

COMPLAINING BEHAVIOUR IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

Purpose – to present the issue of dealing with negative word-of-mouth under the newly created conditions of social media and formulate a set of rules for dealing with negative contributions in social networks such as Facebook.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents findings from both a quantitative survey of Czech Facebook users and expert interviews.

Findings (Rezultatai) – The results of the survey that was done among internet users has proven, that Czech Facebook users are fully aware of the fact that by complaining publicly via social media they can get a company in a serious trouble and want to use it to their advantage. Expert interviews agreed on necessity of good knowledge of the community, quick response to the posts and careful consideration of deleting negative contributions.

Research limitations/implications (Tyrimo ribotumas) – the empirical research is focused on the Czech market that is specific in the field of internet user behaviour. Findings are primarily valid solely for the social network Facebook. Other platforms may differ in complaining behaviour of the users.

Practical implications – research findings show, that social media play an important role in complaining behaviour of Czech internet users. This fact results in the necessity of the presence in social media and careful monitoring the word-of-mouth. Crucial factors of successful communication in social media are knowledge of the com-

munity, quick response to the posts and careful consideration of deleting negative contributions.

Originality/Value (Originalumas/Vertingumas) – Word of mouth, nowadays the most powerful marketing tool and the strongest argument in the decision making process, is now not limited to the circle of nearest friends of family. Social media gives people a voice that is immediate and can have impact. Without an effective and fast reaction of the company, a serious harm can be suffered. The significance of social network Facebook in complaining behaviour of Czech consumers is assessed. Basic rules for dealing with negative contributions were defined.

Keywords (Raktiniai žodžiai): social media; public relations; online reputation; Facebook; complaining behaviour; word-of-mouth.

Research: research paper, literature review.

Introduction

Marketers see the presence of social media as an interesting opportunity. A message can be now delivered easier. The reach is significant, the budget lower than with traditional media. Consumers can be kept informed and engaged.

The growing penetration of the internet, as a new channel for the distribution of information, changed the rules of PR to such extent, that many authors talk about the brand new era of public relations. It gave the opportunity to create a completely new group of influencers that changed the daily routines of people search for news.

The ease of the online communication improves the business relations, shortens the time, decreases the costs and speeds up the business. Internet gives to every organization the potential to gain a control over its relations and reputation (Phillips, 2003/10).

The mass communication of companies has been reshaped, since the new media enables more personalized experience. What is becoming a mantra for successful communication is segmentation. Since there is a lot of information about the users on disposal, a wide variety of segments can be defined. Finding desirable combinations of the most suitable groups (segments) of customers and the corresponding supply of products/services (or values) is the fundamental role of marketing and the key aspect of a company success (Karlíček, Novinský, Tahal, 2014/8). Marketers and PR specialists do not have to decide for one key message any more. The new media allow creating unlimited messages for various target groups.

According to many authors, Google and Facebook have changed the rules of both marketing and PR (Young, 2010/16). While the core elements remains the same – identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements – the consumer behaviour is shifting. Online sources are used for things that were previously got offline. More customers search nowadays for an online support rather than for a hotline number (Fox, 2010/7).

The aim of this paper is to assess the significance of social network Facebook in complaining behaviour of the Czech consumers.

1. Public relations and social media

According to Shih (2011/12), approximately once a decade, a new technology platform emerges that fundamentally changes the business landscape. In the 1970s it was the mainframe computing, 1980s the PC, 1990 the internet and nowadays the game changer became the social web.

Social media refers back to the two way communication approach of PR. We have come to the point, when even those who still pushed the rather broadcasting style of sharing the PR message, now are forced to lead a back and forth conversation with its receivers. It's about listening and, in turn, engaging people on their level (Breakenridge, 2008/2).

Social media is changing people's behaviour about how they follow news. According to the Pew Research Center, which conducted a survey among the U.S. citizens, 27 % of adult Americans regularly or sometimes get news or news headlines through social net-working sites. For people under 30 this number increases to 38 %. This research was done in 2011 and it is very likely, that the current statistics will be even higher (Berkeley.edu, 2011/1).

Most marketers see the presence of social media as a great opportunity. A message can be now delivered easier. However, all the benefits have corresponding drawbacks on the other side and social media can be a double edged sword. Social media gives people a voice that is immediate and can have impact (Chavez, 2011/4). Social media can also influence the level of impact category. A complaint of a single customer, once regarded as a crisis with minimal impact, can within the social media grow very quickly and become situation that has to be resolved as soon as possible.

A large number of companies are understandably hesitant to enter social media. Many of them have spent decades on developing branding guidelines and messaging requirements. Historically, only those with media and PR training were allowed to make public statements (Fox, 2010/7). However, even if they preserve their conservative approach, they cannot control the branding message any more. People are talking about them online already. Insisting on not being present on social media can become very risky while a crisis occurs. According to Lochridge (2011/9), it is important to address the crisis initially in the same channel where it arose. That is the only way how to gain control.

There are many companies, which are handling their marketing and PR activities still in the traditional way. However, they hear and read that the buzzwords such as "social", "Facebook" or "tweet" are spelled all the time and create their own account, feeling to have done all the necessary. Those companies are often very surprised, when a crisis occurs.

A crisis can occur outside the social media and social media can be seen as a tool how to mitigate the crisis. Next level of handling a crisis is the usage of social media proactively. According to the PWC survey (2013), companies are recently re-thinking their approach to crisis management. However, the majority of them (57%) are still behind in leveraging social media as a main source.

The emergence of social media changed the rules of crisis communication to a

large extent. Nowadays every crisis finds its way into social media, either by accident or purpose, but always with consequences (Capozzi, 2013/3). The information users get via social media are regarded as very trustworthy. This fact shouldn't be underestimated by any company and negative information about their business should be taken seriously. Blogs and social media have made communications more instantaneous by encouraging organizations to respond more quickly to criticism (Wright & Hinson, 2008/15). Publications on crisis management, which were released before social media started mixing the cards, often talk about the so called "Golden 24 hours". In the age of social media, hours turn into minutes. In order to be able to react in a timely manner, preparation for a crisis plays an important role. Most PR professionals claim, that social media crisis planning is an essential part of communication strategy. However, they also see a large gap between social media importance and how well their organizations are using it for crisis communication (PR Newswire, 2010/13).

Being social makes the boundaries between marketing, sales and customer support blur. More than ever companies have to improve not only their external, but also internal communication. Facebook admins have to be informed about various aspects of the company's business – e.g., does the supply chain management adhere to the ethical standards of the respective society, what are the latest complaints, etc.). In order to mitigate and even anticipate the crisis it is crucial that Facebook admin is closely integrated with other departments in the organization. It is also very important to adapt the style of communication. Social networking is built around people and relationships between them, hence it is necessary to act like a human.

2. Research methodology

To assess the current situation in the Czech Republic in terms of crisis communication on Facebook a structured, close ended, questionnaire was distributed among more than two hundred regular consumers. A combination of quota sampling and snowball sampling was used. A set of respondents of every socio-demographic group was asked to participate in the survey to ensure, that every group will be represented. The survey was conducted during the period June–October 2014. Full responses were received from 200 respondents.

Research questions were defined as follows:

1. When unsatisfied with a product or service, how likely will a person complain via Facebook?
2. What is the motivation behind complaining on Facebook?
3. How fast do complainers expect to get a solution?
4. Are they satisfied with the suggested solution and what do they see as the biggest failures of Facebook admins?
5. If they are primarily not complaining via Facebook, what would make them to share their negative experience over social media?

As an additional part of research a sample of twenty professionals was asked to take part in expert interviews. The aim was to cover both employees of digital and social media agencies and employees responsible for social media in corporations.

Twelve of them agreed to participate and discuss the topic. Each interview lasted about 1 hour. By sharing their experience, following areas of questions were examined:

1. How do they react to contributions with negative sentiment?
2. What do they see as biggest failures of social media admins?
3. What are the basic rules for handling a crisis?
4. What are the best precaution measures for not letting a crisis to escalate?

3. Findings – questionnaire survey

Most preferred communication channel among the Czech internet users when complaining is still e-mail (see Table 1). Second in the ranking was Facebook with 21% and phone with 12%. Equally scored contact form and other means. Among those other means were mostly mentioned personal complaints (if possible) and in one case another social network, Twitter.

Table 1. Preferred communication channel for complaints

	Men	Women	Total
Facebook	18%	29%	21%
E-mail	46%	40%	44%
Contact Form	9%	11%	10%
Letter	2%	5%	3%
Telephone	12%	11%	12%

Source: Authors, N =200.

The portion of Facebook as a communication channel for complaints is in the case of men bigger (29% vs. 18%). Female respondents might not feel themselves confident enough to present their complaints publicly and prefer the negotiation one to one.

Further analysis showed the distribution of the choice of online channel by age groups. The results are confirming the logical assessment, that the younger respondent, the closer to new media tools they have. On the other hand, Facebook is not a brand new think for early adapters exclusively. Also in the age group 26–40 is this social network competing with e-mail.

When discussing the popularity of particular complaint channels among different occupational groups, a clear dominance of e-mail in the group of employees is observed. An interesting result is that in the case of Facebook, student and employees are using it for their communication with companies equally, followed by managers, who scored in the case of Facebook better than e-mail. This is an argument against statements, that via Facebook only group of lower income (students and young people dependent on their parents) can be reached.

Further analysis was focused on the complaining behaviour via Facebook. The biggest motive was not only informing the company about the dissatisfaction, but also informing others. As a second motive was the speed, closely followed by the hope that making it public would make the company more helpful (see Figure 1).

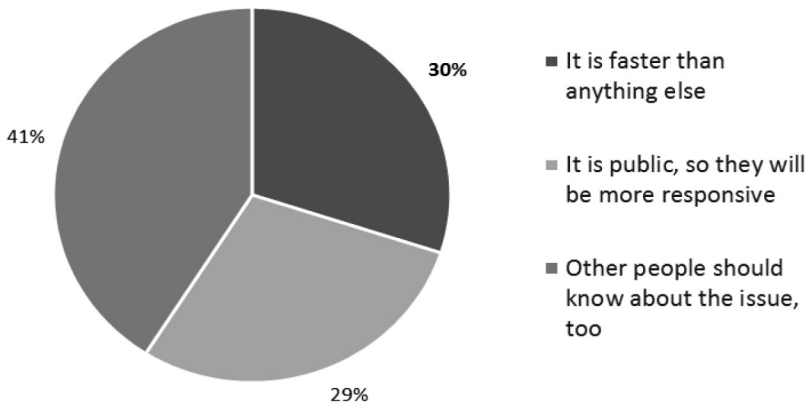


Figure 1. **Perceived advantages of Facebook as a channel for complaints**

Source: Authors, N =200

An interesting outcome showed the question under which circumstances people communicating exclusively via e-mail, call centre, etc. would share their negative experience with their Facebook friends. Two thirds of respondents will post this message in order to warn others against a product or service. 4% of respondents ticked the option “other”, where mainly “the tendency of making me silent” or “when I wait for a reply too long”.

As was mentioned in the theoretical part, social media require to act very quickly. In which time frame do consumers really expect to wait for a suggestion of solution? We have compared the group of respondents who have declared Facebook as a preferred channel for a complaint with the group of respondents who prefer other channels. The results are presented in Table 1.

Already on the first sight it is clear that the acceptable waiting time differs according to the preferred channel for a complaint. As for traditional channels, 55% respondents request a solution within first 24 hours, compared with 90% respondents complaining via Facebook. 45% respondents are willing to wait 2 days or even longer.

Table 2. **Acceptable response time**

	1 hour	24 hours	2 working days	As long as necessary
Facebook	33%	57%	7%	3%
Traditional channels	19%	36%	34%	11%

Source: Authors, N =200.

Women appear to be more tolerant than men. 51% of female respondents are willing to wait for a reply 2 to 5 days, compared with 17% of male respondents.

Interestingly, people who complain via traditional media are significantly more satisfied with a suggested compensation than people who complain via Facebook. The question was directed to the average satisfaction of the suggested reimbursement

on the scale from 1 (= very satisfactory) to 5 (=unsatisfactory). Weighted average for Facebook is 2.86, traditional channels achieved 2.65.

People who prefer traditional channels for their complaints use the same channel for further communication also in case of unsatisfactory solution. 45% of respondents who are not satisfied with the proposed solution use the same channel as before and try to negotiate a better deal. One third is rather conflict-averse and settles with a suggested solution. One fifth shares their negative experience with their friends on Facebook.

This finding may result from common Facebook admin failures. If a negative contribution is posted on company's Facebook wall, sometimes failures of the administrator leads to escalation of the problem. As the biggest mistake is perceived when the admin responds with a pre-prepared phrase (see Graph 3). This technique is a common part of a customer service helpdesk, but via social media customers expect something more. On the ranking No. 2 is ignoring the complaint, followed closely by deleting the complaint from the wall completely.

Table 3. Failures of the Facebook page administrators

	Men	Women	Total
Admin deletes my complaint	11.5%	28.2%	33.3%
Admin ignores my complaint	19.2%	38.5%	35.7%
Admin answers with an obvious pre-defined answer	46.2%	28.2%	52.4%
I wait for the response too long	23.1%	5.1%	19.0%

Source: Authors, N =200.

The ease with which one can write a complaint via Facebook leads to the fact, that consumers do that quite often. Over 50% have complained more than twice and even 27% more than 5 times in the last 12 months.

Most of complaining consumers read the contributions of others. 63% of respondents complaining via Facebook want to see if others have similar experience, 34% of them read only few newest ones and 3% do not care about them. Students and employees read the contributions of other Facebook users very carefully. More than 70% of both groups answered that they read them to find out, if others have similar experience as they have. Managers and businessmen on the other hand tend to read only a few newest one, which is most probably an implication of their busier schedule.

Unlike communication via e-mail or call centre, by scanning the contributions of other on the company's Facebook wall a customer can see, if his/her problem is only a rare occurrence, or a regular praxis. This information is afterwards valuable for further negotiations with the company representatives.

4. Findings – expert interviews

Experts agree that a good knowledge of the community is a core condition for choosing the right tone of voice.

This is sometimes very challenging for freelancer or people working in an agency, who often run several pages simultaneously and have to keep a consistent tone of voice on every page.

Whereas questionnaire respondents consider as a biggest failure “answering with an obvious predefined question”, according to the professionals it is deleting the messages. Based on their experience, deleting a complaint led in most cases to escalation of the issue. As proposed strategies how to react to most of complaints via social media were mentioned, e.g., a patient explanation; admitting mistake when necessary (especially in case of big corporation, admitting a failure often serves as icebreaker that leads to a friendly tonality); showing an understanding and involvement (empathy).

As for acceptable response time half of interviewed experts declared, that a reaction to a post should come within the first hour. On the contrary, questionnaire survey showed that only one third of the social media users expect the reply so quickly.

To get more insights about the crisis management, the experts were asked to formulate one basic rule for dealing with negative contributions. Mentioned rules were as follows:

- “Keep calm and think of the clients.”
- “Our customer, our boss.”/ “Customer first”
- “Give your best to understand the customer and his/her problem.”
- “Take criticism as a valuable feedback.”
- “Has my reply contributed to solving the customer’s trouble?”
- “Openness and authenticity. “
- “Answer in the shortest time possible”.
- “No matter what, stay nice.”
- “What does the complainer really want?”
- “Avoid the computer speech, stay human”.
- “Do not let yourself blackmail by the fans”.

Conclusions

The results of the survey that was done among internet users has proven, that Czech Facebook users are fully aware of the fact that by complaining publicly via social media they can get a company in a serious trouble and want to use it to their advantage.

The survey has shown, that every fifth unsatisfied customer complains on the respective corporate Facebook page. As main advantages of using this channel is seen the speed and making the issue public. A logical conclusion is that using Facebook has become very convenient. With current high penetration of smartphones (56, 5 % in 2014; ZenithOptimedia, 2014/17) are Facebook users instantly online. Writing a short message on a Facebook wall takes only a few moments. Facebook users also expect a reply significantly quicker. This demand is already known to most companies. According to a research done by Brand Embassy, the response time for questions is in case of Facebook 13 hours shorter than response time of regular hotline. Complainers also rely on fact, that when making it public, companies will try to ‘save the face’ and be more generous in the proposed reimbursement.

The analysis of gender behaviour showed, that men incline to complain over Face-book more than women, even though the user ratio is almost accurate 50:50. The rea-son for this refers back to the nature of both men and women. Men tend more to the urge to show themselves off and present their knowledge publicly. Women on the other hand tend to circumvent the technology as such and when possible, prefer complaining in person.

Correlation between age groups and the usage of Facebook have brought expected results. The young people, sometimes called “digital natives” are very skilled in the digital world and using these channels is for them very convenient. As this generation grows older, the heavy usage of digital media shifts to older age groups as well.

Expert interviews agreed on necessity of good knowledge of the community, quick response to the posts and careful consideration of deleting negative contributions. Basic rules for dealing with negative contributions were defined.

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