

# Economics and Business Review

Volume 2 (16) Number 4 2016

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## **Marketing communication in the light of challenges brought about by virtualisation and interactivity<sup>1</sup>**

*Krystyna Mazurek-Łopacińska<sup>2</sup>, Magdalena Sobocińska<sup>2</sup>*

**Abstract:** The development of marketing communication is multi-directional and its new dimensions and forms are related to new business ideas, the growing use of the Internet and the changing behaviour of media users. The article aims to show the main changes in the field of marketing communication which are expressed through the growing influence of the new media, the development and increasingly professional character of marketing communication, both at the stage of ideas and forms, as well as the organisation of communication actions by enterprises and other entities on the market. This is tied to the changing role of the consumer in the marketing communication process and their increased activity at all stages of the value management process. Amongst the directions of marketing communication development and its increasingly international and professional character – as manifested by various entities with a big potential to advance creative businesses – should be noted as well. Moreover an intertwining of marketing communication with pop culture is observable. The changes in marketing communication presented in this article imply a new set of challenges for marketing research. The article is based on a literature review and an analysis of selected results of quantitative research conducted as part of the *Internet in marketing and the use of new technologies in cooperation between a firm and its clients* project.

**Keywords:** marketing communication, functions of marketing communication, visualising marketing communication, consumer, creators of media content.

**JEL codes:** D1, M1, M3.

### **Introduction**

The communication process between enterprises or other market entities and their environment is subject to change brought about by the evolution of the new media as well as by the changing behaviour of their users. The field of mar-

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keting communication is undergoing profound changes which blur the lines between the old and new media, divide the media offer into smaller segments and emphasise the role of individual, personalised messages. This is accompanied by the evolution of the role filled by media users themselves. These changes pose new challenges to international media corporations which are searching for new business models based on media convergence and using the activity of the new media end users. This article aims to show the main changes in the field of marketing communication which are expressed through the growing influence of the new media and the development and increasingly professional character of marketing communication. The new dimensions of marketing communication also involve its increasingly international character, which in turn means an increase of importance of cultural differences. Special attention has been paid to the virtualisation of marketing communication treated holistically – meaning the idea, the form and the organisation of actions as well. The new dimensions and forms of marketing communication presented in this article are also examined in relation to the growing consequence of the receiver in the process which is closely related to the broadening scope of social media and the emergence of new web relationships.

The changes presented in marketing communication generate many challenges for marketing research because gathering information for use in managing marketing communication requires triangulation and development of research methods and techniques based on both automated measurement and cooperation between the research and the respondent.

The article is based on a literature review and an analysis of selected results of the research conducted as part of the *Internet in marketing and the use of new technologies in cooperation between a firm and its clients* project. A questionnaire was distributed amongst a sample group of 152 enterprises and the respondents were managers responsible for using the Internet for marketing purposes. The aim was to determine the approach of various firms to their cooperation with clients and thus the means they use to evaluate the usefulness of client opinion, as well as the forms of marketing communication used by those firms on the Internet. The hypothesis that was being verified through this research was concerned with the fact that Polish enterprises usually undertake classical forms of marketing communication on the Internet – the ones where the consumer is being addressed – rather than the use of the Internet to engage the users to create value and obtain feedback. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section is devoted to changes in the field of marketing communications. The next section deals with virtualisation of marketing communication. The third part presents the methodology of the quantitative research. The fourth section refers to results of empirical research. The paper is closed with conclusions.

## **1. Changes in the field of marketing communications and their implications for marketing research**

The development of marketing ideas, including the classic concept of marketing, relationship marketing, and engagement marketing, means that the scope of functions performed by marketing communication broadens. Apart from the traditional functions such as informing, persuading and forming the attitude of customers, or reminding them about the existence of a brand, integrated marketing communication educates the consumers, expands their knowledge of an offer and reduces buyer risk. When considering the directions in which the field of marketing develops one should also include the function of building multidimensional experiences through contact with the brand and the intensifying role of marketing communication in engaging the buyers and bringing out their creativity as well as cementing their cooperation with the firm through a two-way information exchange [Caniels, Lenaerts, and Gelderman 2015: 358–377]. Because of the high market saturation integrated marketing communication also involves the competition giving an array of new competitive instruments [Taranko 2015: 27–30].

The development in the functions of marketing communication is also related to the fact that, following the precepts of social and humanist orientation, companies are implementing sustainable development-oriented marketing into their policies. The role of marketing communication in such market entities should be seen in the context of participation in solving the problems of the modern world.

Changes in the field of marketing communication are also closely related to its ongoing virtualisation which is evident at the concept stage as well as in its organisation and in creating new forms of marketing communication. Effectively combining the traditional and digital communication channels to contact clients is more and more important in gaining lasting competitive advantage.

Marketing communication shows a distinct shift from the previous sender-oriented approach towards one focused on the recipient and his/her interactions with companies and other consumers. The recent progress of information and communication technologies has been a strong stimulus for the development of networks of correlations [Shen et al. 2016: 2265], with consumers directly involved in value creation processes [Copeland and Malik 2005: 1–3]. The consumers growing involvement in value creation and value communication processes offers potential for companies to employ their creativity for productive purposes, such as introduction of product improvements and an extension of the range of products on offer. In addition it allows for a more accurate identification of target groups and a better understanding of consumer behaviour based on their opinions expressed. Consumer involvement based on opinion sharing idea generation and advertisement content co-authoring is at the core

of the new Web 3.0 approach, designed to facilitate the selection and synthesis of information available in various online repositories [Badzińska 2015: 25–37].

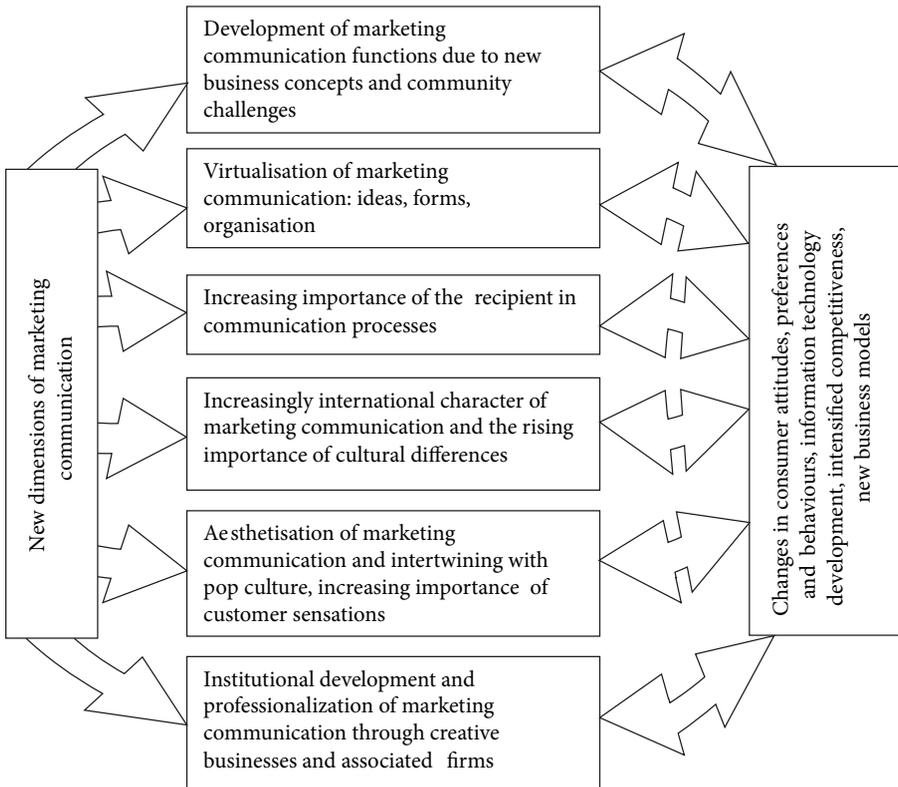
Virtualisation of marketing communication is thus closely related to the increasing role of recipients as participants of value management processes [Correia, Mateus, and Leonor 2015: 43–53]. The changes observed in this field imply an array of questions and challenges for marketing communication which will require answers about the relationship between professionals and amateurs, or between commercial and non-commercial messages in value management processes. The development of the web society causes the idea of the prosumer to shift towards the idea of producer – production and user combined – who does not engage in the traditional production of content but cooperates and transmits the existing content for further improvement. The term producer was introduced because the idea of prosumer paid insufficient attention to online relationships and the participation of the user in creating information [Bruns 2008: 13, 21].

Determining the directions of development of marketing communication means one must also point out its increasingly international character. This is related to the fact that running a business in the 21st century requires increasing aptitudes in reaching recipients of varying nationality, ethnicity and values. The effectiveness of intercultural communication depends on the ability to identify and account for cultural differences which are present on the level of national cultures but also in corporate and professional cultures.

Taking into account the trends in consumption development, including the dematerialisation of consumption and the increasing significance of hedonist values, one should point out that its esthetisation and interlacing with pop culture messages are also significant directions of marketing communication development. Referring to the consumers aesthetic experiences and impressions, instead of functional advantages gained by buying products, is evident in many advertisement messages. This concerns both the visual aspect of advertisements and their content. It should be noted that amongst the most frequently used words in Polish advertising slogans are such nouns as: taste, life, beauty, possibilities, dream, joy, or pleasure and such verbs as to have, to feel, to be able, to discover, to want, to live and to rejoice [See: Spsychalska, and Hołota 2009: 221–223].

The changes in marketing communication processes are complemented by their professionalization and institutionalisation. This is related to the development of creative businesses and their increasing economic significance, advertisement businesses amongst them. Culture brings a creative input here as well. Figure 1 shows the changes in marketing communication in a graphic form.

The changes presented here have many implications for marketing research. The process of marketing research faces the challenge of reducing the discrepancy between the declarations of respondents and their actual feelings, attitudes and behaviours. This means that there is a necessity to triangulate theories,



**Figure 1. Changes in marketing communication**

researchers, data and research methods when studying marketing communication [Flick 2011: 82–87]. Conducting marketing research that would yield data, information or knowledge that can be useful in marketing communication management often requires a semiotic approach and cultural text analysis in order to identify the changing cultural codes. This does not mean that researching consumer opinion is obsolete. However increasing consumer involvement, establishing a cooperation and even partnership of the researcher and those researched is necessary.

Additionally research into marketing communication introduces physiological response measurement into its methods. Measuring typical reactions of the human body, such as biochemical, magnetic and electrical brain activity, eye movement, electrodermal activity, tension in the facial muscles or reaction time permit the possibility to determine customer declarations, and [Szymusiak 2015: 69–73]:

- answer questions on increasing and decreasing attention and distinguish, through use of encephalograph, the element which received the recipient’s attention,

- distinguish changes in emotional investment,
- identify the process of creating memories which, like attention and emotional processes, has a distinguishable brain wave pattern,
- determine the readiness to buy and the originality of the message, as well as measuring how understandable it is.

The development of marketing research based on measuring physiological reactions of the consumer to marketing messages requires an adherence to ethical standards and the development of solutions acceptable to the participants.

## **2. Virtualisation of marketing communication and the growing activity of users in the process of creating media content**

In respect of the subject of this article the concept of communication virtualisation should be explained in some depth. The idea is a complex one, since it concerns the communication model itself, as well as the emergence of new communication tools and means of organising communicative activities which can now be conducted by virtual teams.

The communication model in hypermedia environment is not just a synthesis of the two standard communication models – interpersonal and mass communication – even though it makes use of their terminology. Hypermedia marketing communication is distinguished by a different type of interaction and a new interpretation of the functions of the media. An important feature of the hypermedia model of marketing communication is an individualised approach to marketing actions which retains the ability of global communication [Wiktor 2013: 46–48]. The crux of marketing communication is the change in the role and position of the recipients who have many possibilities to express their opinions and formulate messages on the Internet thus influencing the perception of firms and products by other consumers [Killian and McManus 2015: 540]. In consequence the difference between the entities responsible for creative processes and the clients, seen as passive recipients of marketing actions, is fading [Vescovi, Gazzola, and Checchinato 2010: 41–57].

Accepting an approach in which the buyer becomes an active participant of the internal organisation processes requires a reduction in the information asymmetry. According to the ideas of social media marketing value is created basing on information and relationships formed between the users [Mazurek 2012: 124–125]. A big part of those processes is building trust through the transparent exchange of information [Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004].

Considering the increasing role of web communities in marketing communication [Kumar et al. 2016: 7–25; Valos et al. 2016: 19–20], it should be noted that firms participating only through their commercial message are not accept-

able in those communities. Web users expect such values as knowledge, skills, rare resources or benefits coming from a special treatment of online communities. Those responsible for social media marketing communication should help online communities to achieve their goals and not just promote the offer [Pogorzelski 2015: 154]. Managing those relationships with online communities often requires changes, not only in an enterprise's structure and internal procedures, but often in its corporate culture itself.

The development of the Internet poses new challenges for the mass media which search for new business models allowing them to profit from media convergence and the growing activity of media users. This requires taking the following factors into account:

- new media users are often not ready to pay for using online content,
- Internet users have a tendency to ignore advertisements,
- the Internet market is dominated by Google, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Microsoft, Yahoo and Apple, all of which belong to American corporations,
- the increasing role of media users in creating content may clash with ideas of journalistic integrity, with institutionalised processes of working with information and professional ethics and standards,
- gaining market advantage depends on skilful creation of relationships with online communities which allow access to the content created by their users [Kreft 2015: 142–145].

In the context of these changes in marketing communication a question arises as to the scope of Internet use in communication activities performed by enterprises in the Polish market. Answering this question requires reference to the results of empirical research.

### **3. Methodology of the quantitative research**

The quantitative research was conducted as part of the Internet project in marketing and the use of new technologies in cooperation between a firm and its clients (Project leader Professor Krystyna Mazurek-Łopacińska, project executor Doctor Magdalena Sobocińska). The questionnaire inquiry was conducted in 2013 on 152 enterprises amongst which 51 employed up to 49 staff, 51 firms employed between 50 and 200 and 50 firms employing over 200. Questionnaires were answered by the managers responsible for the use of Internet in the marketing endeavours of their companies.

To make the research more professional the authors made use of a CATI studio in the ARC Rynek i Opinia Research Institute in Warsaw which is equipped with professional hardware and software enabling the authors to properly conduct computer-assisted phone interviews with the use of the questionnaire they had created for the purpose. A preliminary inquiry was performed first and phone numbers were chosen at random from an enterprise database. The choice

of research technique was dictated by the specific qualities of the respondents and their work as well as the need to standardise the process of interviewing and minimise the response bias. The chosen technique allows the scheduling the interview according to the respondents' preferences as well.

#### **4. Marketing communication in the era of virtualisation and the growing influence of consumers on the market – results of quantitative research**

Considering the fact that building a strong competitive advantage requires communication with clients it should be stressed that the most popular forms of contact with web users in the firms interviewed were emails (98.0%) and the company's website (94.7%). A third of the companies (30.9%) use social media in their communication processes. A far smaller amount of managers use blogs (5.3%) or Internet forums (13.8%).

This means the companies interviewed have not entered the social media era en masse mostly staying at the email and website stage in their virtualisation process. It should be noted that broadening the virtual scope of marketing communication requires a better cooperation between marketing and IT teams in companies and in establishing effective organisational procedures for that cooperation.

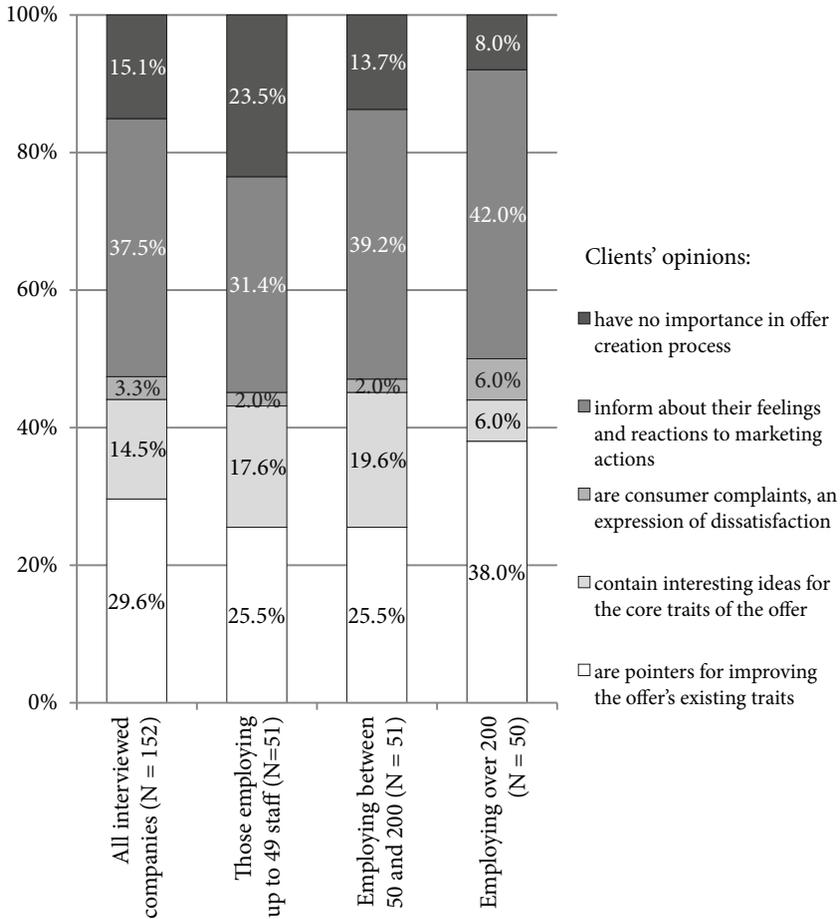
Using the potential of the Internet requires individualised communication with clients. Only 46.1% of the respondents said they personalise their Internet messages. This means that the other 53.9% do not personalise the bulk of their online messages. A small proportion of the firms interviewed (29.0%) engage their customers in promotional activities and recommendations on the web and only 17.8% engage them in sales. A majority of them uses classical Internet advertising (79.6%), and uses the Internet for reports or press items (86.2%) or to check the websites of the competition (83.6%).

Using the Internet's full potential for marketing communication requires not only classical advertising activities but also communicating through the consumers who have an important influence on the brand image.

Activities based on web users' active participation, where through a mechanism of interaction they are able to communicate their opinions, are useful for increasing the consumers' participation in the value management process.

It should be noted that, despite the described changes in marketing communication, the development of the Internet and the changing role of the consumers who transform from passive recipients to participants in the value management process, a large portion of the firms interviewed considered the customers' opinions to be a source of information about their impressions and reactions to marketing practices. 37.5% of the managers interviewed saw

the customers' opinions in this way. Almost half of the respondents (44.1%) considered the customers' remarks and suggestions to be ideas and indicators for changes in the offer, with 29.6% of managers seeing them as suggestions for improvement of the existing offer whilst 14.5% perceived them as suggestions for overhauling its core characteristics. A relatively large portion (15.1%) claims that client opinion has no importance in the company's offer and function. Such declarations point to a low market sensitivity on the part of some of the respondents (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Usefulness of the clients' opinions in the eyes of companies**

Source: Original research through CATI

It should also be noted that the evaluation of customer opinion usefulness varies depending on the size of the company. In enterprises employing over 200 managers are far less likely to say customer opinions have no importance in the offer creation process (8.0%). However this group is also less likely to

consider customer opinions to be good ideas for a thorough overhaul of their offer (6.0%). This may mean that the managers who represent the big companies have high expectations towards consumer competence and are reluctant to supplant the knowledge of marketing specialists with the impressions of buyers when implementing significant changes to their offer. The image is complemented by the fact that the managers in large companies mostly consider the potential of customer opinion as an indicator of the impressions and reactions of the clients towards their marketing actions and for gathering information for perfecting their offer.

Managers in small firms, on the other hand, show polarising opinions. They are more likely to say client opinions have no influence on creating the offer than the big companies, but they are also more likely to see them as ideas for thoroughly changing the core features of their offer. This difference in opinion may be due to the fact that companies employing below 200 staff are more likely to pay attention to customer opinions, since those companies are likely to try and fulfil the existing needs of their clients rather than creating new needs and changing their behaviour. However it should be noted that the largest percentage of managers claiming that customer opinions do not influence their offer (23.5%) was found in firms employing up to 50.

The findings presented in this paper seem to be in accord with those of other authors, particularly with respect to the inadequate use of the potential offered by interactivity, since consumer suggestions and opinions remain a marginal source of inspiration in product development. In the economic practice of Polish companies interactivity as a communication feature is still employed predominantly for promotion and image creation purposes as opposed to the company 2.0 approach increasingly popular amongst Western companies based on the use of communication and cooperation with consumers. The expected trend is for companies to pursue a further integration of their IT systems with external social media services as a result of the shift in their business models towards ones based on increased customer involvement [Sumara et al. 2012].

## **Conclusions**

The research conducted allows the statement that the multi-directional development of marketing means new tasks and functions for marketing communication. Its complex development is a consequence of changes in consumerism models, of the progress in information and communication technologies and of the growing economic potential of creative businesses.

Due to the multi-directional development of marketing communication marketing research needs to triangulate its methods if it is to yield data and knowledge useful in improving the effectiveness of the management marketing communication.

The changes occurring require that market entities develop the skills necessary to, amongst other tasks, create the right conditions for cooperation with recipients in value creation, communicate the existence of such possibilities and perform actions that aid the users in using the new media.

The results of quantitative research confirm the hypothesis presented in the introduction and provide information on the present stage of marketing communication virtualisation in Polish enterprises and on the importance attached by them to opinions voiced by their customers. It should be noted that Polish companies and those responsible for decision making are aware of the significance of changes in communication processes brought about by new technologies but they do not seem to be able to fully profit from the possibilities offered thereby.

Managing marketing communication requires the acknowledgement that not only do the consumers spend more time on the Internet but also that there is an increasing number of appliances (smartphones, tablets, laptops) that the buyers use to search for information on the web, communicate with others, or shop on the Internet [Ehrlich and Hildebrand 2015: 8; Yadav, Joshi, and Rahman 2015: 341]. This means that the models for using changes in the new media, and the amount of possibilities for contact with a brand grows.

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## Aims and Scope

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