

SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLAND – GREAT POTENTIAL UTILIZED BY FEW

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Abstract

Social media are very popular around the world. More and more people adopt this method of communication, as it brings instant and effective ways to stay in touch with ones relatives, coworkers, brands and products. Poland is no exception, as all major brands of the social sphere have decided to prepare localized versions of their product for the Polish market. One could say that Poland is following the global trends very accurately as Facebook has dominated the market and pushed out the indigenous services Brands and corporation utilize the medium to get in touch with their consumers. On the other side, there are public institutions like universities, local governments, that should be interested in getting in touch with people, as reaching out to one's potential customers has never been easier. This is happening, but on a very small scale and many attempts fail. In this paper, Author explores the possible reasons behind the situation and attempts to form a prognosis for the market of social media in Poland.

Key words: communication; media; marketing; social;

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I. INTRODUCTION

Social media are becoming more important, as people search for new ways of communicating with each other and aggregating information at the same time. The success of social media however, cannot be attributed to information and the ability to listen to what others publish on the Internet. One has to keep in mind, that relationships are a part of human life and people tend to bond naturally with others. An emotional value is sometimes as important, as the factual value of the message. The rapid success of portals like Facebook, Instagram or YouTube are a perfect illustration.

These three networks focus on sharing multimedia content: images, video, while text play a lesser role. On the other hand there is Twitter or LinkedIn, which has a stable, yet significantly smaller user base, as these media focus on text based communication and delivering a message as fast as possible, with as little effort as possible. The common theme here is both user groups search for information and discussion possibilities. The first group however is more focused on emotions, while the second is more oriented towards hard facts. This does not mean that Facebook does not contain useful, quality information or Twitter is just for professional use. It means however, that each form of communication has its own type of users and rules it follows. To exist within such communities, one has to learn and obey the rules, otherwise will be ignored by others. In Poland the situation is similar, as Polish Internet users have instinctively chosen the right medium for their needs and adopted solutions available worldwide. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms enjoy a stable growth of users since last 10 years.

The problem lies however within institutions and commercial bodies, which seem to have a problem adopting to the new reality. Most of those mentioned, realize the need to exist in the social sphere, but have a problem in finding a spot within it. This can be observed within various institutions, like local governments or universities. If one looks at the website of such entities and their social media profiles, the information scope is the same. So on one hand, the need to be present on social media is there, but the type of content published does not correspond with the medium profile. Prospective consumers start to lose interest in the message, as it simply blends in with the rest of traffic. The main conclusion here is that although social media make it easier to send a message to a person or a group from a technical standpoint, at the same time, it makes it harder to get through and to be heard.

II. THE SOCIAL MEDIA APPEAL

The success of social media was made possible by technological advancements and the wide availability of broadband Internet access. Before the social revolution, Internet was a non-interactive medium,

similar to traditional media like television, radio or press (Rada, 2012). There was a group of people that possessed the necessary tools and knowledge, required to broadcast a message to an audience. The same principle applied to Web 1.0, where only programmers were able to publish new content on a web site. One could argue, that before social media, there were discussion groups and forums, where people could express their opinions. While this true, the problem is not where one can speak their mind, but how can he do it. Internet forums or discussion groups are always structured, with moderators, administrators or leaders, that to some extent, dictate how the discussion looks (Weinberg, 2014).

Another issue, comes from technical limitations of a given forum and the ability to accept multimedia content. Most forums are text based, which limits the user ability to express himself through photography or video. This resulted in users always having a disadvantage, by being forced to conform to some kind of rules or regulations. Furthermore, a group of people had the leverage of being able to send any given message to the audience, while the audience could respond either by listing or refusing to listen to the message, or by publishing their opinion in an environment prepared and regulated by some other party (West and Turner, 2008). It is well established that people confined to a unknown environment, tend to be more cautious when expressing their personal views (Gupta, 2014). Even with the common belief that users are anonymous in the Internet, people may be reluctant to formulate their true views, as there were rules in place, which may have created a barrier of entry. The same principle applies to traditional media: television or radio live shows, with viewer/listener participation always forced them into some kind of regulations imposed by the broadcaster, who also gets to decide which listener can speak on air.

Social media changed the balance of power, blurring the line between content creators and consumers. Social media responded to the innate human need of bonding in a friendly, unrestricted fashion (Kotler, 2010). The success story of the medium, starts with accessibility. Anyone can easily register with a social service, the only requirements are an Internet connection and a web browser. One registered a user can start building up his own personal *infosphere* (Patrut and Patrut, 2013). The general principle behind this term is that gathering information is no longer the issue, as they are widely available, mainly due to the ease of publishing in the Internet. The side effect of this trend is *information overflow* (Klingberg, 2008), where everyone is constantly feed with new information, that are not always relevant. The problem lies within methods of selection the relevant information and methods of delivering it to the user. Social media respond to that, by allowing the user form a group of people that he trusts and allow the group to deliver the information. Furthermore, as social media are multimedia centered, the information can not only to one's mind, but to heart and soul. This answers the emerging *Marketing 3.0* trend, where a user is a human being, that searches for all experiences on all 3 levels mentioned before (Kotler, 2010). On final note, it is worth mentioning that people tend to trust opinion of others, rather than commercial or large, multinational companies, that for the average users, seems dehumanized and foreign (Butts, 2003). The term social is more important within the social media, as people are looking for a way to contact their favorite brands and companies, rather than just a simple broadcasting tool. It is the involvement that makes social media so applying, while Facebook or Twitter are just tools of achieving the goal. If a company fails to show a positive personality in the social sphere or concentrates on getting its message across, people will simply ignore it, as it does not bring any added value to the people.

III. SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLAND

The social media landscape in Poland is very similar in comparison to other European countries. One could say, that Polish Internet users follow global trends very closely and adopt new solutions very willingly. The oldest social portal dedicated to Polish users is Our Class (Polish – Nasza Klasa). The portal was established in 2006, as a meeting place for people, who graduated from primary or high school, before the instant Internet-based communication era and wish to reunite with their former classmates. It was a very innovative service at the time, as Facebook was still unavailable in Polish language, the same goes for other services, therefore Our Class has enjoyed a stable position, dominating the market.

The situation lasted until January 2011, when the portal noted the highest number of active users – over 12 million (Wojas, 2012). At the time, it is estimated that the number of active Internet users in Poland was about 20 million people (Internet Live Stats, 2015), which meant that more than 60% of them used the Our Class services. Unfortunately, since that time, the number of users was dropping constantly. In June 2011 Facebook have surpassed Our class in the number of active users and became the most popular portal in Poland (SocialMedia, 2012). Currently Facebook has about 12,4 million users, while Our Class dropped below 8 million mark (Prejs, 2015).

Reasons behind the situation are both inside the portal and in the competition. Our Class was based around a very specific model – allowing people to reconnect with their classmates. With each generation of graduates the model was becoming less relevant as young people started to communicate through mobile phones, SMS and finally Internet. They had no need to find their classmates, as they were able to stay in touch with them, with very little effort. The model was becoming outdated. Another problem was with content curation and

business model. Although social media emphasize freedom, rules need to be present and followed, to maintain order and quality of the content published. Our Class failed to do so, as the portal was flooded with fictional or false accounts (until 2010 the portal allowed fictional accounts to attract those sensitive about privacy). Many users published illegal or pornographic content on their profile, which resulted in users losing interest in the service (Own research, 2015). One final note the business model was based around advertisements, which were very intrusive and ubiquitous. In 2008 Facebook launched a Polish version of the portal, advertisements were contextual based and users registered with their real name. This contrasted heavily with Our Class, which was regarded as low end service.

People in Poland realized that international, standardized solutions are better, as they allow easier access to a larger group of people. Although there were attempts made by the owners of Our Class to start a Twitter-clone called Blip. The portal never became popular and was shut down recently. Twitter on the other hand enjoys a stable number of users around 56 thousand, mainly politicians, celebrities, press and professionals (Skwiot, 2014).

One Polish based service that enjoys a relative success is GoldenLine, a LinkedIn clone. The first one has about 1,7 million users, while LinkedIn about 1 million (wirtualnemedi.pl, 2014). One has to observe however, that the number of users of the first portal is slowly dropping, while the other is growing. It is likely that LinkedIn will at some point become the dominant professional network, while GoldenLine will either find a niche or become obsolete. On a final note, according to the Mobi 2015 report 15 million of Poles use a smartphone for more than 2,5 hours a day, mostly on social media. (Brief.pl, 2015). This means that there is a large group of people who have embraced the technology and are willing and able to get involved in the social sphere both on the desktop and mobile. This is a large opportunity for firms and institutions to get in touch with those people and get them involved.

IV. POLISH BRANDS AND INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE

Social media in Poland have a different side to them. In terms of number of users and growth rate of major portals, everything looks very similar to other European countries. The problem however starts when one looks closely at the type of content published and the reaction it triggers. According to the data from 2014 the most popular brands on Polish Facebook are: Heart and Mind (2.3 million fans), Play – mobile provider (2 million fans), Orange – mobile provider (1,7 million fans) (Kasperski 2014). This shows a curious situation as the Heart and Mind profile actually belong to the mobile provider Orange. The Heart and Mind campaign was launched in August 2010 by Polish Telecom.

The campaign was based around an idea, that the company can satisfy both types of customers: those that make their purchase decisions with logical arguments – the mind or through emotions – the heart. Two characters were created The Mind and The Heart, that live together as a normal family and have typical problems. The whole campaign was accompanied by TV commercials and Internet advertisements available on YouTube. The success of their Facebook profile can be attributed to amusing texts and arguments of the characters with multimedia content bringing colors and positive energy to the profile. In 2012 the Polish Telecom brand was replaced by Orange, as the company was bought two years later by France Telecom. A campaign was launched showing how the characters move to their new home under the Orange brand name. This resulted in rapid growth of fans and now the profile enjoys more than 2,3 million active users, with an average of one million likes under each post.

The users also very active in the comment section, with 40-50 comments being placed, on average, under each post (own research, 2015). Looking at the Orange fan page, one could clearly see that the number of active users is much lower: an average of 150 users like each post, 5-6 people actually comment on the content. The discussions are usually focused around tech support, which means that Polish Internet users have also embraced this way of contacting their service provider. Similar situation can be observed on the Play profile, where 50 users are liking each post, with 4-5 comments under each (own research, 2015). There is a lot of potential within the Polish Internet community, but it has to be motivated to act and get involved.

On the other side, there are institutions like universities and local governments, that in theory, should take every opportunity to get in touch with their stake holders, as by definition, as their relationships with them are long term. A survey made by E. Kulczycki in 2012 that all public universities are present in the social sphere and update their profiles daily (Kulczycki, 2012). A follow up to the paper, published in 2013 by Domański and Sędkowski, revealed that although the universities are present in the social sphere, there is little or no involvement on the users part. Most posts have no comments or even likes gathered, one could say that nobody acts upon them in any way (Domański and Sędkowski, 2013).

These findings encouraged the author to pursue the subject further. In 2014 three universities were chosen for this exploratory research: The University of Warsaw, Jagiellonian University in Cracow and University of Lodz. The purpose of this was, to establish why students and other stakeholders, do not wish to engage in conversations with their universities using social media (Sędkowski, 2014). The main problem with the content itself as the universities treated social media like any other marketing channel. In most cases, the type of content published was identical to the

institution website, with no personal elements or call to action of any decryption. Furthermore the institutions utilized a professional, impersonal tone, that does not evoke any emotions.

On final note, there was little to no differentiation between social portals. Usually it was Facebook, that was the main point of focus, while content on Twitter or Google+ was pasted from the first portal. One could say, that this is just an exception, but a quick look at profiles of the local governments of the cities in question and a similar pattern is visible. Warsaw being the capital and the largest city with over 2.5 million inhabitants managed to gather 86 thousand subscribers on the profile (Own research, 2015). Although it is updated daily, on average less than 100 people like each post, with one or no comment on it. The posts are mostly just announcements regarding current developments in the city. Cracow with 750 thousand inhabitants enjoys 61 thousand subscribers on Facebook. The inhabitants to subscribers ratio is much higher, but the situation on the profile is similar to Warsaw in terms of comments and likes (own research). Finally, the city of Łódź has 720 thousand inhabitants with 71 thousand subscribers. The posts published are not only focused on current events, but also on showing the positive side of the city, including monuments and places to visit during weekends. The tone of these messages is more personalized and as a result, they enjoy 200 likes on average, 5- 10 comments and 20- 50 shares (own research). This clearly shows that diversified content and a more emotional approach is interesting for people, who wish to share it with others.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The short research presented here clearly shows that, there is potential within Polish social media and to some extent it has been harvested. Commercial brands feel the need and have the necessary knowledge to engage in conversations with their consumers, both on professional service level and more emotional, personal level. On the other hand, public institutions that from the very definition, should be interested in forming a strong bond with their consumers, fail to do that. One has to wonder, if the shortcoming of the universities and local governments come from the inability to balance the dignity of the institution, with a more emotional approach, expected by the users. The city of Łódź tries to accomplish that, by attempting to diversify the content, by publishing both current information regarding the city along with curiosities and interesting facts and places within it.

This approach seems to incentivize the users to become more active, but it remains to be seen if the trend continues. One might argue, that the consumers themselves need to be educated to search for contact with their university or homeland using social media. It takes time and effort to convince people, that it is worth to be involved in such activities and it results in tangible benefits. The issue requires further research, as social media are on the rise and more entities, both public and private will have to face the fact sooner rather than later. The question remains when the general public will start to demand for this form of communication to become available. At this point social media are an important medium for private and commercial users, while public bodies recognize the need to be present, but treat the medium as another messaging route to their stakeholders.

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