

Crisis communication on Facebook

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the issue of crisis communication under the newly created conditions of social media and evaluate the importance of social network site Facebook for crisis communication on the Czech market. The paper presents findings from a survey of Czech Facebook users. It examines the consumer complaining behaviour in the context of social media that can serve as a new platform to voice customer negative experiences. Differences between customers using traditional communications channels and those using social media platforms are identified and discussed.

Key words

Crisis communication, complaining behaviour, social media, Facebook

JEL Classification: M31

Introduction

Social media has become a phenomenon that is conquering the world. In 2014 there were over billion users that were sharing information about themselves via various social media networks. Developed markets are already close to their saturation, but in developing countries, there are millions of new accounts every year. This new space for communication is for companies a great tool for delivering the right message to the right people in the real time. However, with the same speed that one can spread a positive image about a product, service or company, other can do with an allegation and negative word of mouth. Without an effective and fast reaction of the company, a serious harm can be suffered.

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).

The mass communication of companies has been reshaped, since the new media enables more personalized experience. What is becoming a mantra for successful

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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). 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). 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).

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1 Social Media and Crisis Communication

A basic definition of crisis management is “set of activities, performed toward preventing and evaluating of events of various origins without initiating prevention steps, but trying to diminish the chances of risk development, or by initiating protective steps, trying to reduce the risk effects” (Regester & Larkin, 2008).

Being a part of business means that crisis management is something, that should be already there, not something a company starts to elaborate once a crisis occurs. According to another publication, the term “crisis management” could be very simply defined as “special measures taken to solve a problem caused by a crisis” (Delvin, 2007). For a clear understanding it is also important to mention, what is not crisis management. It is not mismanagement. Crisis management should be composed of systematic approach dealing with crises so that an organization continues to work normally in its operation. What a crisis communication should not be mixed with is a quick-fix or universal solution that is applied whenever an uneasy situation occurs (Darling, Seristö & Gabrielsson, 2005).

According to Shih (2011), 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).

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 networking 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).

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). 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). 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), it is important to address the crisis initially in the same channel where it arose. That is the only way how to gain control.

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). 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). 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).

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 – ex. 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. On social networks there are not many places for the usual corporate vocabulary marketing and writing style (Volek, 2011).

2 Methods

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.

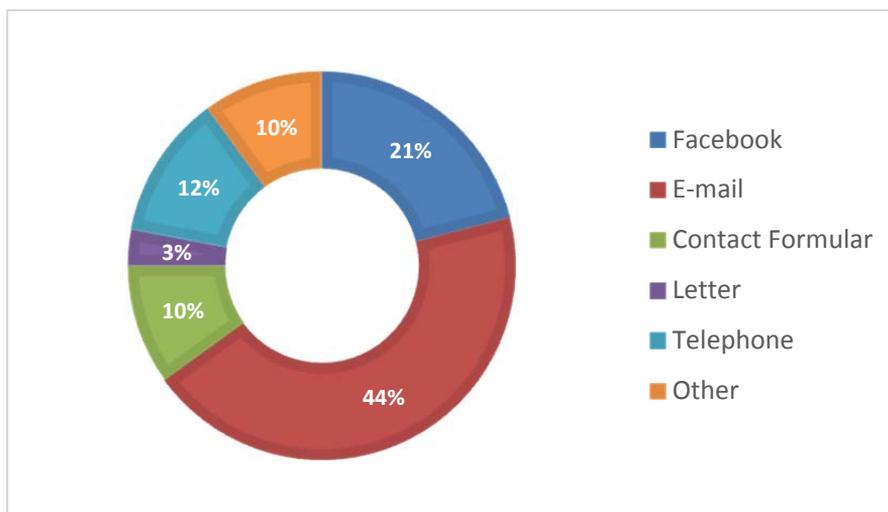
Research questions were defined as follows:

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?

3 Findings and Discussion

Most preferred communication channel among the Czech internet users when complaining is still e-mail (see Graph 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.

Graph 1 Preferred communication channel for complaints



Source: Authors, N =200

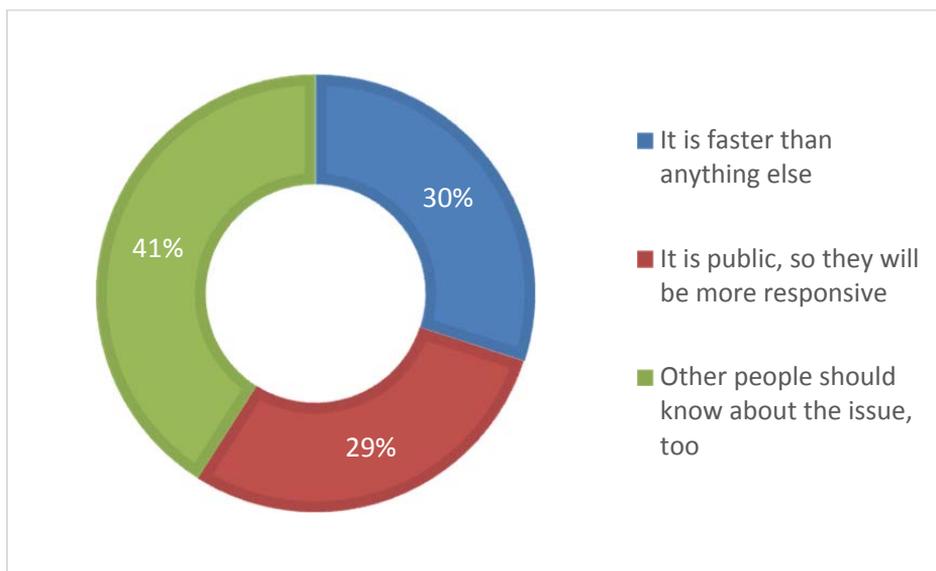
The portion of Facebook as a communication channel for complaints is in the case of men bigger (29 % vs. 18 %). Female respondents might not feel themselves confident enough to present their complaints publicly and prefer the negotiation one to one.

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 Graph 2).

Graph 2 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 percent 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 1 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

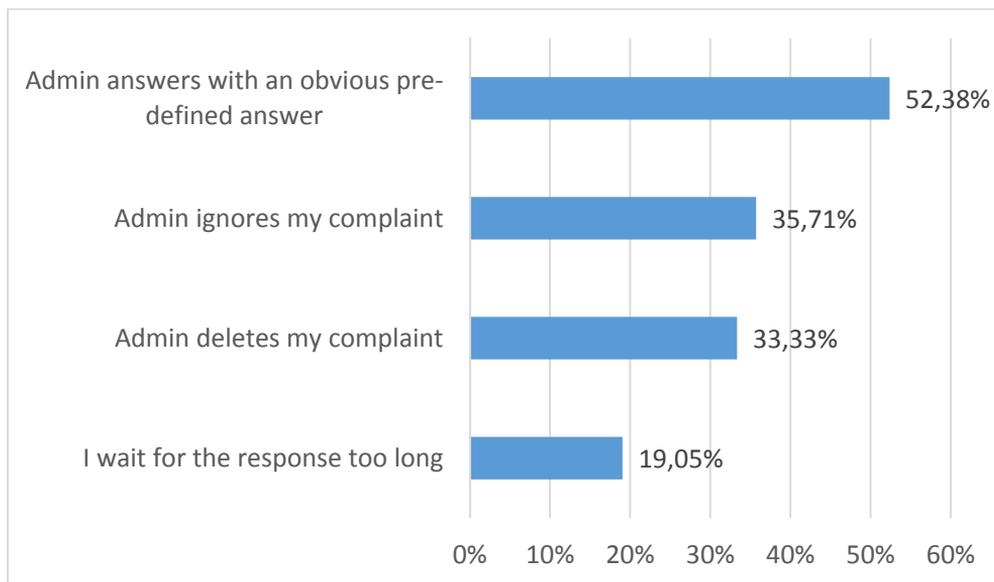
Women appear to be more tolerant than men. 51 percent of female respondents are willing to wait for a reply 2 to 5 days, compared with 17 percent of male respondents.

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.

Graph 3 Failures of the Facebook page administrators



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 center, 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.

Conclusion

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) 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. Accord-

ing 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.

Not a surprise was, that phone as a channel scored very poorly. In the comments few respondents mentioned, that they used to choose phone, but calling an 800 number has become in cases of big companies 'a nightmare'.

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 remaining 4 people out of 5 still prefer the traditional channels of complaints. However, this fact does not necessarily mean, that these complaints will not appear on Facebook. 3 out of these 4 share this experience online on their personal profile. This shows the need of companies to do a regular monitoring. Relying only on checking the contributions on their own Facebook pages is only a tip of an iceberg. Moreover, this fact also proves, than even if a company refuses to be present on social media, people already talk about its products or services on their personal profiles on Facebook, specialized blogs, etc. When turning away from these channels the company loses the possibility to influence those conversations and defend itself when negative word of mouth is being shared.

The analysis of gender behaviour showed, that men incline to complain over Facebook more than women, even though the user ratio is almost accurate 50:50. The reason 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.

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.

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