Dominika Kaczorowska-Spychalska
University of Social Sciences

Social networking sites in a customer communication based on author's own research

Abstract: A role of social media in a communication process with a contemporary customer is systematically increasing, which is reflected in a size of marketing budgets allocated to this objective. Hence, people have always shared their opinions, remarks, and feelings, and social networking sites are perfect space for that purpose. Brands, which will understand the social media essence and lead a narration with their customers in a creative way, have an opportunity to last longer in their awareness. However, it is worth to consider what the customers expect and what they are inspired by which makes them active in social networking services.

Key words: social media, communication, consumers

Introduction

An old approach to marketing will not come back. Nowadays, it is necessary to combine actions in real and virtual worlds – not for marketing fashion, but due to the fact that more demanding consumers are expecting such a step [Pająk A., 2013, p.10]. Social networking media underlie constant changes and at the same time they force continual modifications in a brand communication process. They are changeable – they evolve and change their shape every day. It can be a text, an audio, pictures and a video. In every media, in every second. It is just like the current of the river – permanent but never the same [Gitomer J., 2011, p.15]. Social networking sites are an inseparable element of Internet users' activity, thus, their perception as a separate marketing activity is becoming ineffective. Brands, in order to generate their customers' interest, must include this fact in their strategies. They need a kind of magic which

will charm a customer and will awake unforgettable emotions in him/her. Therefore, customers' experiences and their opinions about a communication process with a particular brand through social networking sites are important here. Consumers make comments on their actions, decisions, and products regardless of intention and will of a brand itself. What is more, this process takes place in real time having an influence on brand image. Due to the fact that there is a possibility to run a business in a real time – an epoch in which media does not show the direction of public discourse – the quantity is not a factor that points out the advantage. The speed and efficiency of action are the things that matter. At present, more than ever, the speed and efficiency of action decide about a competitive advantage [Scott D.M., 2012, p.13]. In a result, a share of expenditure on advertising in social media is definitely enhancing. According to studies carried out by eMarketer.com, global expenditure on social media was 7.7 billion US dollars in 2012 and it has increased by 48 per cent to 2011 (5.2 billion US dollars). In 2012 social networking services have received a separate category in the studies for the first time, which indicates their growing significance in marketing budgets. In 2012 in Poland, advertisers devoted over 82 million PLN to this channel, which constitutes 3.7 per cent of all the expenditure on on-line advertising [Nieminuszczy J., 2012, p.64]. A purpose of the article is to establish a role of social networking sites in brand communication process and an opportunity of their use in the nearest years. In the article, the author's own research results related to a discussed area will also be presented.

Social networking sites in brand communication process

Social networking media is a phenomenon that any words are able to describe. It is like a party on which hundreds of millions of people from around the world appeared. Today, split seconds are enough to make it possible that millions of people find out all the information about everything and everybody [Gitomer J.,2012,p.7]. Internet users in a determined majority participate in a communication process through social media including social networking sites. On the one hand, a simple human need to share opinions and express own thoughts, on the other hand, information overload coming from both other users and brands make this process remarkably difficult.

By now, more than every third inhabitant of the globe uses the Internet. In reference to population, it is almost 2.4 billion people (a growth by 100 million people since 2011). Among Internet users Asians predominate. They are 45 per cent of all the people using the net (1.08 billion). However, nearly every fourth Internet user (22 per cent) is European. A number of people using the Internet in the European Union Member States is systematically growing. In 2006, 49 per cent households used the net. In 2012, this percentage was higher by 26

percentage points and it was 75 per cent. Among the EU countries, Island is a leader in the Internet access (95 per cent). Countries that also take the top places are Holland, Luxembourg, Sweden, and Denmark, where 9 out of 10 households had the Internet access in 2012. Poland with an index of 70 per cent is in the 18th place among the European countries, below the European average [IAB Poland, 2013, p.16]. It is obvious that not every Internet user or a particular brand fan will become its ambassador. Even though a communication process is of a mass character, a majority of its participants generally stays passive. Few participants are eager to post own content or comment other people's content. However, when taking into consideration range and access to social media, and lack of time and space limitations in a communication process through their agency, this media is an attractive tool in the battle for customers. Communities are a huge variety and a whole range of tools with which we can create an image, launch new products, build relations with users, and increase sales. They can be the main character of a campaign, however, they can perfectly be used as one of broader promotion channels led in other on-line media or offline [Bonek T., Smaga M., 2013, p.22].

In a communication process, the most important are the actions which stimulate customer's imagination, create desired and positive emotions in him/her, and convince the customer to participation in this what is happening in a given brand profile. Emotions stimulate the brain 3000 times faster than rational thoughts. An impression that we live in a rational world is far from the truth. Rational thoughts constitute the quality of our knowledge and skills, however, emotions control our behaviour and attitude to the world. Rational thinking makes a customer be interested in a product but emotions cause that he/she buys it [Fisk P.,2009, p.36]. Therefore, a customer stopped being only a passive listener and became a poster who decides himself/herself about what content to post, in what way and when. A customer became a partner who takes part in a communication process through social networking sites. Through new media channels, we can change a person who declares his/her sympathy to our brand into a fan and find extremely committed brand ambassadors [Pająk A.,2013, p.10] and at the same time achieve customer's engagement even 50-80 per cent cheaper than through a display advertising (it depends on a brand and a type of a product) [Internet Standard, 2012, p.56]. A communication process, using social media, is conditioned with previous experiences and emotions which result from common relations between a particular company/brand and its clients. Experiences resulting from these contacts are a kind of added value for those companies/brands that make an attempt to shape them in an optimal way and manage them. It can elevate emotion to the strategic level, recognizing its importance in creating or strengthening a relevant brand identity and

managing the consumers' experience [Robinette, S., Brand, C., Lenz,V.,2001, p.4].

Social networking sites are only one of many media of social character next to blogs, volgs, discussion forums, Internet information services or social virtual worlds. In these forms, they require both reliable content appropriate to recipients' needs and adequate forms of their presentation. Inspiring descriptions of a brand and its products, photographs showing their real features, interaction tools adjusted to communications receiver's possibilities and needs will influence the experiences of services' users. Time, when the only determinant of marketing actions' success on Facebook was a number of fans, is definitely passing by [Dzieduszycka-Jędrach J.,2012, p.4]. More and more things indicate the fact that with the growth of a number of the mentioned fans, the level of their engagement decreases. To a large extent, it is a result of a lack of their loyalty and belongingness that is conditioned only by benefits which they can achieve. Unfortunately, a lot of brands are still treating social networking sites as a kind of fashion and they do not appreciate their possibilities. Therefore, their communication process is based on copying the solutions introduced by competitive brands. Frequently, a dialogue does not even refer to a brand and products connected with it. It is only a loose exchange of thoughts and comments which are to generate a movement on a profile. This definitely discourages users and weakens a brand image as a contemporary customer expects brands which are adjusted to his/her dreamed lifestyle and which will provide a certain added value. Only then, a customer has a chance to feel special and outstanding. He/ she can feel like somebody who through his/her engagement in a brand increases own attractiveness and a social status.

A communication strategy led through social media, especially social networking sites, requires perfect knowledge of users of a given brand profile and knowledge about who among them and why can be its ambassador. Brands must be aware of the fact that a customer will choose these among them which he/she knows and likes. Thus, a communication process through social networking sites should provide such stimuli which will increase the mentioned knowledge and users' sympathy. Exact provided content will be treated by potential profile users as a kind of promise what is hidden by the brand and its products. This will awake a need to talk about them which will have an influence on improvement of interactions' quality among profile users. In a result, brands are choosing such solutions like crowdsourcing (realising business tasks with the use of resources that are outside the company) or storytelling more often and eager. According to market analysts, creating history of a particular brand is one of the best ways to allow the brand, instead of competing, create its own unique history which will capture audience imagination to such extent

that it will take the audience on a travel before consumers take products into hands or try services [Potempa K.,2013, p.11]. Such histories, properly and systematically developed, can reach a broad group of Internet users increasing their awareness of a given brand existence or even their engagement into it.

However, brands must remember that in a communication process through social networking sites an absolutely indispensable element is to respect a decision of the ''crowd'', over which we do not have control, and change the decision into a real, visible effect. Without this, we will lose customers' engagement and trust very quickly [Wojtaś-Jakubowska A.,2013,p.17].

The use of social networking sites in a brand communication process based on author's own research

A survey was carried out with the use of a direct survey method among the university students in Łódź. It was random sampling. According to a Strategic Report – Poland, Europe, the World 2013, the most numerous group of people using the Internet in Poland are still university students and school-age students (28 per cent of all the Internet users). An analysis of an age structure of Polish Internet users indicates that people aged 25 to 34 (25 per cent) and people until the age of 25 (23 per cent) predominate among Polish Internet users [IAB Poland, 2013, p.20]. Such an age structure includes both university day students and students of extramural studies. Results from a report titled Social Diagnosis 2013 – Conditions and quality of life of Polish people also confirm that fact. According to the report, a determined majority of young people (97 per cent people aged 16 to 24) uses the Internet. In addition, a determined majority of people aged 25 to 34 also uses the Internet [Czapiński J.,Panek T., 2013, p. 339]. A questionnaire included 35 questions among which 6 questions were demographics questions. A survey was carried out in academic year 2012/2013 among 719 university students. For further analysis, 701 correctly filled in questionnaires were used. The purpose of a conducted study was an assessment of social networking sites' use in marketing with a particular consideration of their role in a brand communication process. Presented results are of fragmentary character and they concern only chosen aspects of an analysed issue. Due to the fact that the studies in a discussed area will be conducted in a cyclical way, in order to consider changes in customers' behaviours in time, presented results are of informative character and can indicate only general tendency constituting a basis for further, detailed studies and analyses in this scope.

57 per cent people being surveyed were university day students, whereas three quarters of students participating in a survey were students of non-state

universities. These were mainly students of such faculties like Management (56.49 per cent), Administration (24.11 per cent) and Logistics (17.26 per cent). Students of other faculties like Finance and Accounting, Economy, and Journalism constituted 2.14 per cent of all the people surveyed.
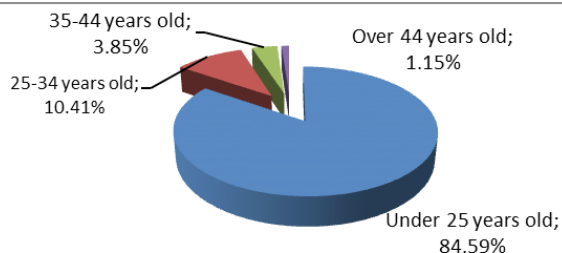
Figure 1. A structure of respondents according to fields of study

Source: Own studies

In the survey, 425 women took part what constituted 60.63 per cent of all the respondents. In the prevailing part, people being surveyed were under the age of 25 (over 84 per cent of respondents) and every tenth person being surveyed was at the age of 25 to 34. The least numerous was a group of respondents over the age of 44 – 1.15 per cent. Such a set of questions results from the specificity of respondents' group as a small percentage of students constitute people after the age of 44. The most numerous age groups of respondents taking part in the survey include representatives of so called Generation Y and Generation Next. These are young people, for whom the Internet and a variety of accessible activities connected with it have a key importance in a process of shaping their shopping attitudes and consumer behaviours.

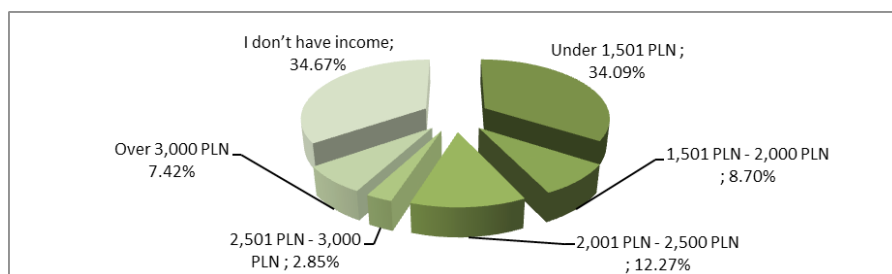Figure 2. The structure of respondents according to age

Source: Own studies

Almost 60 per cent of respondents lived in small towns below 100,000 residents and every third person being surveyed lived in a city with more than 500,000 residents. Slightly over 11 per cent of respondents lived in cities with a number of residents raging from 100,000 to 500,000 people.

Either respondents do not have fixed incomes (34.67 per cent of respondents) or they have incomes under the level of 1,500 PLN per month (34.09 per cent). Such a set of questions can result from dominance of university day students at the age of 25. Generally, such people have just started their professional careers, thus, in most cases relatively small level of their monthly salary is observable. Slightly over 12 per cent of respondents achieved net incomes between 2,001 PLN and 2,500 PLN. Incomes above 3,000 PLN were achieved by almost 7.5 per cent of respondents.
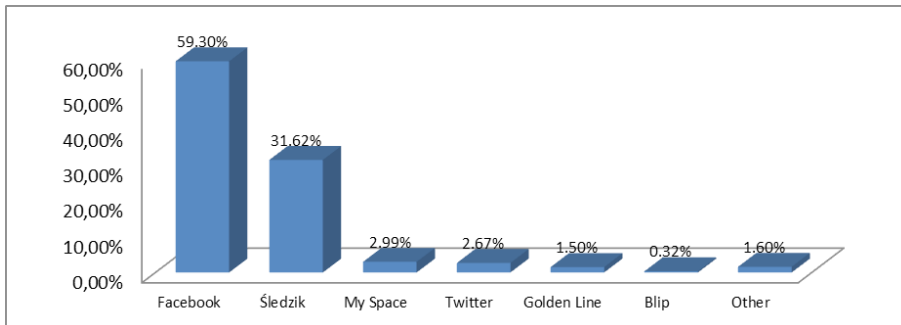
Figure 3. The structure of respondents according to claimed monthly level of net incomes.

Source: Own studies

Over 87 per cent of respondents have their profiles in social networking sites. The biggest popularity among the respondents had Facebook, which was indicated by over 59 per cent of people. Every third respondent had his/her profile on "Śledzik Naszej Klasy" site. Such a tendency is up to general trend of particular social networking sites' popularity in Poland. Only 2.67 per cent of respondents used Twitter social networking site, which popularity is systematically increasing around the world.

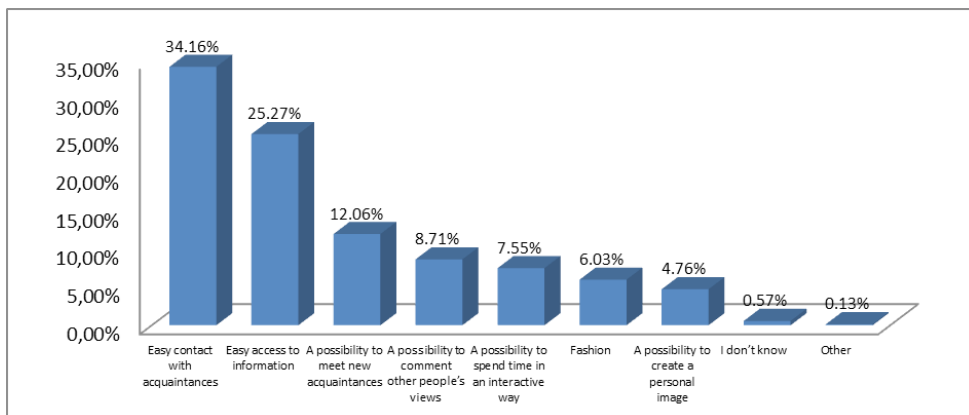Figure 4. Popularity of social networking sites among respondents

Source: Own studies

Slightly over 43 per cent of respondents spend less than 1 hour daily on social networking sites and almost 40 per cent of respondents devote to this aim from 1 to 3 hours daily. 11 per cent of respondents reserve over 3 hours daily for such an activity. However, 5 per cent of respondents cannot unambiguously set the time limits they spend on their activity in social networking sites.

A main cause why respondents use social networking sites is an easy contact with their acquaintances (34.16 per cent), whereas every fourth respondent thinks that these sites allow for quite an easy access to information. A possibility of meeting new acquaintances was indicated by slightly over 12 per cent of respondents. Additionally, the least percentage of respondents uses social networking sites to create their personal images.

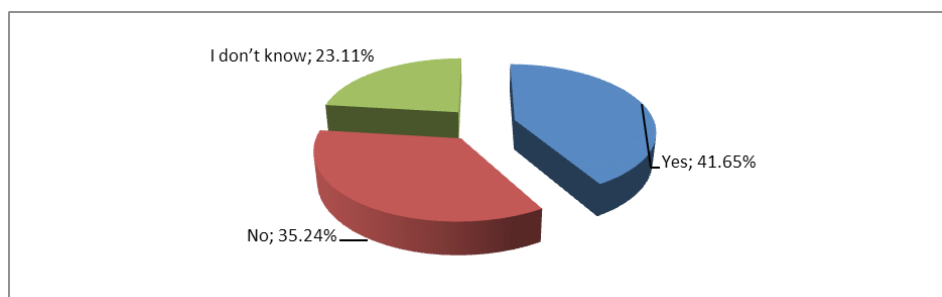Figure 5. Causes why respondents have their profiles on social networking sites.

Source: Own studies

45.75 per cent of respondents use mobile devices in order to get an access to their profiles on social networking sites. Such a tendency results from the growth of mobile devices' popularity and a level of their availability. There is a huge variety of devices and offers, which make it possible to purchase them at attractive prices. This increases interest in them. Moreover, a significant number of available applications, which allow for diversified activity of their users, will have an influence on the growth of interest in them in the nearest years.

Up to 78 per cent of respondents are convinced that a role of social networking services in a communication strategy will definitely increase in the nearest years. Such a tendency is also proved by market analysts. What is more, we should expect not only the growth of a number of brands using social networking sites in marketing strategies, but also quality changes.

According to 41 per cent of respondents, social networking sites allow for individualised contact with profiles' observers or fans of particular brands. Slightly over 35 per cent of respondents think that it is impossible, whereas every fourth respondent does not have an opinion on the subject.
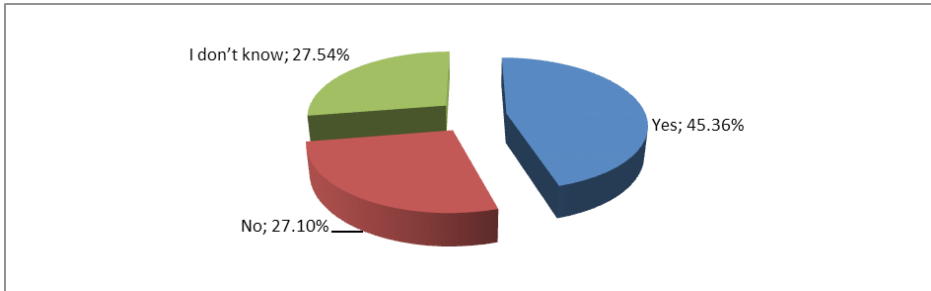
Figure 6. Respondents' opinions concerning a possibility to establish individualised contacts through social networking sites

I don't know; 23.11%

Yes; 41.65%

No; 35.24%

Source: Own studies

45 per cent of respondents think that social networking sites enable creating lasting and positive relations with the profile users. However, over 27 per cent are convinced that such a process is impossible. Respondents who did not have their opinions on the subject were up to 27.54 per cent. We can look for the causes of such a state in mistakes made by the brands in a communication process through social networking services. The excess of advertisements, mistakes in discussion moderation, lack of reaction or delayed reaction in critical situations for a given brand distort a communication process and hinder creating lasting relations between the brand and its customers/fans.
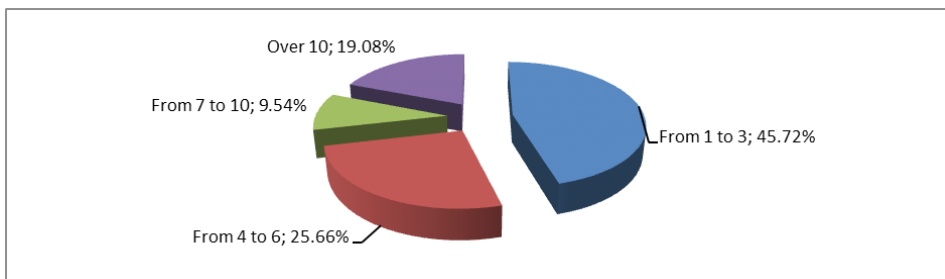
Figure 7. Respondents' opinions concerning a possibility of creating lasting relations between a brand and its customers through social networking sites

49.67 per cent of respondents attach brands' profiles to groups of their acquaintances. Unfortunately, up to 50.33 per cent of respondents are not interested in such an activity. Most often respondents attach profiles of maximum 3 favourite brands (45.72 per cent of people being surveyed), whereas every fourth respondent has from 4 to 6 brands in his/her group of acquaintances. We should suppose that these people attach brands which they appreciate for the quality of products and/or a customer service. Limitation and selection of a number of attached brands' profiles can result from respondents' willingness to effective participation in lives of chosen brands and marketing actions that are realised by the brands. What is interesting, up to 19 per cent of respondents admit that they attach over 10 brands' profiles to groups of their acquaintances. In this case, we can assume that this fact does not result from the affection to a given brand and/or a brand loyalty. The reason can be a desire to use possibly the biggest number of profiles resulting from the fact of being a brand fan and owning its profile in a group of own acquaintances (extra discounts, promotions, a possibility to participate in competitions, etc.).
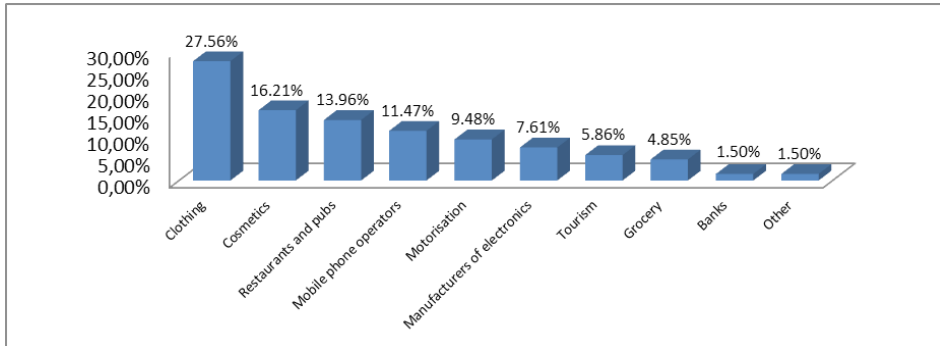
Figure 8. A number of brand profiles attached by respondents.

Respondents attach profiles of clothing brands most often (27.56%). Cosmetics brands (16.21%), pubs and restaurants' brands (13.96%), and mobile phone operators' brands (11.47%) are also very popular. The least popular among respondents are bank brands operating on Polish market, which were indicated by only 1.5 per cent of people being surveyed.
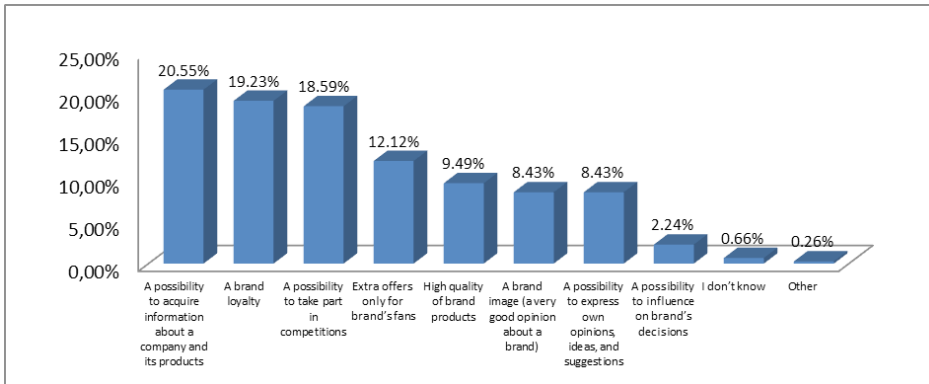
Figure 9. Types of brands attached by respondents most often

Source: Own studies

The most common reason, why the respondents attached brand profiles to groups of their acquaintances, was a possibility of acquiring detailed information about a brand and its products, and getting to know opinions of other users, and that was indicated by every fifth person being surveyed. 19.23 per cent of respondents as a main reason indicated their loyalty to a particular brand, whereas 18.59 per cent expect a possibility to take part in competitions organised through social media. Few respondents (only 2.24%) are convinced that they can influence on brand decisions in some other ways. This might result from the lack of sufficient knowledge concerning social media potential, respondents' reluctance to participate in decisions and actions of particular brands, and negative experiences which the respondents had with the pervious relations with the brands.

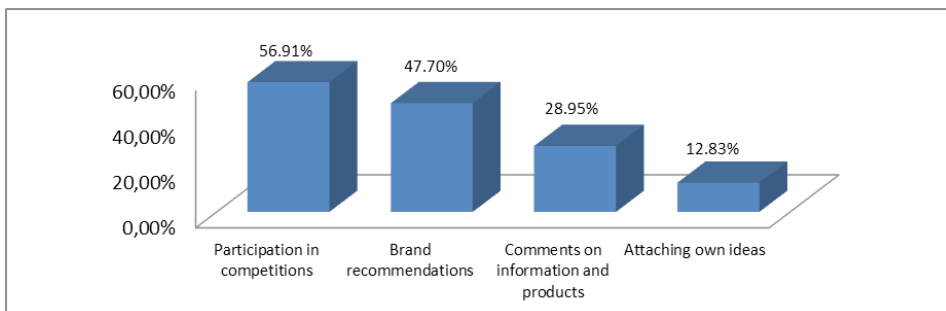Figure 10. Respondents' expectations from a brand profile.

Source: Own studies

A fact of being a fan of a given brand is increasing a number of purchased products in a case of 51.64 per cent of respondents. However, for 48.36 per cent of respondents, it does not influence on their shopping decisions. What is interesting, almost 52 per cent of respondents do not check profiles of particular brands in social media, and do not browse information incorporated in the profiles, including other users' opinions before a purchase. Respondents do not also pay attention to a number of fans of a given brand, what was indicated by up to 79.93 per cent of people being surveyed. Thus, it can be assumed that brands' actions directed on intensifying a number of own fans in order to increase brand popularity are not effective anymore.

Unfortunately, respondents use possibilities provided by social networking sites to a very small extent, which proves a general tendency in discussed area.
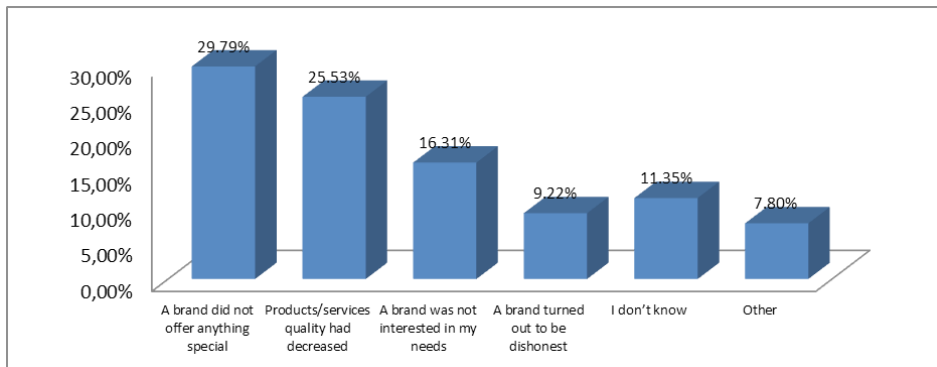
Figure 11. Declared respondents' activeness connected with a brand profile in social networking sites.

Source: Own studies

Only 47 per cent of respondents are eager to recommend a given brand and its products to other customers. Only every fourth respondent gives comments about information attached in an official profile of a given brand, e.g. he/she expresses his/her opinions about a brand, its decisions, actions, and products. Only 12 per cent of respondents attach own ideas and suggestions. Fans' activeness requires their engagement and interest in a strategy led by the brand. However, not every brand can appreciate its fans' efforts. Competitions organised through the agency of a given brand profile on a social networking site attract high interest. They give a chance to show one's own personality among other fans of a given brand and allow achieving additional financial benefits.

Figure 12. Reasons for deleting a brand profile according to respondents.

Source: Own studies

39.14 per cent of respondents admit that they deleted a given brand profile from a group of their acquaintances. The most common reason why they did it was the fact that a brand, in respondents' opinions, did not offer anything special (29.79%). Furthermore, the quality of products/serviced offered by the brand had decreased (25.53%). Respondents also indicated the lack of brand's honesty, and the excess of advertisements sent by the brand or even spam.

Summary

Social networking sites are appearing as a new and powerful marketing channel for the companies. It allows leading exactly directed campaigns thanks to profiled information, activating members of community through using the trust of their acquaintances and systematically developing whisper marketing among existing base of clients [Shih C.,2012, p.140]. Therefore, social networking sites create big opportunities to brands in a communication process. However, effective communication is not only limited to owing a

personal profile. Communicating with customers in the new marketing involves listening as much as talking. It is through dialogue that relationships are built and products are conceived, adapted and accepted [McKenna R.,1991, p.119].

Customers, who are discouraged by a big number of commercial profiles and information overload, require engagement from brands. Shallowness of discussions that are carried out, lack of effective skills of engaging the customers in mutual relations, and lack of knowledge about real needs and customers' expectations discourage the customers to create relations with brands through social networking sites. When creating profiles on a social networking site and deciding to use social media in a communication strategy, brands cannot only limit themselves to actions which provide entertainment and possible benefits to their participants. Competitions or games, led through the agency of social networking services, allow a brand to stand out and encourage customers to acquaint with a profile of a particular brand. However, this is only the beginning of a communication process. Brands must answer the question how to use the users' interest in a reasonable way and encourage them to bigger interest in brands and their products. Brands must be aware of their unique value and what it is that distinguishes them from the competition. Originality and variety of communication tools through social networking services create bigger opportunities for the brands of coming into existence in users' awareness. Moreover, openness to customers' needs, credibility and coherence of actions led in many social media will inspire trust and will allow the brands for creating lasting relations with customers. However, this requires a constant assessment of effectiveness of carried out actions so that a realised communication strategy is based on key values for the customers and encourages them to start a dialogue. Relationships start with a simple conversation. Conversations are nurtured by content. Social media is about relationships. Businesses who focus on relationships first and business second see greater success both online and offline [Smith M.,2010, p.234].

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