

BRAND IMAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA – AN OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH RELATED ISSUES

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Abstract: Growing competition together with an increase in consumers' requirements result in some necessity for distinguishing a company's offer on the market. Foundations of the market success may be provided by the brand image. In the era of the Internet and popularisation of social media, companies have lost a major part of their control over their brand image that at present is a derivative of feedback and opinions obtained in social media. Therefore, companies are now facing some need to conduct related research into their brand image in the social media environment. This allows for identifying a process of selecting products by consumers, behaviours of consumers and their attitudes towards brands.

Key words: brand image, research methods, social media.

Introduction

The most important challenges to be faced by contemporary companies include, inter alia, a constantly growing level of competitiveness on the market, an increase in customers' requirements and remarkable unpredictability of consumers' behaviours. These all result in some need to use more and more diversified tools that allow for distinguishing one brand in the group of competitors. One of the tools in question seems to be provided by brand image. However, development of social media including e.g. blogs, micro-blogs, Internet forums or social networking services makes brand creation and management of brand identity more and more difficult. Due to development of social media consumers have been given some platform of free exchange of information, opinions, experiences and ideas. Hence, as a result of the Internet global reach and possibilities to integrate activities undertaken, consumers have become more able to influence companies and determine companies' development. That is why, it is possible to state that companies are now facing some challenge related to monitoring social media contents with much attention paid to answering questions who speaks about their brands, where they do that and how they speak about their brands. Moreover, research into brand image has got indispensable as well.

In the article its author undertakes some attempt to discuss methods that are used while researching brand image in social media with much emphasis put on the virtual ethnography method and content analyses.

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Brand image and its importance

In the relevant literature, a brand is defined in numerous ways. According to the most frequently found definitions, a brand is a name, term, symbol, inscription, pattern or some combination of all the above elements. A brand is also a colour composition, melody or a conglomerate of all the above elements used to identify products of a given business and to distinguish such products in the group of competitive products (Altkorn, 2003; Michalski, 2004; Garbarski et al., 2001). However, some part of authors highlight that a brand is a much more complex notion that is frequently intangible because it functions predominantly on the emotional level. A brand consists of consumer's past experiences, associations and future expectations (Dunn and Davis, 2004).

In almost all categories of products and services a brand of a product is an important element of an everyday process of selecting and buying. In case of the most famous and appreciated brands including e.g. Adidas, Coca-Cola, Harley Davidson or Apple, consumers frequently buy 'brands' instead of products (of sports footwear, a beverage, a motorcycle, a telephone / a computer, etc.). A brand may succeed on its market, which means it has a wide range of loyal customers. This is possible due to correct realisation of the brand creation process that involves, inter alia, defining a brand position on the market, planning brand identity or setting strategic goals and realising a strategy that would be relevant in the brand context.

In this background, brand image emerges. Brand image is a set of associations that are brand related (material and emotional ones). This set is created as a synthesis of all brand associated signals that are sent by the very brand (its name, graphical symbols, products, advertising or sponsoring, etc.) (Kall, 2001). A consumer decodes these signals attributing subjective meanings to them. Different perception of signals sent by a brand results from different consumers' intellectual predispositions and beliefs, a different hierarchy of values and preferences, and some impact of different cultural environments. Therefore, brand image describes the way particular recipients perceive a particular brand. Brand image involves ideas, perceptions, expectations and beliefs that are deeply rooted in particular consumers' minds (Kotler and Pfoertsch, 2008). Because of all the above, brand image may differ in different groups of customers (Szulce and Janiszewska, 2006). For customers, a brand is some kind of a sign that shows them directions in the process of making purchase related decisions. Properly created brand image allows customers for distinguishing products within particular categories. This means that in a group of products that are similar in terms of their quality and functionality, a consumer is able to choose a particular set of attributes that are identified due to the very brand image. Additionally, consumers find quality to be an important element of brand image. 'A brand product' is according to consumers some guarantee of quality and reliability. That is why, consumers are frequently ready to pay more if they get some sense of purchase safety and if their purchase risk is reduced. Preferences related to "brand" products also result from identification of

intangible attributes of a given offer including prestige or reputation. By purchasing renowned brands consumer frequently aspire to other social groups or they somehow underline their social status.

Benefits that are generated by a brand should also be discussed from a perspective of a company. In this context, a brand may provide benefits that result from differentiation of the company's offer in the group of competitive offers. These benefits may also include legal protection of a trademark or name, maintenance of company's continuity on the market, lower costs of launching new products, greater profits (consumers are able to pay more), consumers' loyalty and effective promotion (Patkowski, 2010).

To conclude, brand image is created by brand knowledge, consumers' related experiences and emotions that accompany consumers when they deal with their brands. Nevertheless, consumers very frequently create their own brand image on the basis of opinions and feedback provided by other consumers, which poses some challenge for companies wishing to manage their brands.

Social media and brand image

Development and popularisation of information and telecommunications technologies (ICT) has resulted in emergence of some tools that enable consumers to create their own contents (further referred to as user created content – UCC or user generated content – UGC) and to exchange information with other users. A platform to be used while exchanging contents generated by the Internet users is provided by social media including, inter alia, blogs, micro-blogs, discussion forums, social networking services, virtual worlds or video services. Due to the tools above consumers have started to play a more active role in the process of shaping brand image. Blogs are Internet websites that are of virtual diary nature. Authors of such diaries (usually individuals or companies) share their experiences and news, describe their impressions and upload interesting materials (including films, animations or graphics). A social dimension of this tool is manifested in some opportunity for users to provide feedback related to the contents involved or make subscriptions.

Blog authors frequently provide opinions and reviews that aim at evaluating products or brands.

The above fact may be confronted with data according to which 45% of the Internet users read blogs at least once a month or more frequently and 47% of them trust product opinions that can be found at blog sites, which may lead to conclusion that such entries do influence purchasing decisions of consumers (*Marketing news...*, 2014).

Blogs have their versions that are called micro-blogs. A foreign service named Twitter.com is one of them. Micro-communications portals allow their users to communicate with one another by means of short text messages (so-called tweets). Micro-blog entries may refer to virtually everything: what we are now doing, what we can see, where we are or what we are witnessing. It is possible to ask for

advice, to recommend an interesting website or suggest your favourite restaurant in a given city. When a telephone user (62% of the Twitter users tweet by means of their mobile telephone applications) uses the micro-blog in question to ask which hotel is worth staying in an unknown place he or she is visiting now, dozens of suggestions with 'reviews' of particular hotels will be sent. Messages that are transferred by means of micro-blogs may be read by everybody or by selected individuals or groups designated by the sender. This means that micro-blogs are some integrated combination of interpersonal and massive communications and the fastest writing based medium (Levinson, 2010). Accounts in micro-blog services are also opened by companies that use tweets to perform their informational and promotional activities, and to provide their customers with required service.

Discussion forums that are used to exchange information and views by people of similar interests who use the same browser enjoy much popularity as a source of information. Internet forums are frequently moderated, which means that the course of any discussion is supervised by a moderator who strictly sets some rules of talking and desired styles of conversations held. It is possible to find thousands of Internet forums in the Internet. They may be divided into general forums (e.g. forum.gazeta.pl), forums that are devoted to specific subjects (e.g. finansoweforum.com.pl, forumogrodnicze.pl, wspinanie.pl) or even forums that are brand oriented (e.g. a4-klub.pl – a forum that is devoted to Audi A4 or corel.wodip.opole.pl/forum/ – a forum of the Corel users). At present wizaz.pl is the largest Polish forum that is visited by real 2.9 million users who generate 31.1 million views monthly (*Mam biznes...*, 2014). Internet forums make people share their opinions more willingly. These opinions are longer visible than in case of e.g. micro-blogs.

At present, social networking portals that are Internet services to be used to meet and exchange contents by users are one of the most frequently used resources of the Internet. Networking services are used by nearly 90% of Polish Internet users. Facebook is the most popular portal. In January 2013 Facebook was visited by 13 million users and other popular portal – a Polish service called nk.pl – was visited by 8 million users (*Nauka w Polsce...*, 2014). Willingness to maintain contacts with friends and some need to watch and comment contents published by other users are decisively the most frequent reason for using social networking services. However, in case of social networking services over a half of the Internet users establish relationships with brands by joining brand related communities. According to Internet users the most frequently given reasons of such behaviours include some willingness to know brands better, to receive good contents, to support a particularly liked case or to get connected with something that is really nice (*Společnościowy kod...*, 2013).

Accessibility and convenience experienced while using the Internet result in the fact that any process of looking for information about particular goods and services before making purchase decisions more and more frequently start with 'searching' the Internet. That is why, consumers' first brand related experiences are obtained in

the Internet: in the Internet browser, at Internet forums or thanks to social networking services. The very first contact provides much information about brands it either discourages consumers or encourages them to do some further reading, commenting or finding out what other individuals think about brands involved (Joel, 2010).

As the research shows, in case of nearly 70% of Polish e-consumers, the Internet is a basic source of information about products. Almost 59% of them believe that the Internet is a reliable source (*E-Konsumenci...*, 2013). Moreover, before making purchase decisions concerning specific products 75% of the Internet users read consumer analysis reports and 85% of them value other consumers' opinions more than opinions made by experts (Gryciuk, 2009). These results clearly show what kind of power consumers can have due to the Internet.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to remember that in social media the Internet users frequently share positive and negative information about their experiences with brands. Due to some sense of anonymity some inclination to criticise companies and brands goes up. 43% of the Internet users express their negative opinions anonymously (*Konsument w mediach...*, 2014). In the era of social media, an image crisis proceeds differently than it used to proceed before. Instead of slowly increasing symptoms, we have to deal with a sudden explosion of activities that are undertaken against a brand involved. In a majority of cases, inability to foresee the crisis in question is one of the most important challenges to be faced.

It is possible to discuss numerous actions whose objective was to boycott brands. A good example is provided by the Facebook related action organised against Adidas with reference to the situation when Adidas covered a wall of the Służewiec horse races in Warsaw with their advertisement (*Facebook*, 2014). The wall was previously decorated by works of Polish graffiti artists that were ruined by Adidas promotional materials. Nestle – an owner of the KitKat brand - was also boycotted with reference to their use of palm oil that came from illegal plantations, which contributed to extinction of orang-utans.

Therefore, in order to shape any brand image correctly, it is necessary to do some research into the very brand image. The research is supposed to determine volume of particular attributes that consumers associate with particular brands. This allows for defining a market position of a brand in the group of competitive brands along with some compliance of the actual brand image with the one set by a company involved.

Methods of researching into brand image in social

Consumers who face a glut of different and frequently contradictory information and advertising noise are getting more and more disorientated and lost in the process of purchasing. That is why, any research that would be based on consumers' declarations only is not sufficient to describe and understand consumers' purchasing behaviours. Getting acquainted with actual consumers' choices and not only their declarations is possible when research methods of

qualitative nature are employed. These methods are particularly useful if research objectives involve learning about consumers' behaviours and attitudes, their feelings, opinions and associations related to product brands.

Due to the growing role of social media in shaping brand image the research in question is more and more frequently carried out by means of the Internet related tools. This research into any user created content most frequently employs the following two methods:

- content analyses,
- data analyses.

Content analyses are systematic, qualitative and quantitative analyses of data that stems from all forms of archive records including e.g. documents, audio and video recordings or photographic materials. Content analyses are particularly useful while researching into contents of blogs, Internet forum discussions or photographic materials shared in social networking services. All contents that are found in the Internet may be subject to wide classification and analyses made from the perspective of an analysed issue, a particular brand or a specific event. In order to find contents created by Internet users in the context of a particular brand, several useful Internet tools may be employed. These tools gather data on pages that contain some key words that have already been predetermined. Data collected are grouped according to the following criteria (*Syntetos...*):

- a) publication location – data concerning pages that contain information subject to research (e.g. participation of particular portals in published contents that refer to a particular subject, a number of visits, a number of views, a number of users or a page rank of particular portals),
- b) types of publications that are divided into the following categories:
 - posts at blogs, information service forums, specialised forums, discussion groups of social networking services or micro-blogs,
 - press information and articles (published at own page or other portals, e.g. sector oriented ones),
 - blog and article feedback,
 - advertisements including product offers, buy and sell auctions or job advertisements.
- c) publication contents – these are data concerning a thematic scope of issues that are discussed in the Internet with reference to a particular key word. Data is collected and then it is subject to qualitative analyses taking into account articles published, discussions held by Internet users with reference to the very issue, problems presented, solutions offered or wished to be offered and associations connected with a particular topic.

Content analyses have many advantages for companies. For instance, any Internet forum audit allows for identifying the most involving themes of discussions concerning a particular brand, i.e. those that attracted the largest number of opinions made by different Internet users (e.g. while discussing Eucerin derma-cosmetics – themes concerning contents of products; while discussing life

insurances provided PZU – themes concerning insurer’s liability disclaimers) (*Social Networking...*). On the other hand, analyses of the GoldenLine.pl service allows for determining a position of a competitive brand / brands in discussions of professionally active Internet users in pre-defined target groups (*Social media...*, 2014).

A strong point of on-line content analyses can be found in using authentic materials that are additionally downloaded from the perspective of an average Internet user who looks for material related to a particular topic. Researchers cannot impose any categories or notions here – formulating hypotheses, their verification or interpreting material are all simultaneously performed on the basis of data that is analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

On the other hand, there is one disadvantage here. Collected materials are limited to key words that were pre-selected at the beginning of the research, which often results in collecting materials concerning ‘hot issues’ that are frequently discussed in social media. Moreover, tools that aggregate materials are not able to distinguish actual Internet users’ opinions from advertising contents, which may distort brand image that is identified in the course of the research.

Data analyses predominantly focus on analysing quantitative sets that are shared by particular social media. These sets concern e.g. page traffic statistics or in case of blogs ratios of posts to feedbacks provided. Data analyses may be used to research into the structure of the brand focused community, statistics related to popularity of a page / profile of a brand or examination of communicated reach.

With reference to much significance of actions undertaken by brands at Facebook, the service provides sophisticated statistics that allow for performing extensive analytical activities. There are also numerous tools aimed at individuals who administer Facebook company profiles and that help to carry out interactive communication with ‘fans’ or allow for monitoring competitive brands. Data collected this way is presented in simple and clear graphs (e.g. Brand24, Sotrender). Selected indexes shown at the portal are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected statistics of a company profile at Facebook (Source: Facebook.com, www.web.gov.pl, www.sotrender.pl)

Index	Description
Total Likes	A number of individuals who have liked the fanpage
Total Reach of the Fanpage	A number of individuals who have been reached by the fanpage
Friends of Fans	A number of friends who like the fanpage; this index also describes potential reach
People Talking About This	A number of individuals who generate some action resulting from a specific post (like, feedback, response to some event created at the fanpage, etc.)
Weekly Total Reach	A number of individuals who have been reached weekly.
Benchmark	Comparison of fanpage statistics with model indexes.
Positive Interactions	Likes, feedback and sharing.

Negative Interactions	Hiding a particular post, hiding all posts of a particular fanpage, reporting spam, clicking 'dislike'.
The Best Type of Posts	On the basis of the average reach and fan involvement it is possible to determine a type of posts that would be the most attractive for fans of a particular fanpage.
Check-Ins	This index provides information about a number of check-ins at a location set by the fanpage administrator.
Demographic Data of Fans	Sex, age, city/town and country of origin and a language used

Analysing sex and age related demographic data of consumers who make up some brand-based community allows for verification that would show if a particular brand were attractive, i.e. if it attracted target groups defined in marketing strategies. If this does not happen, it may mean that brand image that is created at a particular fanpage by means of uploaded contents and the language used are not attractive for the target pre-determined.

To carry out any research that aims at understanding consumers' purchase behaviours in the Internet the virtual ethnography method (nethnography) may be used. This method adapts procedures of participatory observation to exceptional conditions of social interactions to be applied by computers (Kozinets, 2010). Similarly to the traditional ethnography-based method, it is of vital importance to make observations in the consumers' natural environments. Then, researchers obtain some access to diversified contents that are spontaneously generated, which allows for conducting massive in-depth analyses of the issue subject to their research. From the perspective of consumers subject to research, nethnography aims at learning their values and preferences used. In particular, this research makes it possible for those who are interested to find out and understand the way consumers perceive their reality including brand image.

In order to feel and reflect the natural environment of the Internet in the best possible way, any nethnography research should commence with non-participatory observations. This way, researchers can recognise basic locations for interactions in the community subject to research, learn the community's language and identify its potential leaders (Klimowicz, 2010). Learning a language that is used by the community subject to research is extremely important in case we decide to perform hidden participatory observations, i.e. within some framework of the research we conduct we are going to interact with the community targeted by asking questions at Internet forums, provoking discussions at blogs by sharing some feedback, etc. Such a technique of nethnographic research has one advantage that enables learning the community subject to research from 'within', following the way interactions emerge (which topics are interesting for the community or how the community members react to questions asked) and identifying habits and standards observed in the community. This way, researchers become then moderators and therefore they are able to adequately direct discussions held to obtain all the information they are interested in with reference to their research assumptions.

Conclusions

Results of the research ‘Polish companies at Facebook – social networking services in marketing communications of Polish companies’ (*Rapoty – Facebook...*, 2012) show that building positive brand image is the greatest advantage of social networking media as perceived by managers (59%). Moreover managers in question believe in using Facebook to obtain some knowledge about present and potential customers (35%). Some companies’ willingness to ‘function’ in social media proves that the companies in question recognise the value of social media that results from a huge number of social media users who share brand related information, opinions and experiences in their natural environment.

Research into brand image in social media is an important element of any brand management strategy. This allows for obtaining high quality information about consumers’ emotional attitudes to brands and for estimating the brand value for consumers. Such information helps us determine whether consumers’ perception of a particular brand conforms to the brand image that is created by the company involved. It is also possible to diagnose this way potential image related crises on time.

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WIZERUNEK MARKI W MEDIACH SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH – ZARYS PROBLEMATYKI BADAWCZEJ

Streszczenie: Narastająca konkurencja i wzrost wymagań konsumentów powodują konieczność wyróżnienia oferty przedsiębiorstwa na rynku. Podstawę sukcesu rynkowego może stanowić wizerunek marki. W dobie Internetu i popularyzacji mediów społecznościowych przedsiębiorstwa straciły większą część kontroli nad wizerunkiem marki, które w tej chwili coraz częściej jest wypadkową komentarzy i opinii zasięgniętych w mediach społecznościowych. Przedsiębiorstwa stoją, zatem przed koniecznością prowadzenia badań wizerunku marki właśnie w tym środowisku. Pozwala to poznać proces wyboru produktów przez konsumentów, ich zachowania i postawy wobec marek.

Słowa kluczowe: wizerunek marki, metody badań, media społecznościowe.

社交媒體的品牌形象 - 綱要的研究問題

摘要: 日益激烈的競爭，增加消費者的要求，使得有必要區分該公司的報價在市場上。在市場上取得成功的基礎上可以是一個品牌形象。在互聯網和社交媒體公司的普及時代已經失去了很多的品牌，這在目前是比較經常的評論和意見在社會媒體上得知結果的圖像控制的。企業面臨的，因此，有必要研究品牌形象是在這樣的環境中。這可以讓你結識挑選產品受到消費者，他們的行為和態度對品牌的過程

關鍵詞: 品牌形象，研究方法，社會化媒體