culture,* on to *Tourism&Holidays* and *TV.*

3. Social networks and promotion in hospitality industry

Much as in other fields of activity, as far as the promotional activity is concerned, the tendency is for the companies to turn towards other more customer-attractive communication channels than the classical ones. This way, nowadays, almost all accommodation units, public catering units, leisure units as well as the other tourism-related ones have their own sites whereby they promote their offer. The website of the company, its own site, has come to represent the "business card" of the respective company. In addition to promoting the offer, the websites of the companies also post personal opinions expressed by consumers about the products they purchased, a fact which offers extra-confidence to the potential customers (it is well known that the tourists' opinions matter to a great extent in making the decision to buy). Furthermore, there are companies which, after the tourists' return from holidays, send them an online survey in order to assess their satisfaction, which serves both to improve the offer and to maintain the relation with the consumer, to draw him.

On the site Facebrands.ro, the field "Tourism&Holidays" comprises 692 pages; the page entitled *Romania,* with 376.412 fans, ranking first, followed by *"273 Places You Must See Before You Leave Romania"*, with 375.610 fans, *Visit Romania,* with 316.655 fans, then by travel agencies, airlines, pages designed with a view to promoting destinations like Croatia, Holidays in Bulgaria, Galati, the Danube Delta etc. [11]

Surprisingly, the pages designed by the great tour operators (travel agencies, airlines, hotel chains etc) are not ranked high, the top places being occupied by pages designed by tourism-passionate persons, who successfully deal with their administration (probably, the large number of fans for the top page, *Romania,* is due to the patriotism manifested by those having accessed that page, not necessarily to the posts therein).

Given that most Facebook users are eager to update their profiles, by posting holiday photographs and impressions, it must be admitted that it has become one of the most efficient communication channels for tourism companies.

Promotion in social networks, respectively on Facebook and Twitter, has been seriously considered after 2010, when tourism businesses decreased by 15%. Facing a crisis, the companies within the hospitality field could no longer raise their advertising budgets and had to rethink their promotional strategies. This way, some travel-agency managers declared that, by resorting to promotion in social networks, sales grew by 2-10%. The greater the attractiveness of Facebook pages will be, the more fans can participate in sweepstakes or various competitions. [12]

Another factor favouring the communication through the Internet, in general, and social networks, in particular, is that ever-more people possess a smartphone and an Internet-connection subscription; hence the consumer can access the online environment from almost everywhere. Moreover, via free networks of wireless Internet, people not possessing Internet telephony subscription can be "online". In the struggle for competitive advantage, ever-more companies within the hospitality industry (public catering units, hotels) offer free Internet to their customers, both to business clients in search for this availability with a view to being permanently connected to the information, and to natural-person clients who wish, for instance, to post the last holiday photographs in the social networks.

Booking systems themselves allow freely promoting travel agencies within Facebook. For instance, *MerlinX Romania* booking system allows promoting travel agencies within Facebook social network, through a free module included in the engine displaying the Internet offers (IBE). The Facebook module within the new IBE MerlinX may be directly enabled or disabled by the travel agencies through the application managing their presence on the Internet, and the promotion method tackles the interactive component of the network and not the passive advertising.[13]

The necessity to promote within social networks was also acknowledged by the Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism, with its own account in the main social networks, respectively Facebook, Twitter and You Tube, with pages promoting the country brand, variegated tourist destinations and popularizing a series of local, regional or national events. Similarly to the relevant Ministry, another important association activating in the field realized the necessity of its presence within social networks; it is about ANAT (National Agency of Travel Agencies in Romania), which likewise promotes its initiatives through Facebook and, furthermore, urges tourism companies to avail themselves of the advantages offered by social networks through posting articles on this subject.

Nevertheless, effective communication through the social media must be supported in the long term; the presence and afterwards expectation state are not enough; the consumer must be involved in a dialogue, and this dialogue must be consistently kept on. The activities in the social media should be part of a communication strategy and not be sporadically, randomly made. [14].

Due to the ever-rising interest paid both by the clients and the offerers in the field of tourism, for Internet in general and for social-networking sites in particular, a special social network, dedicated to this

field, was created – Touristlink, launched in 2012. Touristlink is a social platform and the place where the passionate travellers may interact, discover new destinations worldwide and get in touch with experts. The members of this network can create lists of the favourite destinations to share with friends, can post photographs with the visited places and can make recommendations. Based on the users' assessments, the social-networking platform makes a top of the most beautiful tourist attractions in any city. In addition to these activities, the members may access a database with travel agencies, travel guides and accommodation facilities [15].

4. Conclusions

The aspects submitted in this paper prove that social media, in general, and the Facebook network, in particular, enjoy ever-growing popularity among consumers, the active population, the largest tourism consumer, being more and more present in the online environment. The current consumer resorts to the Internet as primary information source and, in making the decision to purchase, (s)he relies on the opinions expressed by friends and other persons, on specialized sites, blogs etc. Likewise, the companies in the hospitability field must be aware of the need to approach the customer, the need to build a long-term relation with this one; moreover, the classical communication modalities are no longer relevant in achieving this goal. The aforementioned considerations prove the necessity of active presence in the online environment for the companies within the hospitality industry and of using all the advantages offered by the communication through this environment, in general, and especially through social networks.

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