

**MODERN SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND
THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS OF CONSUMERS**

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Abstract: Information and appropriate market communication are essential for effective competition. In the decision making process of the company, the constant flow of current, reliable, complete and accurate information is a requirement (the quality of information gathered depends on the state of the sources of information). The company must supplement its knowledge with new and current information. Relevant sources of information are used for this purpose. Knowledge of the sources of information that are available on the Internet (divided into primary and secondary sources) allows for proper selection of online tools and techniques used to collect and transmit information. The aim of this study is to show modern information sources in the sphere of business. The author of this article has also made an attempt to define Internet Activity.

Introduction

The telecommunications market, stimulated by the dynamic development of information and communication technologies (ICTs), public awareness, and the high revenues from the provision of such services, is developing at a very dynamic rate. The increasing range of devices available for transmission of media messages provide operators with the basis to offer a wider range of telecommunications services, both traditional and modern.

The popularity of the Internet depends on many factors. These factors may be, among others: the behavior and choices of individual customers, businesses, bidders (of IT services), macroeconomic factors (related to domestic policies), complementary and substitute services and technologies.

Because of the global reach of information and low cost of entry for interested entities, the Internet has become an excellent instrument for the distribution of goods, where information can be saved in the form of a long string of data. Such goods include products of intellectual and artistic creativity, as well as products and services of non-physical form (i.e. tickets, reservations, services provided at a distance). The Internet has become a tool for intermediation between various market participants. The Internet has changed the method of building relationships between organizations (B2B), organizations and their customers (B2C) and between consumers (C2C).

The availability, range, capacity and other features of the Internet have an impact on organizations, on their behavior and their relationships with customers. In recent years, social networking has become a phenomenon from which both businesses and customers may benefit. It has had a great impact on the formation of relationships between companies and its customers, and has given new possibilities for actions from both sides.

Research methodology

Information is growing in importance as another factor of production. Continuous improvement of products (services) leads to their comparability, lessening the differences between the best products and those which have been improved upon. It is imperative to be able to reach customers in new ways, which is conditioned by the ability to acquire more detailed information on what customers expect.

An intelligent information system is an important prerequisite for the successful implementation of competitive strategy. This stems from the fact that the winner on the market is the one who has quick access to accurate information.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to show the dependency between modern information sources and the decision-making process of the consumer. The author presents the role of the internet community in the area of business and economy. In the framework of this study some forms of online activity are also shown.

The information revolution affects competition in three main ways, by:

- changing the structure of the sector, which changes the rules of competition;
- creating competitive advantage, enabling companies to achieve better results than their competitors;
- generating entirely new fields of economic activity, often on the basis of the current operations of the company.

The above mentioned issues are the subject of analysis in this paper.

Social networking and the purchasing process

Considerable development in online communities can be seen from the time they were merely text notice boards to now, when they have become complete three-dimensional virtual worlds. Their importance as a medium for communication is constantly growing. In general, it can be stated that Internet communities are nothing more than social networks that use computers to aid

communication between individual members. Members of these Internet communities can have various formal or informal roles, e.g. experts in a particular field, knowledge managers, moderators, opinion leaders, etc. Different roles, taken on or assigned (in the case of sponsored communities) can contribute to the success or failure of a particular forum (Tang & Yang 2006, pp. 508-509).

Online communities are created by people with common interests, goals or social origin. This refers to both social factors and specific consumer characteristics. Online communities are able to satisfy the following needs of consumers: interest, creation of relationships, transactions and fantasies (Berger & Messerschmidt 2009, pp. 447-448).

The involvement of participants in a virtual community may contribute to its success or failure, but without a specific purpose for the existence of a community, it may be difficult to convince potential customers to engage in it. Thus, one can try to extend the definition of the Internet community to express its purpose and mechanisms (rules and requirements). In other words – an Internet community is a group of people with a common goal who communicate through a network based on specified standards (Laudon, Traver, 2010, pp. 11-16). In some communities, communication is the only objective. Of course, the function and organization of the community depends on its specific objectives, which vary from community to community.

The increased importance of social networking may translate into the increased importance of the impact those communities have on the purchasing process. The most pronounced economic implication of participation in online communities is their impact on the process of finding information in the early phase of the decision-making process. In order to obtain the information they seek, consumers may contact like-minded people or consumers who have already had experience with a given product. Recommendations from friends, family members and like-minded consumers have a significant impact on the decision to make a purchase, both in offline and online conditions. They are particularly important in the case of services, when the level of uncertainty and the risk associated with the purchase are particularly high. The increased importance of social networking causes a significant increase in opinions and recommendations available to the customer (Cheung, Lee & Rabjohn, 2008, pp. 231-234).

Virtual communities support the flow of information through an appropriate combination of communication and content. Research was carried out to learn about the motives of consumers participating in online communities. It turned out that online communities satisfy some specific needs of consumers, and the three most important needs are as follows (Shuen, 2009, pp. 96-97):

- common interests,
- building relationships,
- transactions.

Communities can equally satisfy all three needs mentioned above or can focus on one particular need. Most frequently, online discussion forums are created by motivated individuals who have enough technical knowledge to start such an endeavor. From that moment on, the forum can begin to grow if a sufficient number of members of the targeted community accept it and start to use it. The forum is kept alive as long as the number of new users is equal to or greater than the number of users who lose interest in the forum. Over time, forces that support the functioning of this community may start to appear: interest in and building of relationships between members of the group.

The convenience of the Internet has made it a popular channel for accessing external information by consumers. Seeking information on the internet can be divided into two types of external information search- seeking general information (in other words, browsing, surfing the internet), or a focused search for specific information. During an external internet search, consumers may come across information about a product posted by its producer or retailers, or may easily refer to the experience of friends, family members or people who have already purchased this or similar products. Many customers do not wish to rely solely on commercial information, and use the Internet to find opinions posted by other customers; to read reviews of products; or to ask questions (Misra, Mukherjee & Peterson 2008, pp. 322-325).

Based on the reason for their creation, online communities can be divided into two groups: common interest groups, which are communities based on building relationships, focused on the exchange of information; and working groups. Common interest groups are specific communities of people who share the same interests and values. Members of such groups are people who are willing to share information and knowledge about their common interests. Themed forums allow members to exchange ideas, to debate, to solve problems and to access knowledge previously accumulated by the community (forum archive). Working groups are informal communities linked by common activities –from conversations over coffee to solving complex problems - and by what individual members were able to learn by engaging in joint activities.

The main difference between these two forms of communities is that the common interests group does not presuppose the development of some shared activity or joint action. Communities dedicated to building relationships focus on individuals who have experienced or are experiencing similar life events (e.g. an unfavorable medical diagnosis). Members are looking for support, understanding, and contact with people who have had similar experiences to their own. Communities dedicated to exchanging information allow their members to have access to a free flow of information that they have deemed to be useful and valuable.

The subject of discussion forums is very diverse – from technical and technological issues to various types of interest (i.e. fishing or sport). In these communities, individuals share their thoughts and experiences and seek information from people that are well oriented in a particular field. Contact between individual members may be direct and highly interactive. Over time, when individual users acquire more knowledge about one other about a particular topic, the exchange in information could lead to the establishment of deep personal relationships.

From a business point of view, Internet communities can be used for various purposes, such as supporting the activities of the Public Relations department, customer service, providing a basis for the creation of new products and services, as well as providing marketing research. An uncountable advantage is brand loyalty and the use of the community as an early warning system against crisis.

Customers, in turn, can use self-organized communities as a tool to battle large corporations in situations where individuals cannot fight for their rights as consumers alone, and to share opinions about products and services.

Blogs as sources of information and formation of opinion

Blogging can be defined as the creation of a consecutive series of entries (posts), whose collection is called a blog. A typical blog consists of the main page (showing current posts), an archive (allowing one to access older posts) and a clearly defined description of the creator of the blog (Wilde, 2008, pp. 405-406).

Blogging helped transform typical Internet users from consumers of information into producers of it. Blogs are typically updated on a daily or weekly basis, and may take the form of a personal journal or diary, be a specialized source of information, or may comment on the political situation, etc. Users share their experiences, values and approach to life, often by posting photos or short videos.

Bloggers engage in various activities related to exploring, creating, sharing and influencing the validity and hierarchy of posted information. Blogging is not just about searching for information, but can also in itself be seen as a benefit. For this reason, searching for information on blogs is not always associated with positive feelings, to be transferred into specific decisions of consumers. Blogging allows one to influence the opinion of users and their perception and loyalty to the brand through the sharing of knowledge (Sokół&Sokół, 2008, pp. 11-15).

Blogging networks play a significant role in creating trends. Participants share opinions and news and spread information through informal communication. With the launch of consumer-

generated media (i.e. blogs, social networking, consumer review forums), consumers are more actively engaged in online interactions.

Because of the opportunities offered by both single and double-sided communication on a personal and mass scale, blogs are seen as a potentially effective and efficient communication tool for businesses. Companies can use this special communication channel, reminiscent of a form of personalized communication on a large scale, for direct contact with their environment. The boundaries between personal, group and mass communication become blurred in the blogosphere (Urban, Amyx & Lorenzon, 2009, pp. 179-183).

Blogging allows one to create an atmosphere of openness and honesty to all interested parties, whether it concerns employees, customers, the greater public or media. The atmosphere of openness is important, especially in large companies which are increasingly under careful observation by the public, and which meet with growing mistrust of potential consumers. Many leaders in the IT market (such as IBM, Intel) have been using a variety of social tools for many years, including blogs, in order to create a better platform for discussion between employees and provide a place where employees have the opportunity to communicate with management (Tapscott& Williams, 2008, pp. 263-264).

Internet Activity

Internet activity is the ability to use information sources available on the Internet as well as the ability to use web services, web tools and techniques of acquiring and transmitting information to increase one's own knowledge or those of other individuals (Gabriel, 2008, pp. 23-31).

Doing business online is not possible without communicating with business partners, and this sort of communication takes the form of a company website. An interesting and important research problem is measuring internet activity (Czarniewski, 2015, pp. 1-8). Research on the internet activity of online businesses must be of a cross-cutting nature, and should include measurements of the capacity of a company's technological facilities, a description of the available data sources inside and outside the company, as well as the ways of achieving planned internet activities (Pralhad, 2009, pp. 35-42).

A model of internet activity may include the following elements:

- primary and secondary sources of information on the Internet,
- tools to collect and transmit information on the Internet,
- techniques to collect and transmit information on the website (presentation techniques, search, personalization, security)

- internal ICT systems.

The elements of the model of internet activity listed above are used in the processes of transmitting and receiving information by the company on the Internet.

Major secondary sources of information available online include:

- company websites (websites allow companies to monitor competitors and suppliers and their products and services in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and to increase knowledge important in marketing; they allows for monitoring of information provided by companies on their websites, where one can gain knowledge about measures adopted, about similarities and differences in products and services offered and about strategies implemented in other companies; websites allow for monitoring of trade services as well as advertising on search engines, i.e. in the form of sponsored links on search engines);
- electronic publications available on the Internet (electronic publications are most often of an advertising or informative nature, although they may take the form of different types of reports, studies, non-periodical publications or newsletters published cyclically);
- databases - the Internet grants access to databases containing information of different types and degrees of validity (Maćik 2005, p 148-149)
- government statistics (in Poland, mainly from in the Central Statistical Office);
- market research agencies;
- European Union institutions, research institutes, research and development institutions, Universities;
- internal ICT systems.

Major primary sources of information available online and used in marketing research include:

- observations (observations during direct contact with the customer – information collected in databases, such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems; monitoring of web sites of competitors, suppliers; monitoring movements within a company website; monitoring of internet discussions);
- interviews (online focus groups, in-depth interviews);
- questionnaires (internet questionnaires sent via e-mail or placed on the web site of the company; sampling);
- Experiments (the impact of advertising on sales; the effectiveness of results reached compared to expectations, in areas such as unique visitor conversion, return visitor conversion; changing the content presented on the website).

One can observe a tendency among corporations to take over forms of communication that originally were quite informal and consumer initiated. This can be observed with the creation of corporate blogs, the hosting of discussion forums on company websites (practically all banks and travel agencies include a discussion forum on their websites available to users); and the presence of companies and brands in social media.

Conclusions:

1. The contemporary buyer of services expects to be able to find information about a particular service on the Internet, be able to compare prices and conditions of the sale among different suppliers, make an order and, finally, pay for the chosen service. Companies should therefore keep databases of consumers with information on their individual preferences and requirements, so that they can better adapt the company's offer to specific recipients.
2. Under the conditions of the new economy, more and more transactions are and will be concluded using electronic media. The ability to acquire and process information, the possession of ever more efficient information systems, and having specialists in data processing are becoming important conditions of market competitiveness.
3. In a competitive economy, being able to reach the customer in a modern way is an important issue. It is conditioned by acquiring more detailed knowledge of what the customer expects. The more precise the information collected, the greater the competitive advantage. This will result more accurate decision making by the customer. The leading tools for obtaining and processing information have become the Internet, devices for reading data, and process automation services.
4. The competent management of information is a prerequisite for the functioning of entities on the market, particularly in the aspect of strong competition. Actions in this area are becoming more thoughtful and professional. It is also becoming the basis for the competitive strategy of enterprises. Acquiring and processing of information, more efficient information systems based on computer systems, and possession of data processing experts are becoming important conditions of competitiveness on the market.
5. The characteristic features of the Internet allow companies to develop their "word-of-mouth" marketing campaigns, to freely allow the exchange of opinions between consumers, and to make it easier to find information about goods and services. The growing popularity of online communities and social media has begun to arouse more and more interest from companies looking for new ways to reach potential customers and trying to improve their position in the market.

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