

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN THE FAST FOOD INDUSTRY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *In a continuously developing market, such as that of restaurants and cafés, the strategies used in the marketing mix, the way they are designed and the way they resonate with the values and needs of consumers influence the image of the brand, but also the consumer's behavior. Many companies in the field of fast food, but not only, operate now in an environment different from anything they have encountered before. This work includes qualitative marketing research. The purpose of the qualitative research is to identify the opinions of marketing specialists regarding the communication strategies implemented by companies in the field of "Restaurants and Cafes" in Romania.*

*To highlight these strategies even more clearly, we took as an example a Romanian company in the field of fast food that has been operating on the market since 2017 and deals with the production and retail sale of fast food products. The name of this company is **Cartofisserie** and is a company that always pursues innovation in its communication with clients.*

Key words: *Communication strategies, Fast food industry, Innovation, Qualitative marketing research*

1. Introduction

At the moment, communication represents an interactive dialogue between the company and its customers, a dialogue that takes place before and during the sale, during and after consumption. In a European Communication Monitor survey targeting communication specialists, the results show that the challenge for the profession in the coming years is to connect the value of communication to business results and organizational objectives. (Johansson, Grandien, Strandh, 2019).

Innovation and marketing must fit perfectly, with innovation revealing consumer needs beyond the product, while marketing innovation must assess value perceptions and generate opportunities for customers' unmet needs, on which companies will deliver innovative new products. (Aksoy, 2017)

Companies need to develop effective communication, determine their marketing communication budget, determine the appropriate communication mix, and manage

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and evaluate the communication process to improve it in the future. (Falihat, Ramayah, Soto-Acosta, Lee, 2020)

Through this paper, we tried to analyze the communication strategies practiced by the companies that sell fried potatoes, among them Cartofisserie, the company that represents the object of the case study related to the paper. At the same time, the research aims to identify how the specialists regard the positioning of Cartofisseria's communication strategy about that of competitors.

Thus, we started with qualitative marketing research based on the following objectives: identifying the aspects that determine an effective communication strategy, opinions about innovation in marketing communication, also ways to overcome the crisis generated by Covid-19.

2. Literature Review

Communication strategies in the food industry are essential to building and maintaining a strong bond with customers and promoting products.

It is recommended to make well-thought-out advertising campaigns that can help to grow the brand and attract new customers, and fast food often uses tv, online, and street displays advertising.

Using social media platforms can be a good strategy to keep in touch with consumers, and target audiences, and spread information about the products and services offered and the events that occur. If we are talking about marketing through events, organizing events such as free product tastings or organizing contests that can attract new customers are the recommended strategies in this field. Creating a loyalty program or offering personalized offers can help increase customer satisfaction and maintain brand loyalty.

Another strategy applied in the fast food industry can be the transparent, open communication about the ingredients used and about the sources of food. This strategy can help build customer confidence in the brand and can be the determining factor in choosing a particular product.

McClure and Seock consider that, in the growing use of social media platforms by companies, such as online user innovation communities, customers actively participate in company-sponsored innovation activities by posting and commenting on new ideas for improving firms' products and services or developing new ones. (McClure, Seock, 2020) and (Ogink, Dong, 2019)

Marketing communication capability is a firm's ability to plan, manage and launch its marketing communication program. Thus, companies must develop effective communication, determine their budget allocated to marketing communication, establish the appropriate communication mix, and manage and evaluate the communication process to perfect it in the future. Marketing adaptability refers to the willingness of the firm to adapt different aspects of its marketing strategy to the target market. (Efrat, Gilboa, Yonatany, 2017)

Competitors' offerings through an effective marketing program can add value, the ability of marketing communication to enable firms to identify, connect and serve their

market, improving business performance. (Falahat, Ramayah, Soto-Acosta, Lee, 2020) and (Mkhize, Ellis, 2020)

3. A brief Description of the Analysed Company Cartofisserie

Cartofisserie is a Romanian brand launched in 2017 that deals with the production and retail sale of fast food products: fries, meat-based products (chicken legs, skewers and wings, pork ribs and sausages), and milk products (cheese pillows), sauces, soft drinks, and coffee-based.

Cartofisseria's communication strategy is homogeneous and consistent, transmitting a unified message at the level of all the channels and means of communication used. How the company communicates with the public is both online and offline. In the online environment, the company communicates through the profile created on various social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and gastronomic networks (TripAdvisor), but also through the website.

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In the offline environment, the company communicates through catalog-type promotional materials found at each restaurant, distinctive packaging, point-of-sale design and the image of the sales force. This cohesion of branding elements facilitated the differentiation of Cartofisseria in the market and determined its memorable character (<https://cartofisserie.ro/>).

In addition, Cartofisseria is the only player on the market specialized in the marketing of fries, for whose preparation fresh potatoes are used, which they put in the foreground, meat or milk preparations being considered as garnishes.

4. Methodology

The qualitative research is based on the semi-structured in-depth interview that is applied among marketing specialists. The interview guide includes 5 topics related to the proposed objectives. The 5 topics that make up the qualitative research interview guide refer to the following aspects: general aspects regarding marketing communication; opinions regarding creativity and innovation; the perception of consumer expectations; the marketing communication of the Cartofisserie company; crisis communication strategies.

The respondents are marketing specialists from Romania who have been working in this field for over 2 years and have knowledge about Cartofisseria's communication strategy. These specialists (7 people) are between the ages of 28 and 45 and were selected regardless of gender, provided they have not participated in another market study in the last 6 months.

The efficient and responsible collection of data from the targeted specialists was achieved by sending the interview guide electronically and by receiving the answers in the same way. The research was carried out between September 7-12, 2022.

The results were obtained by conducting a content analysis in two directions: horizontally, on the categories of topics proposed in the interview guide, and vertically, by presenting the opinions of each respondent.

5. Results and Discussions

The analysis led to the following results, according to the 5 topics approached.

As for **the first topic** "general aspects regarding marketing communication", respondents stated that it represents positioning, the totality of messages, channels, and ways to communicate, which occupies a place in the minds of consumers. Communication involves a conscious act of promotion, knowing consumers, using the marketing mix and digitization, so as to give value to the product and offer personalized experiences to the public.

Regarding the aspects that determine an effective communication strategy between the company and its audience, the respondents stated that studying the target audience and choosing the most suitable communication channels are the most important aspects. For effective communication, we must consider appropriate content, presented respectfully and in an appropriate tone. Great attention must also be paid to the segmentation, coherence, and differentiation of the strategy, as well as emotional arguments.

The respondents also claimed that a communication strategy can be hampered by barriers such as the choice of inappropriate means of communication, by factors aimed at the target audience (lack of knowledge of the public, the public's disinterest in advertisements), by the brand (company management, undefined brand, credibility of the brand, lack of enthusiasm or its excess, difficulties in capturing the attention of the public and ignoring its negative experience, differences in values between consumers and the brand) and by the strategy (unclear structure, lack of employee skills, early stage of digital transformation). Specialists believe that the future of marketing communication will be in the digital, interactive environment, on social networks, and will include the development of new directions such as voice search. Also, in the future marketing communication will put more emphasis on the quality and relevance of content, on personalized communication, less intrusive and more human, on the idea of inclusion, personalized experiences, and values. In addition, there will be a shift from diverse to different, from traditional methods of communication to new methods such as the use of chatbots, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, and Spotify, micro-influencers and pop up stores. In the future, marketing communication will involve a transformation of customers into communicators.

Regarding the second topic from the interview guide "opinions regarding creativity and innovation", the specialists consider that a creative communication strategy should motivate you, imply a continuous development of the brand strategy even when it is in the first position in the market, carry out multi-channel marketing, have a fun approach and have characters associated with the brand.

To be considered innovative, a company in the field of fast food must be surprising,

and inspiring and have innovative products. Curiosity, different characters, experiences, humor, honesty, avoiding clichés, adaptation, correct values, and paying attention to the feedback received from customers, but also the integration of the product with the message and technology represent elements that can lead a company to be innovative.

The opinions of the interviewed specialists regarding the third theme from the interview guide, namely "the perception of consumer expectation", are the following: the main expectations that consumers have regarding how brands communicate with them are transparency, convenience, continuity, promptness, and honesty. Also, respect, consistency, interactivity, correctness, involvement, well-being, fun, personalized experiences but also the desire to be surprised are expectations that the respondents believe consumers show in this field.

Regarding theme 4, "the marketing communication of the company named *Cartofisserie*", the specialists consider that this company was successful for the following possible reasons: good taste, satisfying an appetite, accessibility, diversified menu, ease of ordering, professional branding, the fact that they are a good and cool snack. In addition, the product is real (it can be seen in its imperfections), and the jovial sense emanating from the brand arouses the curiosity of consumers. Specialists also consider that the communication strategy of *Cartofisseria* can be improved by creating a community, defining the brand and its benefits more clearly, carrying out constant promotional campaigns, launching seasonal products, and increasing reactivity to consumer feedback and visibility. In this sense, buses can be posted, street banners and guerrilla marketing tactics can be used, recommendations can be improved, more communication channels and content taken from consumers can be used, and the strategy can focus more on the customer than per product.

On the subject of crisis communication strategies, theme 5, the respondents issued the following ideas: in crises, the communication of a brand must be adapted to the context, empathetic, and with an emphasis on the idea of community, transparency, relevance, and sincerity. It must show empathy, be made more humane, not lack the funny component that generates hope, and must be done as a sign of solidarity and support towards the consumers who have helped to maintain the company in difficult situations, with their common goal of in help, but it should not be done annoyingly. From the point of view of the post-pandemic effects on the Romanian Fast-food sector, respondents think that sales will decrease and companies will have to adapt, migrate to online deliveries, and find the opportunity to reorganize to be close to the community and have sales again.

Post-crisis marketing actions that can be taken to successfully overcome the situation could be: establishing an optimal distribution system, aligning with honesty, transparency and relevance to consumer values.

Regarding the responses of each specialist, we have the following results:

The first respondent states that marketing communication represents the promotion of services and products to people willing to pay for them. He believes that the story, tone, and communication channels chosen by a brand are the most important determinants of effective communication. The future of marketing communication is the migration to quality and differentiation, relevance, and it reflects consumer values in a

less intrusive way. The respondent argues that people do not expect companies to communicate with them, instead they want transparency and the ease of finding information where and when they want it. However, Cartofisseria's communication strategy is not clear enough, the brand needs to better define its benefits so that customers understand why they should choose its products. In crises, communication must be transparent, relevant, and humane, being a good moment for a company to stand out. The respondent argues that restaurant companies must adapt to new consumer demands in the post-crisis stage, create an online presence, and deliver and convey the idea of safety.

The second respondent believes that the future of marketing communication is digital, based on computer analysis, Big Data, and social networks. An innovative fast food company should be surprising and take inspiration from other industries. In the respondent's opinion, people expect companies to communicate respect, consistency, low prices, and continuity, depending on the segment they belong to, and the main reasons why people consume Cartofisserie's products are quick access, good taste, the fact that it is a different kind of snack and that is fresh. Speaking about Cartofisserie, the respondent states that this brand has differentiated itself from its competitors by putting the potatoes in the foreground, not as a side dish, through the jovial tone and fun, however, they have not managed to create a connection with the consumer, which is why the strategy of communication could be improved through promotional campaigns, reactivity to consumer feedback, greater visibility. In his opinion, the post-crisis effects may be a decrease in sales, but if companies in this field focus on creating office food delivery subscriptions, and catering and are focused on quality, they will benefit in the long term.

Analyzing the answers of **the third specialist**, we retained the following ideas: the totality of messages, modes and channels used to communicate determines marketing communication. This can be effective when there is an internal consistency of messages in the company, when appealing to the values and issues of the public, or it can be difficult if the brand is not well defined and there is no clarity at the level of the communication structure. The respondent believes that the future of marketing communication is represented by personalized communication and the migration to the online environment. Cartofisseria had a creative communication strategy, thanks to the characters associated with the brand (fries) and the fun approach, never seen before as a defining feature. From the point of view of communication in crisis situations, the respondent is of the opinion that the focus should be on the idea of community, that together (customers and brands) will overcome this situation, with the help of an adapted strategy that includes the fun component and hope.

The fourth respondent believes that marketing communication is represented by the marketing mix, to which are added digitization, artificial intelligence, and the use of data. The respondent believes that the future of marketing communication involves a return to the human, interactivity, personalized experiences, micro-influencers, voice control, and pop-up stores. He appreciates the professional brand of Cartofisserie. From a marketing point of view, the respondent believes that the main action that a company in the field should undertake post-crisis is to regain total control over logistics.

The fifth respondent perceives marketing communication as a conscious act of presenting the company's products to the public and occupying a unique and representative place in the mind of the consumer. He believes that the future of communication is represented by technology. Cartofisseria's communication strategy differs from that of competitors by the fact that it starts from the star product, being truthful, recognizable, and unique, but it lacks consistency in communication. So, the strategy can be enhanced by intermittent special campaigns and seasonal new products. The respondent states that during times of crisis, the communication strategy of companies must take into account the pandemic and use their common sense in order not to trigger communication crises, but not to turn it into a public relations game.

The sixth respondent believes that effective communication between the company and its audience can be determined by differentiation and relevance, and the main communication barriers are the lack of consistency in communication and implicitly upsetting consumers, a difficulty in capturing their attention, sales pressure, and ignoring the negative experience. The respondent believes that in the future more will be bought for social reasons and digital marketing will grow a lot because it offers more flexibility and accurate statistics.

The opinions of the seventh respondent, regarding the themes proposed in the interview guide, are the following: effective communication of the company with its public is due to its adaptation to the context, but also the migration from rational to emotional arguments, while the lack of employee skills, the early stage of digital transformation and the focus on objectives that do not have the customer at the center are negative situations in this sense; people expect real-time, conversational responses from brands, on the channels they want and personalized experiences; in crises, brand communication must show support and empathy, have messages of solidarity and closeness to the consumer.

5. Conclusion

Using this exploratory method allowed us to understand how marketers view the communication of brands with their audience in general, but also in times of crisis. According to the content analysis of the answers received, it was shown that the majority of respondents think that choosing the right audience and knowing it is the main element in achieving effective marketing communication, and the future of marketing communication is in the digital environment.

Also, according to the researcher's expectations, a small part of the respondents thinks that consumers do not expect companies to communicate with them and they believe that Cartofisseria's products are consumed because customers think it is cool, and the brand has differentiated itself through the strategy of putting potatoes in the foreground. Also, by the researcher's hypotheses, the results showed that a large part of the respondents state that in crises brands must adapt their communication strategy to the context and a small part of the respondents claim that to adapt to the post-pandemic, brands need to eliminate the fears that consumers have.

However, contrary to the assumptions of the hypotheses, only a small part of marketing specialists consider that the multitude of advertisements with which consumers are assaulted represents a communication barrier, believing that innovation comes from overcoming clichés.

The results of the qualitative research can be used by marketing specialists, by managers of fast food companies, but they can also be a source of information among interested consumers. Following the completion of the qualitative marketing research, the road was opened to the realization of quantitative marketing research among the Romanian population.

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The originality of this work consists of the objectives proposed for qualitative research, objectives that lead to the collection of approved information, collected from specialists in the field.

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