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Report on policies and mechanism for social web presence

Deliverable D3.2.1 Action 3.2

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Purpose: Survey on the policies and mechanism for social web presence

Results:

Conclusion: A variety of tools are available to support online web presence of SME also using SNA approaches. Though, there is a need to customize the web presence strategies according to the specific business goals of each SME.

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Report on Policies and Mechanisms for Social Web Presence

Section 1 Introduction

Social Networks are platforms that enable people to connect with each others, share content and create virtual communities revolving around common interests. Different social networks are designed to respond, infact, not only to the different individual needs but also to provided useful sharing and communication functions for people belonging to the same virtual communities because of their job (e.g. LinkedIn), hobbies and interests (e.g. Foodspotting for restaurant and food, Flickr or Instagram for photography, etc.), problems (e.g. Patientslikeme) and so on. Online social media provide their users a set of communication functions, such as instant messaging and private e-mail service, as well as a suite of utilities for content sharing (including picture, video, notes, music sharing, rating and tagging).

In this sense, social media have shown to act not only as an instrument for facilitating online interaction but also as powerful aggregators of virtual communities. Moreover, in the majority of cases in which customers can't get effective support or feel the need for providing feedback to a company, they usually refer to Facebook or Twitter, as the most popular social networks [1]. Thanks to the recent wide diffusion, over the last few years, of their use among people of all ages and cultural background, social media have become a critical 'place' for companies that want to develop a successful marketing plan. As for every social context, informal networks matter, since they spontaneously create around shared interests and habits. As for every organization, informal networks have their opinion leader, information bottlenecks, rumor mills, competing cliques and other potential problems/interesting features that only Social Network Analysis can detect and that SMEs should be aware of in planning their marketing campaigns on social media.

In fact, the online communities represent the natural aggregation of people with similar interests and behavior, sharing preferences and opinions on products and brands. In case of companies and brands, these groups are related to all those people that interact on the social media profiles or talk about the products of a given company, having the status of 'customers'. This is obviously true for big companies with a strong web presence (e.g. Nestlé). Though, online social presence is becoming increasingly important for SMEs as well that are now using the social networking tools in their online marketing campaigns (e.g. Cake Design). In this article, we report about the importance of strategies for defining successful policies for social web presence.

Section 2 Socialization of Business

With the world-wide diffusion of social networks (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, My Space and so on), a large amount of material about spontaneous interactions (e.g. blogs, chats, conversation transcripts) has become available, raising the attractiveness of empirical methods of analysis on this field: an enormous amount of data about online natural interaction is now available on the Web and can be exploited for research in sociology, marketing and economics, intelligent interfaces supporting the online computer-mediated interaction, opinion mining and user and group modeling in several domains. As a consequence, a very large number of software tools have been developed to capitalize on the new opportunities offered by online social networks (see [10] for an exhaustive overview).

2.1 Building trust in e-commerce

Over the last few decades scale, automation and modern marketing techniques contributed to the reshaping of the relationship between companies and their customers. In the past the customers could have reasonable expectation to establish a personal relationship with the seller. Nowadays, efficiency and growth made companies forget the value and importance of ‘being social’, that is to establish trust-based relationships with their customers, fundamental for obtaining the customers’ loyalty and for being perceived as accountable and professionally skilled. The trustworthier a company is perceived by a customer, the stronger the customer intention to buy from this vendor. In particular, trust has been found to be extremely crucial for people that usually make purchases or seek for information about a company on the Internet (see [3,4,5] for empirical studies on this research area and for model of trust antecedents in the buyer-seller relationship).

Social media offer a great potential in this sense, by providing companies with tools for reaching each customer in a one-to-one relationship. As applied in the business world, social media recalibrate the question of B2B and B2C customers into the traditional approach on which commerce is based: all businesses are fundamentally P2P (*people to people*) [2] and agreements and contracts are made based on the perceived trustworthiness of the other party. The perceived trustworthiness of an online vendor partially surrogates the absence of face-to-face interaction for e-commerce website. Moreover, the interaction with customers using Web 2.0 technologies provides companies of a great opportunity to demonstrate openness to the customers’ needs, availability to be reached in case of problems, constant attention to the customers’ feedback. Also, the ‘word of mouth’ mechanism typical of trust-based commercial relationship is perfectly translated in the Web 2.0 paradigm by the tools provided by social network platforms.

In order exploit social networking for enhancing its own business, it is important for a company to define and constantly revise ad hoc web marketing strategies. In the following section we highlight the importance of Social Network Analysis; then we

describe what are the crucial factors to take into account when defining successful web presence strategies.

2.2 The Role of Social Network Analysis

Nowadays, Social Networking platforms enable Social Network Analysis (SNA) by making available APIs to the developers. APIs are now provided by the most popular social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Google+) and allow to access the user generated contents and profile information that publicly available on social media. API allows developer do access public data about the graph and the network of connection as well, allowing researcher to perform traditional SNA techniques to extract knowledge from such data. Besides traditional socio-cultural areas of investigation, SME and local startups may take advantage from SNA approaches on such spontaneous data shared by users, indeed [8,9].

The recent wide diffusion of social networking in our everyday lights and the new possibility for business (not only e-commerce) represented by social networking, caused the revival of SNA approaches [9] and the flourishing of web-based technologies and tools, which are often provided as freemium solutions to companies. Based on the functionality they offer, tools may be simple either simple aggregators for joint profile management or advanced platforms for statistical and SNA analysis on aggregated user data across the platforms on which the company digital identity (and, hence, the customer community) is spread. For an exhaustive overview on tools and analytics platforms please refer to the deliverable [10].

Section 3 Planning online social presence strategies

According to Blanchard [2], defining a successful web presence strategy is more than simply exploiting Web 2.0 for social communication. A social media program is more than a simple 'plug-in' of the marketing strategy of a company and requires awareness of the possibilities offered by the social media platform. Moreover, social media platform offer the possibility to gain a deep insight on the social interaction going on in the community of a SME customers. This is of crucial importance for companies that want to get a direct perception on both the customer feedback and the quality and success of the social media strategy implemented, in order to correct and revise it if necessary.

A well-developed social media program perfectly integrates in the company communication and organization and amplifies the impact of every function within the human networks by exploiting online social networking. In order to be successful, a web presence strategy should provide an organization with a clear definition of the goals, roles and envisaged tools. Usually, role definition and tool selection are performed according to the goals of the social media strategy, which should be defined according

with the long-term business goal of the company. For example, a social media plan can protect a brand during crisis by supporting brand restyling and by enhancing the customer affective trust [6,7] towards the company. In different cases, the goal of the social presence marketing could be to support a discount promotional campaign in order to foster online purchases.

Regardless of the specific goal the SME is addressing to, the online web presence should be organized in order to exploit also the mobile technology potential. Mobile devices (such as smartphones) increasingly incorporate social media capability and people now have their identity spread through several social media. This acceleration in the worldwide use of the social media technologies in our everyday life is a paramount factor to be considered when designing and sharing promotional contents and being part of this segment of the web marketing is now crucial for the success of the business of a company.

3.1 Influence and Social Media

One of the first visible effects of social media in business is the moving of the customer relations from private spaces into the public [1]. Second, but equally important, is the rising of importance of lateral forces in the corporate communication [2]. Before the advent of the Web 2.0, the corporate communication was basically one-dimensional: the B2C communication was strategically defined by the head of the organization and hence transmitted to the customer in a vertical shaped engagement model (Fig. 1a). Basically, the organization decided the message to be transmitted to the customers, who could merely perceive it as interesting or worth of attention or not.

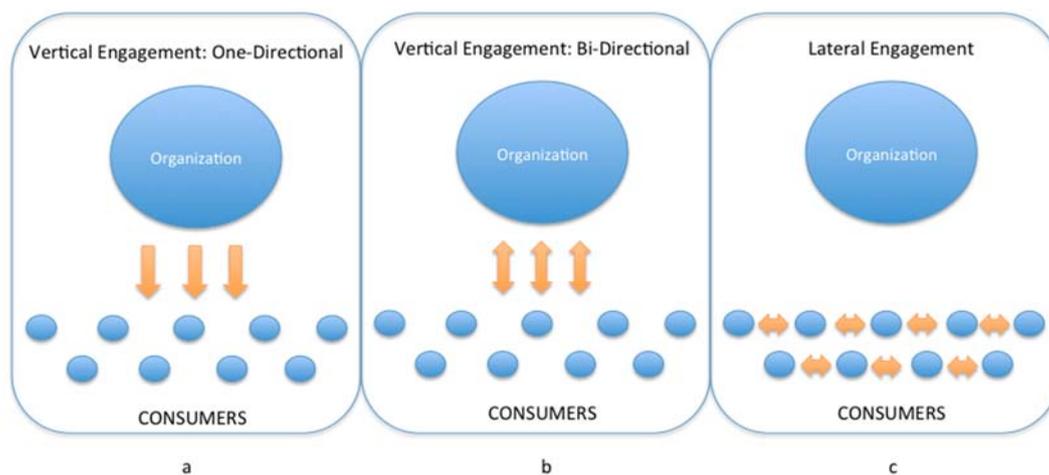


Figure 1: Influence and Forces in Engagement Models in Social Media [Soc. Media Roi]

A first version of a dialogue-based model of engagement appears in the early years of the Web 2.0 diffusion: blogs, forum and platform supporting customer feedback provision enabled the users to make the company hear their voice (Fig. 1b).

Nowadays, online networking platforms provided real collaboration opportunity among members of the community of customers of a given SME. The dialogue dynamics are absolutely peer-to-peer and reflect the lateral engagement model (Fig. 1c) typical of ‘word of mouth’ advertising, which is one of the fundamental sources of trust in human communication, especially when talking about the establishment of buyer-seller relationships [5].

The wide customer base on which online social networking platform relies nowadays, multiplies the effect of this word of mouth mechanism to level of influence and scale that traditional media cannot reach. In fact, companies could not afford the costs of reaching billions of users without the technology that online networking provides for free. This gives us the measure of the potential represented by social networking platform if properly exploited in web marketing strategies based on online presence.

3.2 Defining successful web presence strategies

In order to define successful social presence strategies, the company should refer to social media marketing as an integrated component of their model of business, rather than as a simple add-on of the traditional marketing strategies. In the following subsection we highlight the most relevant factor to focus on when defining ad hoc web presence strategies involving the use of social networking platforms [2].

3.2.1 Goals and Targets

A company that intends to include social media in its web marketing strategy should consider online networking platform as a plug-in of its business model. One of the most common mistakes of companies is to see social media strategies should as objective [2]. To be successful, a social media program should be grounded on the business goal of the company. The best way to operate is to highlight the business goals the company intends to achieve and to create a set of objective whose achievement could be naturally supported by social media strategies.

It is particularly helpful for companies to define, in the very early stages of planning, a roadmap in which goals are turned into targets (e.g. the general goal: ‘increasing my audience on social media’ might be translated into the more specific target: ‘increasing the followers of my Facebook fan page to 5000 in the next three months’). The idea underlying this concept is that targets may be objectively evaluated using metrics, which will hence become indexes of success of the company’s web presence strategies. Moreover, achieved targets create and strengthen accountability (among the trust antecedents, according to [7]), enhancing the customer perception of the company success and trustworthiness, whenever target achievement is made publicly available through social networks.

3.2.2 Content Management

According to the goals settled in the previous step, the social media manager has to select the content the company has to share/allow customers to share on his social media channels. Moreover, currently available tools and profile aggregators help both their customer and business users to enhance their web pages with social plug-ins. They also assist their users on personalizing the content¹ and appearance of their web pages based on target demographics, such as language and location.

In such a plethora of possibility, it is crucial for a company to choose the right social media platform to be used and the communication modality with respect to the audience, goal and characteristics of the company business.

3.2.3 Management and Coordination of online presence

Employees should not perform social media management in their spare time. The definition of a web presence strategy involved, in the second step, the definition of the most appropriate tactics. Results of empirical studies of real cases suggests some rules to be applied in the content generation and updating as well as in the management of the customer positive and negative feedback (refer to [Social media roi] for a detailed overview on strategies and tactics of business communication in online social networks).

Moreover, company should be aware of the possibility to adopt several tools offering the possibility of collectively managing the presence of an individual or a company in a variety of social tools in an efficiently and effective way. Most often they offer a single point where users can manage their profiles in many social network sites at once, monitor traffic on such sites and aggregate their followers from different sites. They also offer to their users a comparative analysis of their presence at the different social networks, as well as archival of related information over time [10].

Section 4 Exploiting Web Presence for Trust Building: Future Work Directions and Conclusions.

In this report, we highlighted how over the last few decades scale, automation and modern marketing techniques contributed to the reshaping of the relationship between companies and their customers. In the past the customers could have reasonable expectation of establish a personal relationship with the seller. Nowadays, efficiency and growth made companies forget the value and importance of 'being social', that is to establish trust-based relationships with their customers, fundamental for obtaining the customers' loyalty and for being perceived as accountable and professionally skilled.

Social media offer a great potential in this sense, by providing companies with tools for reaching each customer in a one-to-one relationship. As applied in the business world,

social media recalibrate the question of B2B and B2C customers into the traditional approach on which commerce is based: all businesses are fundamentally P2P (*people to people*) [2] and agreements and contracts are made based on the perceived trustworthiness of the other party. A variety of tool are available that can be used to leverage data provided by social networks. The success of a web presence strategy, though, highly depends on the way it fits the business goals of the company.

In order exploit social networking for enhancing its own business, it is important for a company to define and constantly revise ad hoc web marketing strategies. The first step towards the establishing of a long-term relationship with customer is the process of trust building. Evaluating the potential of online social networking in this sense will be the object of further empirical studies in the next future, in the scope of the present project.

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