

# DIGITAL MARKETING INFLUENCE ON THE FORMATION OF BRAND COMMUNITIES

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**Abstract:** *The digital environment in which the interests of communicating and promoting brands is manifested, in a growing extent, exerts its influence on the dynamic economic sectors, it changes consumer habits but it mainly affects how content is consumed in brand communities. This environment is still not a channel or ad format yet, forming a parallel reality, a complex system which is constantly changing. To enter and to remain here, brand owner organizations must approach communication, both in entertainment as well as in production and sales in a as pleasant and useful way as possible for the members of the communities they support. In this context, this paper consists in a qualitative research method; various sources of secondary information, such as summaries of some events, analyses, case studies, etc., have been consulted accordingly.*

**Key words:** *digital marketing, brand community, consumers, content, promotion.*

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## 1. Introduction

It has become increasingly clear that in current times the world has passed from manufacturing-based economy to one that manages electronic information based on Internet technology and globalization, and digital marketing is thus increasingly practised. Moreover, research in this field is relatively new and is related to the development in virtual communication, many advertising and public relations companies (allaboutbranding.com, iaa.ro etc.), media monitoring (mashable.com, ZeList. ro, mediabrief.ro etc.), association of marketers (digitalforum.ro, pr-romania.ro, smark.ro etc.), bloggers, well-known authors (Seth Godin, Doug Thompson, David Meerman Scott etc.) showing interest in popularizing the concepts related to communication with promotional purpose, made by means of modern electronic media.

In this context, organizations that “digitise” business will be favored, with a view to reducing costs, increasing the influence and degree of market penetration, focusing on both product portfolio and customers, by creating and maintaining relationships with them by means of the so-called “brand communities”. The gain will be at the consumer’s level as well, since they will have a different informational content and greater adaptation to their needs, they will find that they can buy products and advertised services faster and safer. Thus social media is created as a system of people and content that requires a growing long term relationship between brands and community members.

In this work we will approach issues about promotion offers through individualized content found in digital marketing, promotion based on allowing customers eager to hear news about brands and to be the first to receive information novelties, sent in a context based on integrated use of electronic communication media.

## 2. Methodological issues

The primary objective of this study has been highlighting the way the promotional communication tools, through digital marketing, influence decisions and purchasing and consumption behaviour of the brand community members, both inside and outside our country. Thus, by using qualitative research methods, various sources of secondary information, such as summaries of some events, analyses, case studies etc. have been

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consulted. The research started from the analysis of “Digital Marketing Forum” held this year in Romania, which boasted international participation, as well as the analysis and interpretation of some articles focused on the trusting system used by brands with their clients and presentations of initiatives from the practice of international companies (some of which operate on our market) on the use of digital marketing tools.

We started from the following assumptions: the existence of features and trusting systems corresponding to brands intended to determine the formation of community members and the existence of a high degree of influence on the consumers’ purchasing decisions from the organizational promotional communication supported by electronic tools, under the influence of variables related to economic competitiveness and performance of organizations on promotional communication, socio-demographic characteristics and living standards of consumers, the awareness and use of information technologies, etc.

### **3. The current dimensions of digital marketing**

Based on the above, we can say that digital marketing is based on the Internet and digital information and communication technologies to create, maintain and develop relationships with customers, within the online environment, leading to the appearance of the “brand communities”.

Thus, digital marketing is the practice of promoting products and services using digital distribution channels to reach target customers, build relationships with them and have the ability to produce measurable results ([http://www.syscomdigital.ro/marketing\\_digital.html](http://www.syscomdigital.ro/marketing_digital.html)).

Out of the digital marketing key-objectives we notice the engagement of customers by their permission to interact with the brand and delivering digital media content. Instead of breaking out the commercials and entering the consumer’s life with unexpected phone calls or emails, marketers will try to first obtain their consent to participate in the sale process. Consumers will often give permission because they wish to know more about certain products, so that marketers will need to provide rewards or benefits in exchange. These things are done through digital media designing so as to need some type of action from the final user in order to view or receive the results of media creation (<http://www.techopedia.com/definition/27110/digital-marketing>).

Digital marketing supports brand promotion through electronic media such as internet platforms, e-mail, television and radio online, mobile phone and even on-line stored databases or any form of digital media. So, it can reach the customers very effectively in two ways: the user has to search and retrieve content directly through web search or the marketer has to route messages to the recipients in order to receive orders from them.

Thus, digital marketing must be measurable and involve building strong relationship through the “use of electronic means to communicate with target consumers and to receive responses via the same media, instantly.” (<http://digicat2010.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/what-is-digital-marketing/>).

As many parts of the world have become favourable for development, the organizations entering the market use technical progress and strive to obtain an advantage over the existing brands with access to advanced technology. In turn, the existing brands are determined to gain more market share using innovative marketing platforms and strategies (Thompson, 2011).

#### **4. Analysis of the involvement of brands in the digital environment**

To better grasp the stage of using digital marketing to support brands we analyzed and synthesized “Digital Marketing Forum” works, organized by Evensys (a company specialized in creating business events), in February 2012, and reached its sixth edition, which brought to the audience useful ideas for promoting companies and brands in the online environment, this year the event brings together a range of local and international experts who spoke about the experiences and global trends of online marketing ([www.digitalforum.ro/2012](http://www.digitalforum.ro/2012)).

The exhibits shown in the event focused on the intense concern of marketers on getting to understand and satisfy the customer, around which organizations digital communication efforts are sized. Among the topics under discussion we identified: changes under the influence of new media marketing, online marketing strategy, solutions for interactive campaigns, promotion of social media; two workshops were also held, namely *Social Media Marketing* and *Internet Marketing*, where the basic elements and strategies that can be used in online marketing were presented (<http://www.iaa.ro/Articole/Evenimente/Evensys-organizeaza-digital-marketing-forum/4795.html>).

Thus, in this event, the participants insisted on the idea that there are three aspects to be considered by those who are involved in promoting brands in the digital environment (Baciu, 2012).

The *first aspect* was the knowledge and understanding of users which are in constant search of individual content, but also those who follow at the same time, several channels of information, and users for whom experience, position and reputation of brands in electronic media really matters.

*Secondly*, it is important that all channels of digital transmission of information to be integrated and follow a strategy that takes into account the particularities of the Internet, so that marketing objectives are transformed into objects of online media. Organizations must be present on social networks to provide location-based platforms and to allow a high rate of user’s mobility. Furthermore, it is important for brands to be active, to participate in the members communities, to identify opinion leaders for providing them relevant content that they will forward on.

The *third issue* concerned the need for the digital content consumers loyalty inside digital strategies created by brands through prizes, offers, discounts, etc.

It should be noted that the development of the content of messages sent by brands is done by monitoring the conversation and environment where the brand operates, experiencing and anticipating long-term effects, counteracting the negative comments and measuring campaign results.

Moreover, the commitment to consumers in meeting a certain standard of supply and related services through public education brands create the interest and desire to buy, earn their respect among customers and become catalysts of interest in the environment in which they get integrated.

#### **5. Formation of brand communities and their orientation towards the online environment**

Reality shows, especially on the international level, that each brand is associated with large groups of supporters and consumers which form the brand community and contribute to the development of the community, thus managing to ensure its success. However, only strong brands obtain market-leading positions in the harsh conditions of competition, be it fair or unfair. What brand community members appreciate are elements such as design, quality, communication that contribute to consumer loyalty and competitive differentiation, of any kind. ([www.creativemarketing.ro](http://www.creativemarketing.ro), 2012).

For long periods of time marketers have analysed how some brands acquire a “soul”, a “voice”, a “personality”, so they realized that Apple has its own “cult”, Nike has its own “tribe”, Coca-Cola has “enthusiastic members” etc. It has become increasingly clear that the future of those brands will be to surround the community of loyal customers that encourage them to consume faster and more depending on technological developments, pricing strategies or even product range renewal. This is easily possible in the cases of already famous companies, which have created and developed members communities and a system of trust from them, but for other bidders it is a challenge that can determine success or failure in the years to come.

Relating to this system of trust that is developed by the brands for their community members a set of specific components has been formed: brand creation story, creed, icons, rituals, sacred words, unbelievers and the leader. When these components are highlighted, consumers are attracted to the brand, helping to create a relevant, active community. (Hanlon, 2007):

- the story of the brand creation is, in fact, its legend (e.g. Google was born in a bedroom, Apple and Hewlett-Packard in a garage, Starbucks started in a flower shop in Seattle, Nike appeared when its founder began selling shoes in the trunk of the car, etc.);

- the creed brand is the idea that consumers retain and the image makers have synthesised in a few words regarding to the business philosophy; there is the central element that attracts the people to whom a certain brand wants to share its beliefs (e.g. “Ultimate driving machine”, “A green planet”, etc.);

- the icon establishes a visual tag that extends beyond the product itself and allows community members to identify it (e.g. Sydney Opera House, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower etc.);

- the ritual is composed of things that community members want to do together, there are life models, daily activities networks that connect people (e.g. marathons, café discussions, beer festivals, winter carnivals, etc.);

- the sacred words composing the community’s vocabulary through which the persons belonging or not to that group are identified; regardless of their profession, to belong to the community, these words must be known;

- the unbelievers appear as a countertrend, and while marketing helps us to identify characteristics of customers, there will always be people who will fall within this description; this situation creates, however, certain opportunity (e.g. consumers not using products that contain sugar, drinking decaffeinated coffee, etc.);

- the leader is found in the person who exceeds all the difficulties and recreates a certain state of affairs in accordance with its terms (e.g. Bill Gates, Oprah Winfreys – at the macro level, and project leaders, team leaders, supervisors – at micro level, etc.).

When all the pieces of this code work together a strong attraction to the brand can be created, but each element is a point of differentiation that give the individual the opportunity to create a system of beliefs which brings him/her near those who already share them, giving the community a sense of existence. Moreover, by creating consumers who make recommendations to others about the brand of that community, it is possible to reach their long-term maintenance.

In other words, brands need to communicate what is interesting for the community members, with the advantage that they can always ask for feedback in a competition, inviting them to events, organizing face-to-face meetings on topics of interest, giving them information about the organization and those who compose it, using photo and video content and putting them in the spotlight. Inside these initiatives a focus-group system can be organized with the members of the brand community, in terms of reduced costs and to obtain information about consumption preferences and motivations, competition, etc.

An important role in this context is owned by online social platforms, which include the contests for members, promotions, photos, video presentations, etc. Of course, these social media campaigns have different targets, establishing two-way communication, gaining the consumers' attention, beyond the purchasing process.

To support the previously stated ideas, we present an example of creating brand communities for the Romanian consumer.

Tuborg has begun to engage in Romania since 1996 by building the factory near Bucharest, with local human and material resources; in December 1997 the first bottle of Tuborg beer was produced locally (Crăciunescu, 2012).

This company operates on the premium beer market, a busy and dynamic market in which innovations in product and communication are essential to keep an important place in the consumers' minds and preferences. Thus, regarding the product, the company offered the first bottled dose, easy-open lid, the first keg of 5L, and in the communication field brought as the news first promotion under the lid, first promotion on the label, the first international festival supported by only one brand, etc. To increase the favourable results of these efforts, Tuborg has supported the benefits deriving from brand values, such as quality, innovation, freedom for an "atypical" consumer, which willingly ignores the others' opinion: young, active, dynamic, that not only does not fear change, but also causes it.

In this respect, the brand dialogue with the community of consumers described above is made in several ways, both offline and online, but the key factor is determined by communication platforms "Tuborg Green Fest" and "TuborgSound".

Concerts and events organized in the first concept – "Tuborg Green Fest", reached the fourth edition – have successfully established the brand in the mind of the consumer, associated it with fun and quality music, putting our country on the map with similar events from other countries such as Serbia, the United Kingdom, Denmark, etc. Thus, the image that Tuborg beer has among loyal consumers is supported, offering added value to the brand and helping to create a memorable experience for each and every consumer.

On the other hand, Tuborg is involved in the online environment through the second platform of communication and interaction between consumers and brands through music and "TuborgSound", which has become an important source of news in the music industry, regardless of the genre approached. Quality Romanian music lovers can find on this website artists and new bands and listen to their songs through a customizable player. However, "TuborgSound" is present and actively communicates on the dedicated Facebook page, where it has developed a strong community of over 50,000 quality music and Tuborg beer lovers.

Experience gained by using the two platforms to communicate with community members is used to develop, in its case, a clear and precise strategy to be respected, with constant investment, by focusing on key messages and careful analysis of the consumption behaviour.

Therefore, we estimate that the process of consolidating the analysed brand position will continue in the future, based on rapid reaction to market changes and from the macroeconomic framework, on the adaptation to social context, etc.

## **6. Results**

This research shows that the strategies that can be addressed in the digital environment must begin from defining the objectives of organizations, established according to market researches, and to continue to identify consumers, a step that will be doubled by defining and communicating brand image to induce them to choose those offers over others.

This is because it has become increasingly clear that there are communities of consumers, while the role of the brands is to recognize and respond to their needs. Practically, the members must become aware that they form a community and professionals who develop the brand have to identify group needs and, then, help those who want to do what they have in their mind.

On the other hand, there is an exchange of value between community members and brands, these being able to give, always, reasons for conversation to be rewarded by consumers with different messages addressed to them (for content creators and distributors and passive viewers) (www.smark.ro, 2012).

Thus, the first hypothesis of the study is being checked. It claimed that there are features and systems of trust for brands who are leading to the formation of community members.

Between brands and associated communities a flexible connection is created that leads to the idea that consumers – members of these communities – have the power, and brands with which they interact must learn to listen to them and be part of such groups. A good example is the way that Tuborg was able to form a brand community in Romania.

Especially regarding the organizations which aim at the leading position, but which have limited resources, through promotional electronic messages, the communities that can be easily attracted are targeted, depending on the knowledge degree of the reasons why their members decided to join and, then, converted into image carriers. After the formation of associated brands communities these may further exist only based on the most interested members.

Therefore, with promotional organizational communication supported by electronic instruments, a high degree of influencing the consumers' purchasing decisions is reached, and thus the second hypothesis of the research is proved.

## **7. Conclusions**

In this paper there were presented and argued the reasons why brands are turning to digital environment and to their communities, in order to apply new marketing strategies, offering consumers the grounds to belong to the respective communities. However, the tasks of the marketers do not stop there, since they are interested in highlighting the different roles that brands assume within communities, even reaching the use of the social media as a tool and as a strategy to create communities.

Thus, through digital media, the management of organizational communication becomes more efficient, both internally and especially, abroad. From this point of view, the greater the power of online technologies, the more open and transparent the organisations can be when they want to be understood within certain groups of consumers. In this way, temporal and spatial boundaries are discarded.

On the other hand, however, there are challenges created by digital media and by new technologies, the most important being represented by the idea of information security, from this perspective occurring problems regarding the personal data of individuals. However, it is clear that to achieve two-way communication, brands need to adapt their plans over time to the needs of the community members, to use simple mechanisms and even funny messages when approaching them, to accept that they can not control everything consumers say and allow them to express, to prove that they care about them, to monitor how community evolves – not only through regular reports, but also in quality – and to present to the members the results obtained after interacting with them.

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