EXPERIENCES OF DIGITAL MARKETERS ON THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF IT COMPANIES USING FOCUS-GROUP

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Abstract: *The IT field, by its nature and evolution, requires a special attention to the online communication strategy. If for most IT companies, the marketing strategy is customized according to their product, customers, marketing objectives, budget, marketing team size, etc., there is a common perception of the digital communication strategy. Therefore, this article, which is based on two Focus-group research projects, aims to present the attitudes, experiences and opinions of online marketers related to the digital communication strategy of the IT companies based in Romania.*

Key words: *online communication strategy, IT field.*

1. Introduction - Why Focus-Group?

The Focus-group provides relevant information compared to other research methods and it is designed to create and exploit a group's dynamics, in order to facilitate data collection of the digital marketing specialists within IT companies, while retaining their individual preferences. Thus, this method allows them to gather in-depth information as well as the opinions and attitudes of the participants. The advantages of this method are:
- it allows to generate a large amount of information about a specific topic;
- relatively low cost;
- it permits to obtain immediate reactions.

2. Size and setting of a sample

Given that the ideal sample specific to the focus-group method is 8 to 12 people, it was considered to have chosen 8 participants (an optimum number for shaping the analyzed broad theme and for enabling everyone to present his/ her views and opinions). The criteria for selecting the 16 participants of the two focus groups were:
- working in the online marketing field within an IT company in Romania;
- parity between the sex of the respondents;
- similar ages;
- no participation in a panel discussion on the topic for the last 6 months.

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3. Selection

The participants in the two focus groups were selected via LinkedIn and contacted through an email containing a recruitment questionnaire. Subsequently, they were contacted by phone to confirm their presence in the focus group.

4. Focus group participants

Persons participating in the two focus-groups were*:*

Group 1:
  - Male, 25-30 years, Online Marketing Specialist;
  - Female, 25-30 years, Digital Strategy Developer;
  - Female, 25-30 years, Community Manager;
  - Female, 25-30 years, SEO Specialist;
  - Male, 30-35 years, Digital Marketing Manager;
  - Female, 25-30 years, Manager E-commerce and Online Marketing;
  - Female, 25-30 years, Manager E-commerce and Online Marketing.

Group 2:
  - Male, over 35 years, Content Marketing Manager;
  - Female, over 35 years, Database Manager;
  - Female, over 35 years, Online Marketing Specialist;
  - Male, over 35 years, Digital Marketing Manager;
  - Male, over 35 years, SEO specialist;
  - Female, over 35 years, Digital Marketing Specialist;
  - Female, over 35 years, Community Manager;
  - Male, over 35 years, Online Marketing Specialist.

5. Formulation of hypotheses and objectives

The hypotheses and objectives of these two focus-groups have been designed to facilitate knowledge and understanding of the attitudes, opinions and experience of digital marketing specialists in IT companies related to the online communication strategy of these companies.

5.1. Hypotheses
   a. Online marketing is the most important form of marketing practiced by IT companies;
   b. All IT companies use digital marketing tools in their marketing strategy;
   c. The most effective form of digital marketing for IT companies is email marketing;
   d. The efficiency of online marketing campaigns depends on defining the profile of "buyer persona" and the content marketing.

5.2. Objectives:
   1. Identifying the main forms of marketing used by IT companies:
   a) Identifying traditional marketing tools practiced by IT companies;

b) Establishing the importance of digital marketing in the marketing strategy of IT companies;

c) Benefits of the digital marketing for IT companies.

2. Identifying the tools used in the IT companies' online communication:

a) Identifying the tools used by IT companies in their online communication;

b) Identifying the advantages of using social networks;

c) Identifying the advantages of using Google Adwords;

d) Identifying the advantages of using SEO;

e) Identifying the advantages of using Newsletters;

f) Identifying the advantages of articles published on the blog;

g) Identifying the most effective online marketing tools for IT companies.

3. Opportunities to raise the target through online communication:

a) Establishing how online communication influences the purchase decision;

b) Establishing the efficiency of webinars for IT companies;

c) Establishing the efficiency of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) for IT companies.

4. Defining the ways to improve the customer relationships through the online communication strategy for IT companies:

a) Improving the company's image by online communication;

b) Establishing the new online communication's priorities in order to improve the client relationship.

5. Identifying the best online marketing strategies practiced by an IT company:

a) Identifying the basic components necessary for an online strategy to be successful in the IT field;

b) Establishing the percentage of each element that ensures the success of the online strategy;

c) Identifying the elements that can lead to the failure of an online marketing strategy for IT companies.

6. Profiling "buyer persona" for IT companies:

a) Socio-demographic characteristics;

b) Identifying the "buyer persona" profile for IT companies (interests, hobbies, expectations, etc.);

7. Identifying content marketing strategies for IT companies:

a) Content of an IT company website;

b) Content of Articles;

c) Content of Newsletters;

d) Content promoted through social networks - language, topics, frequency.

The two Focus groups followed the standard steps of a qualitative research, namely: (1) Design of the detailed interview guide used in the Focus-group moderation; (2) Preparation of the questionnaire completed by the participants in the Focus group; (3) Conducting the Focus Group; (4) Interpretation of the results.

6. Preparing the interview guidelines

The focus group began with a series of structured questions that followed the topic, asked to the specialists in online marketing working in IT companies. The introduction lasted about 5 minutes, after which, the members had approximately 3 minutes each to present themselves.

7. Interview guide

The focus group began with a series of structured questions that followed the topic, asked to the specialists in online marketing working in IT companies. The introduction lasted about 5 minutes, after which, the members had approximately 3 minutes each to present themselves.

The two focus groups were recorded audio / video and then manually transcribed to be analyzed carefully.

PART I - 35 minutes
I. **Identification of the main forms of marketing practiced by IT companies (10 min):**
1. What are the traditional marketing tools used by IT companies?
2. What are the benefits of the traditional marketing tools for IT companies?
3. What are the digital marketing tools used by IT companies?
4. What are the benefits of the digital marketing tools for IT companies?
5. What is the percentage of the digital marketing in the marketing strategy of IT companies?

II. **Identifying the advantages of the digital tools used by IT companies in their online communication (15 min):**
1. What are the tools used by IT companies in their online marketing strategy?
2. Which are the benefits of using online social networks to promote IT companies?
3. Which are the benefits of using SEO in the online promotion of IT companies?
4. Which are the benefits of using Newsletters for IT companies?
5. What are the advantages of articles published on the blog?
6. What are the most useful online tools to promote IT companies efficiently?

III. **Opportunities to raise the target through online communication (10 min):**
1. What kind of online advertising used by IT companies can influence the purchasing decision of their customers?
2. What is the effectiveness of CSR in the online communication of IT companies?

PART II - 45 minutes
IV. **Establishing ways to improve the customer relationships through online communication strategies for IT companies (5 min.):**
1. How can IT companies improve their image by online communication?
2. What are the priorities of IT companies' online communication towards the clients?

V. **Identifying the best online marketing strategies practiced by an IT company (15 min.):**
1. What are the components necessary for an online strategy to be efficient?
2. What is the percentage of each element that ensures the success of an online communication strategy for IT companies?
3. What are the digital marketing mistakes that can lead to the failure of online communication strategies for IT companies?

VI. **Profiling "buyer persona" for IT companies (10 min.):**
1. What are the socio-demographic characteristics of the IT companies' customers?
2. How can the "buyer persona" profile be identified?

VII. **Identifying content marketing strategies for IT companies (15 min.) :**
1. What do the IT companies' websites present?
2. What topics do the articles published on the IT companies' blogs cover?
3. How often must articles be published on the IT companies' blogs?
4. What type of content is used in Newsletters by IT companies (sales, information, education..)?
5. What is content marketing used in social media?
6. How often do IT companies communicate on social networks?
7. Does the content marketing strategy used by IT companies relate to the strategy practiced by their competitors?

PART III –5 minutes
In this final part, each participant has been asked to give his/her suggestions and lessons learned from these talks.

8. Interpretation of results

Regarding the marketing tools used by IT companies, they are both traditional and digital. **Traditional marketing tools** include: brochures, banners, posters, radio and TV, neon signs, roll-ups, stands, advertising in print media, etc. They are used to achieve the sales targets and to increase the IT companies' awareness on the Romanian market, especially for recruitment reasons.

Thus, traditional marketing tools are used by the IT companies in Romania for:
▪ **PR campaigns** (participation as partner in IT events, appearances in magazines - interviews, etc.);
▪ **CSR campaigns** (sponsorship and participation in CSR events)
▪ **BTL (Below-the-line)** campaigns - segmented communication, face to face (promotional materials, fairs, etc.)
▪ **ATL (Above-the-line) campaigns** - communication (generally through mass - media), street billboards, TV commercials, radio, etc.

As the main objectives of the IT companies in Romania are related to increasing awareness and to recruitment (in most of the cases, customers are international), some of the most useful tools of traditional marketing are organizing competitions, internships and participation in events specific to the IT field or IT recruitment.

Two important forms of traditional marketing for the IT companies in Romania are: "brand ambassadors" - employees can influence significantly and positively the company's image, and the charitable actions (CSR actions in general) that are designed to increase the awareness and the confidence in the brand.

In this context, a priority of the IT companies' marketing strategy in Romania is to improve their image internally (among employees).

In terms of **digital marketing tools** used by the IT companies in Romania, they are: Newsletters, Facebook / Google / LinkedIn Ads campaigns, remarketing, PPC, SEO; SEA; SMO; content marketing, affiliate marketing, blogging and web sites, applications, free webinars, testimonials and demonstrations on YouTube; quizzes; online competitions; campaigns on blogs; comments on specialized forums. Among them, the most effective are email marketing and Facebook.

The weight of the digital marketing tools versus the traditional marketing tools differs greatly from one company to another. If for small IT companies, digital marketing may be the only form of marketing practiced by the company, for the mid-size and large companies, the attention allocated to the traditional marketing is on the rise, reaching a balance between the two forms of marketing (a mix of elements within a coherent strategy with a common goal, in which the two forms of marketing are complementary).

Furthermore, the objectives set up as part of the marketing strategy may influence the decision of using marketing tools belonging to one of the two categories (digital and traditional).

The multiple advantages of the digital marketing tools determine the IT companies in Romania to use them. Thus, it may be considered that any IT company in Romania that has a marketing strategy relies on one or more digital marketing tools.

The most important advantages of the digital marketing tools are:
- Notoriety;
- Better customer segmentation;
- Easier access to information;
- ROI much easier to track;
- They are matching well with the changes in the consumer's behavior;
- Greater flexibility in analyzing the results of the marketing strategy;
- Opening to new international markets;
- Measurable results in real time;
- Ability to test new strategies without high costs;
- Two-way communication and real-time feedback from clients or potential clients;
- Diversification of communication depending on the target audience;
- Lower costs compared to the traditional marketing tools.

The instruments used in digital marketing are: SEO, SEA, Facebook, Online PR → Lead Nurturing, Email Marketing, Facebook and specialized forums, social media, online advertising, newsletters and webinars.

Regarding the objectives established in the online strategies of the IT companies in Romania, they are related to the awareness and confidence in the brand (brand awareness), the presentation of products and services, sales and getting leads (improvement rate conversion), recruiting and building an online community.

Also, the main forms of sensitization of the target chosen by the IT companies in Romania are:
- Participation with speakers in online and offline events (webinars and conferences);

- Participation in charitable events, sponsorships, CSR;
- Organization of internal parties and events (KS, Team Building, etc.);
- Job Fairs;
- Contests, gala premieres, social activities such as marathons.

In order to improve the IT company's image by online promoting, the following items are needed:

- Establishing a clear image, a precise and measurable target as well as the tactics to achieve it;
- A very good customer service strategy (quick responses, management reviews etc.);
- Distribution of quality content, proper audience segmentation;
- Measurement and analysis of the results of each campaign to be able to see items that must to be improved;
- Clear expression of values;
- Social Media and CSR actions taken correctly;
- Transparency regarding recruitment goals - Glassdoor, open days, facing positive negative feedback (forums);
- Mailing campaigns to educate the public and less with trade promotion purposes.

The online communication priorities of IT companies towards their clients are related to transparency, honesty, delivering quality content adapted to the target audience, attention allocated to the customers' interests (customers override their own image), improving the conversion rate. In fact, the online communication priorities of IT companies are determined by objectives (each company communicating towards its target useful information).

Regarding the components necessary for an online communication strategy to be effective, they are:

- Research;
- Analyzing and defining the target audience / buyer personas / context personas;
- Defining SMART objectives, resources, timing, communication plan, communication platforms, budget;
- A clear strategy (branding, communication, context, social, SEO);
- Testing and adaptation;
- Monitoring and analysis of results;
- Proposals to improve future campaigns.

Each of the above mentioned elements contributes to the whole and if an item is not treated properly, the whole marketing strategy will fail.

In general, the IT companies in Romania communicate their services and products, then the brand values, followed by the customer service communication.

Also, the forms of digital marketing practiced by the IT companies in Romania vary greatly, but the current trend for the majority is represented by a crossing use of inbound marketing element; for the best of them, the use of integration marketing platforms.

The most common mistakes made by the IT companies in Romania are related to the lack of clearly defined objectives from the beginning, or the lack of coherence between tactics (if there are many actions without any coherence between them), the lack of content tailored to the specific needs of the target audience, the lack of competition analysis, the use of an inappropriate communication channel, a budget spent without a plan, by defining uncompetitive goals, or by the obsolete use of platforms as well as the lack of monitoring and analysis of the results.

The "Buyer persona" profile for the IT companies in Romania is difficult to be identified because, on the one hand, it is different from one company to another, and on the other hand, because it is a dynamic component, which changes over time.

Broadly, however, the customers of the international IT companies in Romania are coming from: the USA and Western Europe, from urban areas having a high income and a modern lifestyle. They are decision makers (CEO, CTO, COO, CMO) and HR managers, aged between 35-50 years from different sectors: banking, finance, automobile, industrial, IT, tourism, entertainment or health, from famous international companies, software publishers to start-ups.

Some ways to identify the "buyer persona" profile are: newsletters, blogs, the analysis of social network subscribers, the analysis of current customers (customers are grouped based on demographics, their main activity, goal, turnover, business needs, how they use the online environment, etc.), the analysis of certain trends related to their field of activity, marketing research: integration of custom forms, questionnaires sent to customers, profiling with the sales department, research on social networks (social listening), Google Analytics.

The content used in the digital strategy of the IT companies in Romania has an overwhelming importance. In the case of the **websites**, the communication is informative and commercial, and it must be adapted to the stage of purchase in which the prospectuses are. There are different types of pages, PDFs, presentation, transformation, intermediate pages, etc., as well as several types of formats (sports video, infographics, charts, statistics, GIF, slideshow presentations, e-books and other "how-to" materials,). The website content must be adapted according to the Search Engine Optimization rules and tailored for the mobile devices.

In terms of the content published by IT companies on their **blogs**, it presents mainly topics of interest, up-to-date articles, as well as specialty articles written by IT experts with the objective of informing, educating and providing news in the field.

Also, the content publishing action on a blog must meet the following phases: planning (topics and frequency of publication), research (content and keywords), editing, publishing, promoting and measuring results.

The content of **newsletters** is predominantly sales and information content (in order to increase brand, products and services awareness). It communicates available offers, new products, information about products / services, what improvements are made to a specific product, new launches, information about the company, promotional events, etc.

The promoted content on the social networks varies much depending on the specificity of the communication network. The content used on Facebook, the most popular social network, is mixed: on the one hand, there is a commercial communication of products, services, promotional offers, and on the other hand, the IT companies in Romania promote non-commercial, educational, entertaining and informative content.

Generally, on Facebook get promoted the company's services and products, brand, vision and values of the company, messages related to the company's field of activity (eg news from tech) which are interesting to the target, promotions / discounts, messages related to the main celebrations within the company and customer service messages.

Regarding the frequency of article publication on blogs and on social networks, this kind of communication is welcome when it has an informational and educational nature, and its frequency can be raised.

As far as Newsletters are concerned, because they typically have a commercial character, the recommended frequency is less often, to not becoming "annoying".

Moreover, within the digital strategy of the IT companies in Romania, it is required an analysis of the market, customers, competition, trend, in order to develop and promote unique and valuable content.

9. Conclusions

One conclusion of the two research focus-groups conducted on the digital communication strategies adopted by IT companies refers to the fact that the IT companies in Romania are mainly focused on recruitment and increasing awareness, and they have less commercial goals on the Romanian market.

Moreover, small IT companies develop their marketing strategy using digital tools, while large companies or multinationals use a mix of digital and traditional marketing tools.

If the internal and external events, as well as the specialized fairs are the most important traditional marketing tools, the email marketing and Facebook are the most important tools of digital communication.

Moreover, the multiple benefits of the digital tools compared to the traditional ones emphasize the importance of the digital marketing strategy for the IT companies in Romania.

In large companies or multinationals, most often the marketing strategy is set globally and adapted only circumstantially, depending on the context, to the Romanian market (local events for example).

Also, two elements acquire a major importance in the digital communication strategy of the IT companies in Romania, namely: the content marketing and the correct definition of the target audience. Without an accurate definition of these two items, any digital marketing strategy is doomed to failure. Moreover, defining the objectives of communication, the communication plan, budget, used platforms, etc. plays an important role in the digital marketing strategy.

Another conclusion of both Focus-groups is the fact that the most useful way to raise the target audience is supporting CSR (Corporate social responsibility) actions, especially charity events.

The communication goals of the IT multinationals in Romania are mainly related to the recruitment process. In this case, the most important form of communication is the definition of "brand ambassadors" among the employees, which could materially affect the company's image outside.

The content promoted through the digital strategies varies largely depending on the digital tool that is used. If in the case of the websites and newsletters, the content is rather a commercial one to boost sales, on blogs and social networks the content is, in particular, non-business and educational, allowing the identification and entertainment of the target audience.

Regarding the frequency of communication, educational and informational posts can be published more often than posts with commercial content, so as to gain the trust of the target segment and to develop a long-term relationship.

If the size of the IT company or its marketing budget no longer play a crucial role in the success of its communication strategy, as it was the case in the past, a careful

organization and professional digital marketing can tilt significantly the balance of the marketing results and can be turned into a powerful competitive advantage for any IT company on the Romanian market.

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