

DIGITAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN HORECA INDUSTRY. CASE STUDY MARTY RESTAURANTS, CLUJ-NAPOCA

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Abstract: Generally speaking, the digital communication era works with easier mechanisms for generating, collecting and sharing information and content. Communication specialists changed their perspectives in the relationship of the company with the public. Today we speak about digital PR, digital marketing, and branding, digital all. This study aims to examine the digital implications of communication strategies in HoReCa industry. Previous researchers showed that the digitization of the communication strategies of restaurants around the world had a direct and positive influence in the consumer-brand relationship. Our research is based on the relationship that Marty Restaurants from Cluj-Napoca, Romania builds in online with its customers. We intend to provide a twofold approach. On one hand, we analyse the theoretical framework regarding the digitization of the communication strategies in the restaurant industry. On the other hand, we shall design an empirical research, based on interviews and content analysis that shall provide empirical information about how digital communication strategies are used in HoReCa industry in Romania and, how a successful restaurant can be visible in online in order to gain more clients and create a great brand experience.

Keywords: digital communication, consumer-brand relationship, digital PR, digital branding, HoReCa, restaurant, Marty Restaurants.

1. Introduction

As an emerging country, Romania is trying to reach investors, to gain trust of companies to invest in its economic growth and is willing to develop all fields of activity. Because today the Internet is one of the most used instruments in finding information, but also in buying goods and services, Romanians are more and more internet users.ⁱ

Other statisticsⁱⁱ are showing that many companies that are activated in Romania and their brands are using online communication strategies in promoting goods and services. This is because, in the digital era, most companies try to change the classic tools of two-way symmetrical communications with public and stakeholders to a similar communication experience but using online social interaction and all online techniques. Romanians are familiar with the most used online platforms around the world, such as: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, bogging, Instagram, Pinterest.

Generally speaking, the digital communication era works with easier mechanisms for generating, collecting and sharing information and content. This is way communication specialists changed their perspectives on the relationship of the company with the public. Today we speak about digital PR, digital marketing, digital advertising, and digital branding, digital all. Hence, “they can effectively initiate relationships with people directly through online conversations” (Alikilic & Atabek, 2012, 57). Social media were primarily created to help and develop communication and sharing of information between peoples personal networks, but, quickly gained trust and started to be used in professional interaction (Damasio et al., 2012, 13), being seen by the companies as a good opportunity to spread information to public. In the same idea, we

can speak about Facebook, the online platform that “brands have recently employed as a tool to create brand awareness and gain people’s participation with their online comments, their posts, and their likes” (Sakas et al., 2015, 590). Having a so fast growth, the online elements are keeping research about them not easy to catch-up. Previous scholars have given attention to the way digital era has affected communication strategies in all the parts of the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) activity. Some authors discussed mainly digital PR, some about digital marketing or digital branding. From our point of view, all parts of the IMC should be part of the discussion regarding the influence of digital techniques on the communication strategies of a company. This is one of the reasons we will integrate into our theoretical framework, literature about all parts of the IMC. Another reason is because the case-study of this research incorporates all parts of IMC. We will provide information about the way one of the most popular restaurants in Cluj-Napoca is using digital communication strategy in promoting the tangible elements of the brand, such as food and the intangible ones, such as the locations, employees and the spirit of the restaurant.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. General view of digital communication tools

If before the Internet the communication activity of a company to its public and stakeholders was delivered through news media outlets available on the market and visible for any consumer, based on the companies' communication strategy, now the process can suffer big transformations. Due to the fact that the consumer has now an online and direct voice, changes the way a brand is perceived. Social media and other internet tools can create great benefits to reach the public and create positive attitudes (Doyle & Lee, 2016, 914). Public relations, branding, marketing and advertising specialists are now all concerned about how to manage the new tools offered by digital/social/mobile media (Verčič, et al. 2014, 142). The communication industry “has to be part of the internet revolution” (Petrovici, 2014, 80).

Practitioners and scholars are interested in how these new technologies are working and how can they affect the public, the company, and its work results. The scholarships about the topic are giving various names for the activity. Morris & Ogan (1996) speak about *Internet as a medium*. Kelleher (2009) named them *interactive online communication*. Kent & Taylor (1998) and Taylor, Kent & White (2003) agreed that the name of the online activity for public relations should be *World Wide Web*. Seo et al. (2009), Kitchen & Panopoulos (2010), Ye & Ki (2012), Hallahan (2013) are speaking about *online public relations* and Yaxley (2012) about *digital public relations*. More interesting is the way Heinderyckx (2014) explains the new tool naming it *onlinement* (Verčič et al., 2014, 142). Other concepts in the field were: *website/web-based PR* (Kim et al. 2010; Sommerfeldt et al. 2012), *internet-related/focused PR* (Khang et al., 2012). The conclusion of the research was that “none of these terms covers the relationship adequately” and that even if there is “a growing number of studies exploring the application of new communication technologies in public relations [...] there is no guiding theory, framework, or even unifies terminology” (Verčič et al., 2014, 142-143). Another conclusion is that “several problems exist with these designations because all of them, exclude specific elements of the public relations work” (Huang et al., 2016, 3). The results of the analysis of 155 published articles on the topic of digital public relations

showed that the authors used 63 different terms to explain the interaction that PR and communication strategies have with the digital environment (Verčič et al., 2014, 144-145).

Authors were also interested in the *impact* that internet usage can have on the public relations activity, such as “the specific features of media, the power relations that exist among stakeholders, and the forms of organization-public interactions” (Guillory & Sundar, 2014; Kent et al., 2003, L’Etang et al., 2012, Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010, Huang, et al., 2016, 2). On the other hand, the practitioners’ one, the internet technologies started to show great interest, because of the opportunities they offer in communicating with and to all publics involved in the company’s activity. Empirical studies showed that more and more PR practitioners are interested in tools such as blogs, social networks, websites, social media and so on (Guillory & Sundar, 2014; Eyrich et al., 2008; L’Etang et al., 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Huang, et al., 2016, 1). The *organizational performance*, as well as the *influence* internet tools can have of professionals’ leadership was also underlined by communication professionals’ (Jiang et al., 2016, Huang, et al., 2016, 2). Social media were described as those channels using “web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication” (Wright & Hinson, 2010, 4).

It is clear that both public relations academics and practitioner agree that using the digital environment in public relations activity is beneficial for the company because “public relations is in its ability to directly reach stakeholders and publics and vice versa” (Kellenher, 2009; Verčič et al, 2014, 146).

2.2. Digital public relation and branding

Today “social media transformed business priorities”, because they are now incorporated in the planning process of all organizational activities (Brown, et.al. 2013, apud Allagui & Breslow, 2016, 20), due to the fact that the Internet became “one of the most important marketplace for transactions of goods and services” (Leeflang et al., 2014, 1). These are because 87% of specialists believe that increasing brand awareness is one of the biggest priorities in their work and 56% of them are using digital engagement with customers in order to gain brand awareness (Institute for PR, 2013; Allagui & Breslow, 2016, 20). In creating smart public relations campaigns, the specialist should focus on the creative content more than on social media or other internet tools, but not neglecting the communications technologies and adapting the creative content to it (Green, 2010, 141; Allagui & Breslow, 2016, 21). Significant point of view has Blakeman when recommending a mix for a successful social media campaign, that should “take the following into consideration: Listen, focus, be patient, share, trendsetters, discuss, respond, be available” (Blakeman 2014, 128). More than this, for a social media successful campaign, a specialist will try to meet one or more of the PARC principals: participatory, authentic, resourceful and credible (Barker et al, 2013). Mayfield claims that the characteristics of the interaction of companies with their online publics are: participation, openness, conversation, community and connectedness (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014, 220 apud Mayfield, 2008). Hence, this allows us to underline that “These attributes enable brands to reach the right people, in the right place and the right time” (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014, 2201). In using internet technologies, people create a lot of experiences by changing information, about products and services, by describing them on blogs, product reviews, discussions groups facilitating the decision-making process

and establishing a new and easier shopping behaviour (Leeflang et al., 2014, 2). An important role in the relationship of the companies with their online public, when using the *Internet as a strategic communication tool* is played by the *bloggers*, which are considered *opinion leaders*, *digital influencers* or *content generators of digital platforms*. They have the power to influence members of their platforms by sharing their brand experience and by mediating messages from the company to the public. They are also playing a key role in providing opportunities for the company and its brands to launch on new public. In doing so, brands engaged with bloggers will gain “authentic and trustworthy presence among online communities” because among consumers the opinion of a person whom they trust is more objective than all strategic advertising or marketing messages of the companies. (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014, 592-596; Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014, 220). The additional literature claims that digital tools in communication activity are useful not only for big companies but also for small or medium size companies, NGO’s or governmental agencies. The usage of social media is useful for advertising, handling customer service, developing innovation ideas, creating engaged brand communities, build connections with users, creating participation, allowing public to identify with them and become involved in the companies activity (Enginkaya & Yilmaz, 2014, 220). Similar, people using digital media can easily and directly respond to institutions (Plowman, et al., 2015, 273-274). Four main advantages can be observed: 1. the communication process between the company and the public is easier and more advantageous, because the interaction and response are direct, 2. better understanding and knowing the public, 3. lower costs for promotion and 4. The messages sent to the public and the feedback are more accurate and precisely (Petrovici, 2014, 80).

In their intention to add value to the literature of digital PR, Huang et al. are making significant progress defining the new PR tool as being

“the management of communication between an organization and its public through Internet applications [...] including websites, games and instant messaging services that process data and display information that is mediated by Internet through text, sound, graphics, images, video or binary (executable) files” (Huang et al., 2016, 3).

Considering this definition as a complex one, we will focus this research on it.

2.2.1. The usage of digital communication tools in branding restaurants

There has been noticed a great interest in the recent literature in delivering information about the way restaurants can use digital tools in communicating about their brand. The idea of branding a restaurant it is also quite new around the world. There is a lack of theoretical and empirical data about this topic. However, the growing number of restaurants in both big and small cities around the world drove to the idea of differentiation and positioning in the context of promotion. Given “the fact that gastronomic experience is unaware before consumption” (Zhai et al., 2015, 117) and food selection are mostly based on sensory system - color, flavor, texture (Ariyasriwatana & Quiroga, 2016, 18) the need to launch a positive impression to clients is crucial for a restaurant.

In a crowded market, full of all types of food choice, a restaurant with a brand strategy will probably develop faster and will gain both local and national and international clients. In regarding the digital era, restaurants have more opportunities to communicate to their clients that ever before. If word-of-mouth was decades ago the

main way to gain new clients, today reviews on platforms such TripAdvisor, Foursquare, Food spotting, Urban spoon, Zagat, Foursquare, Open Table, Yelp, Vine decide if a restaurant will have clients or not. Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) becomes an important factor for restaurants. The “digital footprints” provided by reviews have the power of success or failure of a restaurant. Thus, to ensure the flow of clients in a restaurant and the long living of it, a manager might think of a branding strategy, in which mixing the traditional communication tools with the new, digital ones might bring success. Past literature on the food topic set that element such as “food, service, price, location and environment were the key aspects in restaurant rating” (Zhai et al. 2015, 114). Other ranking scales were volume of views and the quality of food (Zhang et al, 2014). As regarding the social media platform analyzed by the researchers, Twitter seems to be the highest interest (Chen & Yang, 2014; Zhai et al. 2015).

If we refer to the intangible assets of a brand experience and mix this idea with the feeding activity of humans, we can assume that identifying branding instruments for a restaurant is vital. “Humans` relationship with food and eating are subject to the most powerful emotions experienced in any context” (Lupton, 1996, 36) being one of the strongest feelings a human can have. This is way it is believed that branding strategies may complete the experience of eating in a restaurant.

Researchers found that managers adapted quickly their promotional strategies, due to the fact that social media is seen as a prominent vehicle in advertising and marketing tactics about a restaurant. Alleged reasons of restaurants managers in using digital communication tools are the low-cost advertising implications, increased market share and boost sales (Needles & Thompson, 2013, 6). Added value to restaurants firms is also another good point of view for managers to choose digital communications tools in their activity.

Because social media is considered one of the most used digital tool in promoting a restaurant, knowledge about how to manage it is crucial for the success of that restaurant (Kim et al., 2015, 42). Moreover, authors explain that using social media will help restaurants in building “a positive corporate image through improving transparency and accountability when various stakeholders actively communicate online” (Kim et al., 2015, 42, apud Jones et al., 2009). In using social media, restaurants can provide quick information about new products and the experience the customer can have with it.

2.3. Objectives and research questions

We star our research *from the premise that in the digital era, online communication directly influences the relationship of the brand with costumers*. In HoReCa industry, this relationship with the costumers goes beyond the product or service. Variables such as atmosphere, attention to details, diversity of food, plating, treat of costumers, promptitude, and professionalism are brand elements that speak about a successful restaurant.

As underlined by the literature digital communication tools, social media, and all public relations and branding online strategies are important metrics in restaurants` communication with existing clients, and of course with potential ones.

The objectives of this study are three-fold:

1. To see how are the digital communication strategies used in the branding strategy of a successful Restaurant from HoReCa industry, in Romania.

2. To see how a successful restaurant can be visible in online by using digital communication in branding strategies in order to gain more clients and create a great brand experience
3. To see which are the main digital communication platforms used by a Romanian successful restaurant

The subject of this analysis is Marty Restaurant from Cluj-Napoca, Romania. We decided to use this restaurant on the assumption that is one of the strongest brand restaurants in Cluj-Napoca, as evidenced by the prize for Best Restaurant ([http://www.clujlife.com/2017/02/06 / winners-clujlife-awards-07 /](http://www.clujlife.com/2017/02/06/winner-clujlife-awards-07/)) in ClujLife Awards, 2017. Literature also speaks about the opportunities that restaurants winning a prize based on costumers' opinion have to gain more and more trust and credibility (Kim et al., 2016, 44). In this context, we are interested in *how Marty Restaurants positions itself in online and which are the online strategies used to promote and attract customers*. If we take a look at the presentation they have on their website, we can assume that Marty Restaurants is caring about brand elements, this being another reason form investigating their communication strategy:

"With unceasing care for the needs of those who visit us, with enthusiasm and attention to the smallest details, we are in a continuous transformation. The idea of diversity builds Marty, core in which are brought together tastes from around the world, in rich and unusual combinations. The five locations Marty Restaurants have are similar but very different at the same time, each proposing a unique atmosphere. Welcoming, caring, trustworthy and full of energy, we promise to always be a caring company, we are committed to treating every customer, every time, through impeccable service and constant attention to detail and answer all requirements promptly and with professionalism. We led ourselves by passion and have the courage to put in front of the cost, the quality and complete satisfaction of those who are coming in, we skillfully prepare our own coffee, we invent every week new foods and challenge ourselves constantly, serving exceptional cuisine in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere, where the smiles are always part of the house". (<http://www.martyrestaurants.com/despre-noi/>)

The research questions are

- Q1: Which are the main digital communication and branding *strategies* used by Marty Restaurants?
- Q2: Which are the most used *digital communication platforms* by Marty Restaurants in their online branding strategy?

2.4. Methodology

Two research methods were used in order to gain information for answering the research questions:

1. We have conducted an *interview* with the PR officer of Marty Restaurants, Patricia Padureanu. The interview was based on questions regarding: the type of restaurant Marty is, the main target of the restaurant, the main type of food they sell, the main advertising, public relations and branding strategies they are using in online communication, the most used digital communication platforms used in their online branding strategy, the most successful social media campaigns they had, the digital applications they have, collaborations with bloggers and influencers, the frequency of online posts.

2. We have applied a *content analysis* on the Facebook page of Marty Restaurants and on the official blog of the company. The content analysis of the Facebook page was based both on qualitative and quantitative variables such as frequency of posts, the content of posts, number of likes, number of appreciation of the page and evaluation of clients, promotional elements. The analysis of the blog was especially based on the content they are posting in the articles.

2.5. Findings

2.5.1. Interview

According to the PR officer, this is an international cuisine restaurant, casual, urban and modern, focusing the cuisine on American and Italian food. The main target of the restaurant is young people, having between 25 and 35 years old, with middle to high incomes, higher education, active people, followers of a healthy lifestyle, unwilling to compromise in terms of quality of products and services. The interviewed also mentioned that if we refer to the public, we can point out that every location Marty Restaurants has, also a specific target because of the specificity of the location (Marty Boulevard, Marty City, Marty Society, Marty West Side, Marty Sports, and Grill). Being a versatile restaurant, this is appropriate for breakfast, brunch, lunch, dinner, business meetings, and anniversary, meeting friends or romantic dinner.

In terms of promotion, Marty Restaurants is using both of line and online techniques, combined in an Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) activity. If we refer to offline promotional elements, we found out from the interview that they are dividing this type of promotional activity in five categories:

1. Marty's campaigns are promoted in all locations throw POSM, roll-ups, and table tents;
2. Promoting the imagine of the restaurant by being present in local Festivals (such as Untold, Electric Castle, Street Food Festival etc)
3. Partnerships with different events hold in Cluj (TIFF, Comedy Weekend, The Woman)
4. Corporate social responsibility actions (Little people, Familia Regasita, Lumea ca Lumea, Swimathon)
5. Campaigns in partnership with other companies

Regarding the online strategies we found out that Marty Restaurant is using digital communication through platforms such as Official website delivery website blog social media (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat) and partnerships websites (hip Menu). The content delivered through all digital platforms is based on newsletters, articles, online contests, sales promotion campaigns, PR online, Facebook Ads. Also important is the balance between posts with dishes, bar, Marty team and the atmosphere from all locations.

Another important digital tool they are using is a mobile application, Marty App, used for mobile orders. Paid content of Facebook and Instagram is also used.

The campaigns that Marty Restaurants are developing in social media are two-fold:

1. Campaigns that are developed offline and are using online tools to support the offline messages and content
2. Specific online campaigns, developed only online

Another important online branding strategy is based on partnerships with bloggers and influencers. The main objective is to gain awareness on the new menus that are promoted by bloggers and influencers through written, video and photo content. The frequency of posting online is usually once-twice a day, but with increasing posting in times of festivals or different campaigns, when the frequency increases to four-five posts a day. All digital communication instruments are monitored throughout and frequently evaluated. Good outcomes are replicated and optimized, the whole activity being based on the idea of "trial error". Not used yet, but in intention to be used in the future is digital storytelling and image transfer with public figures.

2.5.2. Content analysis

The content analysis that we developed had the intention to add information to the one received at the interview. The analysis was daily conducted for one month, both for the Facebook page and for the Marty Blog, in the period 1st of March to the 31th of March 2017.

The Facebook page has 20,689 fans and it is evaluated with five stars by 284 persons, four stars by 49 persons, three stars by 15 persons, 2 stars by 21 persons and 1 star by 61 persons. The restaurant is evaluated on Facebook by a total of 430 persons. In the period of the evaluation, there were four new comments and evaluations for the restaurant, three of them being positive and one being negative.

The Facebook page shows also the Trip Advisor reviews, Marty Restaurants being evaluated by 149 persons on this digital tool, being situated on the 38th place from 264 Places to Eat in Cluj-Napoca. The Certificate of Excellence of Trip Advisor is another validation of Marty Restaurants: food, atmosphere, service and value being evaluated with 4 stars.

Regarding the regularity of posts on Facebook, the content analysis revealed they are having a 1 to 3 posts a day regarding topics such as: promoting the brand, promoting new or old products of the brand, presenting locations and employees, promoting contests, promoting partners events.

Marty Blog is another digital tool that Marty Restaurants is using for communication with the public. In the month analyzed there were four articles published on the blog. All four articles were based on information regarding events in which Marty Restaurants were partners.

3. Conclusions:

This research has aimed to empirically investigate how digital communication strategies are used in the HoReCa industry in Romania and to see how a successful restaurant can be visible online by using digital communication in branding strategies in order to gain more clients and create a great brand experience. In the same respect, the research wanted to highlight the main digital communication platforms used by a successful restaurant.

Our findings allow us to admit that digital communication has entered all fields of activity. In creating brand awareness and a positive relationship between the brand and the customers it is today necessary to wager on all tools used by a customer. As seen in the literature review most clients are today using online platforms to search for information and to set an impression about a brand. This is one of the reasons why all

brands should develop online strategies in communication with clients. HoReCa industry is no exception to this situation.

The digital communication and branding strategy of Marty Restaurants is based on creating positive content on social media (Facebook, website, blog), in the collaboration with successful food bloggers, in promoting good food, comfort food, best atmosphere in all locations, positive employees. All in all a close relationship with the public.

Even if Marty Restaurants are not using all digital tools existing on the market, we can assume that their digital activity has helped in the brand creation and in the optimization of the relationship with the customer.

4. Limits and further research

The limits of this research are speaking about the fact that there was used only one Restaurant as the base of the research, and this restaurant is a local, not national or international one. Also, we have used only the interview and the content analysis so, basically we do not have the confirmation of the public on the facts that we have found. Additionally, the exposed date was mainly descriptive. Despite of this we can claim that the data offered by this research can be relevant for bigger researches on the topic of digital communication in the HoReCa industry, researches that can enrich the potential of this domain. So, the current study contributes to the identification of new research opportunities in the domain. We are committed to develop a new framework on the topic of digital communication in Restaurant sphere, continuing our work, especially by asking Marty Restaurants costumers their opinion on the topic.

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