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THE NEW (MARKETING) ROLE OF FIRMS AS MEDIA CONTENT PROVIDERS

– THE CASE OF SME’S STRATEGIC SOCIAL MEDIA
PRESENCE

In the new social media context, it is gradually more common to say that each party can itself be considered a media content provider, firms included (through their brand pages). This tendency is reflected in a rising professional field called “content marketing”. This study incorporates the perspective of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) into the scope of social media (SM) as a marketing communications and media content distribution system. In an exploratory content analysis of 20 official SM brand pages with 1281 analyzed posts the authors study how SMEs respond to the advent of a new paradigm of marketing communications with special attention to their usage of media-specific contents. SM impels companies to eventually rethink the traditional one-way communication flow of their marketing messages and to incorporate a new, two-way communication into their marketing strategy, where (their engaged and involved) users can create, modify, share and discuss content related to the firm’s activity. This study’s preliminary results show that diffusing content generally acts for SMEs as a facilitator to involve fans by offering a thematized space for them to manifest themselves in company-related topics. Therefore, content adds to the firms’ possibilities of brand positioning by offering a reflection of fans’ company- and content-related behavior, which is a supplementary source of information.

Keywords: social media (SM), small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), content marketing, marketing communications, media content distribution system

Social media (hereafter: SM) in a wider perspective is a pool of various two-way communication platforms that enables the free flow of ideas, information and values on the internet. In this sense, all actors present on the platform as users, be they individuals or organizations, account for only one of many information producers (Smith, 2009). Moreover, in the SM environment, information is generated and disseminated to multiple directions and social contexts mainly by users. While the SM platform acts as a media channel, content is largely created by productive users (or producers (Bruns, 2008)) whereas active, involved users participate in the dissemination of those pieces of content that catch their interest. In this sense, SM – as opposed to traditional broadcast media – is a highly bottom-up phenomenon. As a social networking platform SM is an environment

where users are there to connect with each other and organize themselves around themes and topics of their interest (Piskorski, 2011).

However, by its very logic, SM provides a suitable environment for the presence and spreading of (electronic) word-of-mouth which equally makes it a target medium for marketers even more that regardless whether or not a firm actively participates online, users are constantly talking online about companies and services as these are simply part of their everyday life and conversations. As a marketing tool, SM is a highly audience-focused medium: as brands are a part of a conversation, people wish to hear solutions to their problems instead of product offers (Bottles – Sherlock, 2011). Piskorski (2011) posits that a social media strategy differs largely from what can be referred to as a

digital marketing communications strategy. Whereas this latter is the digital manifestation of a somewhat traditional way of marketing communications (i.e. broadcasting commercial messages) with an extended possibility for users to provide direct customer feedback, leads or even purchases, SM is about letting users improve their own social status (e.g. relationships, esteem, etc.) through (but not exclusively) various spaces, activities, discussions, etc. managed by the firm. Thus even by becoming fans of or following firms on different SM sites, this does not necessarily reflect users' intention to connect to the firms themselves rather the intention to share with other members of the social sphere their enthusiasm towards the products of the given brand and benefit from the personal and/or social satisfaction that comes with being a member of the given community.

In a promotional environment where clutter becomes commonplace (Ha – McCann, 2008) and where the majority of users do not wish to participate directly to any firm's promotional activity (Van Dijck – Nieborg, 2009), firms face a new challenge in their marketing communications namely that advertising produces more scattering loss than targeted reach. In this perspective, content and through it, content marketing marks the advent of marketers as media content producers (see e.g. Emarketer, 2013), competing for users' discretionary spare time and audience to convey their marketing communications messages which would otherwise likely be lost in this clutter of traditional messages. By being both a marketing communications tool and a media content distribution system, SM adds a new way of thinking to marketing businesses but it also requires a new approach from marketers.

In order to engage users and to generate any form of participation on the firms' behalf, firms themselves need to be engaged (Nyirő et al., 2011) and create a strategic framework (Csordás et al., 2014) for communicating to and with their customers, potential customers and with other users positively involved to participate in the marketing processes of the firm. This latter target group of involved non-consumers hints that firms here will equally need to focus on what could be referred to a secondary target group, that of a media audience.

Brand communities and value co-production

The positive membership mentioned beforehand and the role of firms and brands within can be put in parallel with the theory of brand communities (e.g. Muñoz – O'Guinn, 2001) and more widely with that of tribal marketing (Cova – Cova, 2002).

Brand mentions and brand-related activities can emerge from various types of communities, group activities, fashion trends, etc. originating from people gathering around given themes, activities, hobbies, etc. These gatherings are referred to as postmodern tribes in the literature (Cova – Cova, 2002). These are communities with chosen and dynamic memberships, which brings along the characteristic that within one tribe and at the same time, there is a number of active members involved in the building and maintaining of a framework and institutions for the community (e.g. organizing and promoting events for a sport) but there are also other, less active, but interested parties who still identify themselves by and through the various norms, values, beliefs and behavioral patterns related to the community. Marketing in postmodern tribes can be best characterized by the process of value creation through organizing, executing, sharing, promoting, etc. the values and experiences of the community and therefore contributing to its existence (Kates, 2004; Muñoz – O'Guinn, 2001). In this respect, marketing activities necessarily embrace user participation as a means and channel of legitimation within the tribe and by the latter, which in turn becomes an integral part of brand positioning (thus, for example, the existence of brands which are associated with a given activity as a whole (e.g. Vans for skateboarding)).

Brand communities – as any other community – are characterized by common norms, values, beliefs and behavioral patterns, but are special in the sense that they are informal, geographically unbound communities organized around a sole focal product and/or brand (Muñoz – O'Guinn, 2001), which most often can be referred to as “love brands” (Batra et al., 2012). In this case, brand meanings are directly co-created within these groups by the users as much as by the focal firm. Participation in brand communities (e.g. Facebook brand pages) focuses on acts of consumption, reflected through brand stories, anecdotes, symbols; moreover the groups possess an own, brand-specific language all of which to mark the group's cohesion (Antorini, 2007). One characteristic feature of love brands is that users not only like, but often love and/or adore them, have close emotional ties with these brands, regard them as necessary parts of their lives and therefore are genuinely disposed to recommend them to their acquaintances in every way possible (brand evangelists (Scarpi, 2010)). Brand communities enable a new source of information for new potential consumers of a brand. This source of information, although still biased, is not company-generated, and goes through a filter of opinion leaders present within brand communities who equally add a personal relevance and narrative to brand

and brand-related messages which makes fans a special – exemplary and exceptional (Busse – Gray, 2011) – source of audience. Members of online brand communities are producers who generate content related to their consumption. These pieces of content (spreading from an alternative, peer-to-peer consumer support activity, online discussions to various types of entertainment content related to the brand) can be considered the essence of online brand communities.

Brand communities and consumer tribes are therefore (online as well as offline) social networks where members enjoy spending their free time. Online manifestations thereof are the different brand fan pages and brand- and community-related user-generated content. However, the large majority of consumers do not consciously belong to brand communities (Kates, 2004), brand and consumption meanings at the same time appear embedded in their daily lives, and along their needs. As mentioned beforehand, SM spaces are organized around themes of interest and tribes and as such, brands (through brand pages) can equally be a focal theme of one or more thereof, but still in competition with other brands, user activities and tribes.

SME marketing and marketing by networking

Small and medium-sized enterprises (hereafter: SMEs) can benefit from SM in various ways. For instance, these firms are situated at what can be referred to the long tail of the advertising industry, that is, they are ruled out of traditional media advertising as it bears too important barriers of entry (e.g. lack of capital, patent and license requirements, lack of distribution channels), SMEs are therefore forced to communicate more creatively and cost-effectively with their target audience. In this sense they can be characterized by less market power, capital and managerial resources than bigger firms but equally by more flexibility and innovativity in, among others, their marketing communications activities (McCartan et al., 2003; Carson et al., 1995; Mackintosh – Tynan, 1994; Carson, 1993). These firms' marketing activity can be characterized as usually intuitive, unstructured, informal and reactive, adapting itself to industry norms (Gilmore et al., 2001; Carson – Cromie, 1989). Moreover, beside an industry-specific marketing activity SMEs tend to present a manager-/owner-specific side as business as usual remains very much affected by the company owner's personality. In this sense, SMEs provide an interesting ground for research in the highly personal(ized) sphere of SM. SMEs can respond to the advent of a new paradigm of marketing communications with special attention to their using media-specif-

ic contents (with a contextual value both relevant as a piece of marketing information and as a 'consumable' piece of media) in order to create added value to their engaged fan base and friends thereof.

Nevertheless, SME marketing is a combination of three different factors, which characterize them substantially (Hill, 2001): (1) the existence of personal relationship networks, (2) a strong sales focus of the firm, and (3) low consciousness of formal marketing methods. These factors however do not take into account the current industry trends. One of these trends is the effect of networking on SMEs (Hill, 2001). Relationship building among customers and other stakeholders of a business can be improved by different gains of ICT solutions, making it possible to measure the value of relationships to the firm (Halliday, 2011). SM enables this kind of measurement, enabling the analysis of customer relationships with the SMEs in a different perspective. In the SM environment, "firms have to involve customers less by selling to them, more by genuinely creating a two-way flow of information in order to play a role more in creating value with them rather than in delivering value to them" (Halliday, 2011: p. 247.). In this sphere, customer experience is gradually growing in importance. In a media space, where SMEs make use of earned media (e.g. word-of-mouth) besides paid and owned media opportunities (Corcoran, 2009), content on the SM brand page can be managed through more personal contact and greater social embeddedness to increase customer experience. Schmitt (1999) states that consumers are less rational entities who care about functional features or benefits and more emotional human beings who are more interested in achieving pleasurable experiences. Small business owners (i.e. entrepreneurs) have (through being personally and emotionally involved) an ability to make use of their own personal networks (Hill, 2001), including their networks in the SM sphere.

According to Bonnemaizon (2007: p. 57.): "[t]he future of relational marketing will depend on the ability to play with communities that can either destroy a firm or strengthen it. Between now and 2015, identifying consumers' experiences or those of a group of consumers, will create a marketing that is truly relational. This will be a wonderful challenge for any firm that understands the complexity of a relationship which will be increasingly facilitated by current and future modes of communication". In the SM sphere, these kind of communicational opportunities seem to become real for companies, where every single SME can be unique and different, creating its own SM brand page, manifesting itself as a predestinated kind of "marketing brand" (Hill, 2001: p. 175.).

Research questions and methodology

SM can help companies rethink the traditional one-way communication flow of their marketing messages and add a new two-way communication flow into their marketing strategy which is more consumer-centered than for example traditional customer services, direct mail or personal selling and at the same time convenient to manage and relatively cost-effective. In this sense users are given a direct platform on the web to share and discuss, but also to create and modify company-related content. Just like traditional media having two-sided markets, businesses present in SM and harnessing information or intelligence from SM might develop a similar type of two-sided market structure, with a “media audience” interested in the contents the company shares on SM, making the company itself a sort of “broadcaster”, and its “target audience” made up by the consumers of the firm’s products or services. As the two sets only partially intersect, beyond the traditional business value of a consumer appears or strengthens a new type of value for the firm, that of the audience’s social value. With the aim of examining the possibilities for SMEs to embrace this new communications channel, our departing research questions were as follows:

- Q1. What does the consumer gain from the firm’s SM content generation process?
- Q2. What is the value of SM content marketing in a media perspective?
- Q3. What is the value of SM content marketing for marketing communications?
- Q4. Can SM marketing communications be interpreted as media content?

In a first exploratory approach, a holistic content analysis was conducted on a selection of official brand pages on Facebook. The selection of a B2C (business-to-consumer) context (i.e. official Facebook brand pages) is merely based on the assumption that con-

tent marketing is more appropriately observable in a B2C environment, where consumers act and react to companies’ SM activities in a more multi-faceted way than, for instance, in a B2B environment (Williamson, 2010). Each of the observed companies were SMEs (according to the definition of the European Commission, i.e. enterprises with 1-249 employees (EC, 2009)) thus appropriate for our research problem.

Being a holistic qualitative study of digital content and communities, our approach can be regarded as a netnography (Kozinets, 2006). Besides analyzing textual content, we equally extended our attention to semi-otic (see e.g. Antorini, 2007) and visual (see e.g. Schau – Muñiz, 2006) elements observable on the analyzed surfaces.

The scope of our study was narrowed to one distinct sector in order to provide for the sample a more homogeneous environment for more transparent and comparable analysis. “Eating and cooking motivates people very easily, and this is visible on their Facebook pages, too. A restaurant or confectionery communicating properly with their fans can attract them without serious campaigns” (Lévai, 2012: p. 42.). In a service marketing approach (see e.g. Langeard et al., 1981), Facebook fan pages can equally extend the core experience of regularly going to the given restaurant and contribute to what can be referred to as the experience “concept” (Sundbo – Hagedorn-Rasmussen, 2008) of these firms in the online context, which is in a way a particularly interesting extension of capacity for a firm and activity limited in time and space of service.

In this view we proceeded to a content analysis of 20 service firms in the Hungarian HoReCa (Hotels, Restaurants and Catering) sector, and more specifically, brand pages of individual restaurants (i.e. not pertaining to any chain or franchise) in Budapest selected in a process of purposive sampling (see e.g. Wallendorf – Belk, 1989), focusing on their posts that triggered the most activity on their brand page.

Table 1

Research design and methodology

Objectives	Methodology	Sample characteristics	Industry	Inclusion criteria	Period of analysis
Analyzing the SM content generation in providing value for media and marketing communications purposes.	Online content analysis, data mining	3559 fan comments to 1281 posts on 20 standalone Facebook brand pages	Services, HoReCa (restaurants)	Brand page with more than 100 fans; businesses that are not part of a restaurant chain (SME criterion)	Posts published between Jan 26 and Mar 26, 2013 (2 months)

Source: own elaboration

VEZETÉSTUDOMÁNY

In determining what accounted for as “more active” we took into account the number of fans, and compared these to the number of likes and shares of each post. All posts and related comments that appeared during the period of analysis (Jan 26-Mar 26, 2013) were included in the data mining and analysis. Our study is based on the observation of ca. 3600 fan comments to ca. 1300 posts (*Table 1*). In the following, we chose to alter the name of each analyzed brand page, replacing it with their numerical code within our sample database (e.g. [1] stands for Analyzed Business Unit #1) and to include a date with each quote.

Findings



When content analyzing social media brand pages the number of fans of each page is the first metric that one has access to. These pieces of data enable us to know the general popularity of each brand (e.g. [1] has the most fans within the sample with 22,725 fans in contrast to [20] with “only” 609 fans. However the “power of like” (Lipsman et al., 2012: 1) is a very subjective metric, as “[...] typical approaches that focus on raw fan counts, or the total number of engagements on a given piece of content, fail to depict the potential and realized scope of SM brand impressions” (Lipsman et al., 2012: p. 23.). It is then more reasonable to evalu-





ate the general relation of people who talk about the company to those who like the company but are not generating any discussion in the topic (e.g. [12] has 2,488 fans with a respectful amount of people talking about them [5199], although [2] has 21,075 likes with a relatively small group of fans [433]). These general metrics referred to as quasi-statistics (Maxwell, 1996: p. 95.) help us to begin our analysis and to get an initial picture of the sample and evaluate the relative weight of a topic. We then chose to further analyze posts that generated the most activity from the whole sample and view them as contents containing different amount of information concerning the exact activity of the SME (HoReCa). The measure of activity-generation is based on the relative number of likes, comments and shares of each analyzed post.





SM activities on the analyzed pages show peculiar differences when it comes to using social media as a marketing and/or a media channel. In the sample of SM posts by restaurants, content generated showed different types of information for the audience, that we categorized based on their informative content or on their entertaining nature, giving the content a connection to the basic activity of the firm in some cases, or ignoring this connection otherwise. A summary of our findings are presented in Table 2, followed by a detailed analysis of its most important elements.

Table 2

Information types of the analyzed posts and examples

Informative	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pictures and/or comments of physical products (foods, drinks, etc.) <p>e.g. [1], Jan 26, 2013: “night sandwich # [1] # Tally-ho!” (+link to picture) [<i>see picture 1 beside</i>]</p> <p>e.g. [12], Mar 23, 2013: “Don’t forget that “madártej” [“Hungarian floating islands”] doesn’t plump, because is it made from birch sugar! It is the same delicious as the one with sucrose, but it is OK for people suffering from diabetes! We ‘re waiting for you, try it: [12]” (+link to picture) [<i>see picture 2 beside</i>]</p> <p>e.g. [5], Mar 08, 2013: “Daily menu main dish :)” (+link to picture)</p> <p>e.g. [6], Mar 19, 2013: “Have you ever tried our Borsche Turbo baguette? It’s brutal... We used to say that if you eat it you fall asleep, or we don’t wish you “Enjoy” rather “Good night!” There’re so many delicious things in it...”</p>	<p>picture 1:</p>  <p>picture 2:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information about price reductions, promotions <p>e.g. [15], Feb 04, 2013: “LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! We’ve opened our reservations for February 14th. Limited Valentine! Good price, 5 course menu: 3.900Huf. Let the feelings burn!”</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> daily menu (on a day-to-day basis, containing extra price reductions and other promotions) <p>e.g. [19], Mar 05, 2013: menu: “goulash from the Alföld, carrot cream soup with ginger”</p> <p>e.g. [15], Mar 05, 2013: menu (+link to picture with a traditional Hungarian menu) [see picture 3 beside]</p> <p>e.g. [18], Mar 04, 2013: “...Thirsty Wednesday! Only once in a month! You can choose from beers, wines, spirits and long drinks – and drink it for half price! Book a table, if you listen to us!”</p>	<p>picture 3:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> event information (when, where, in what topic) <p>e.g. [4], Mar 20, 2013: Flavors of Transylvania weekend! (+ link to event)</p> <p>e.g. [15], Mar 11, 2013, Kitchen Exhibition 2013 (+ link to event)</p> <p>e.g. [15], Feb 27, 2013: “You can meet us at the cooking show on Saturday! Come and taste!” (+ link to event)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> information about the opening times <p>e.g. [9], Feb 23, 2013: “We open in 40 minutes! Weekend is coming :) Enjoy!”</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reference to the news about the company <p>e.g. [3] Jan 21, 2013: “You will never get used to it!” (tudas.fm)</p> <p>e.g. [15], Jan 20, 2013: “You ‘ll find us at the newspaper stands tomorrow!” (+link to picture) [see picture 4 beside]</p> <p>e.g. [10], Mar 11, 2013: “Dinner at [10] in Budapest: jamie goone’s wine blog”</p> <p>e.g. [14], Feb 02, 2013: “[14] has ridden in on its white rocking-horse!” (player.hu)</p>	<p>picture 4:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> recruitment <p>e.g. [3] Mar 22, 2013: [3]</p> <p>e.g. [6] Mar 03, 2013: [6]</p>	
<p>Entertaining</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> atmosphere generation (daily music, artistic pictures or photos, etc.) <p>e.g. [11], Mar 21, 2013: “Before opening”, (+link to music video of Bobby McFerrin: Don’t worry be happy)</p> <p>e.g. [11], Mar 16, 2013: “Before opening”, (+link to music video of Adele: Set fire to the rain)</p> <p>e.g. [12], mar 22, 2013: We’re closed today. Plan a little sally tomorrow, maybe to [12]”</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pictures and/or comments of the chefs (making a dish, preparing a meal, etc.) <p>e.g. [17], Jan 31, 2013: “...and when he is focusing on the next meal...” (+link to picture) [see picture 5 beside]</p> <p>e.g. [12], Mar 14, 2013: “Good morning everybody! We ‘re doing our best to make you choose from our wonderful dishes! Come in! [12]”</p> <p>e.g. [4], Feb 26, 2013: “Laci is working at the moment... :)” (+link to picture) [see picture 6 beside]</p>	<p>picture 5:</p>  <p>picture 6:</p> 

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pictures and/or comments of the SME building (the building, a new design, etc.) <p>e.g. [13], Feb 22, 2013: "inner design of the restaurant" (+link to picture) [<i>see picture 7 beside</i>]</p>	<p>picture 7:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pictures and/or comments of funny things (e.g. a baby eating a cake, a cartoon, a joke, etc.) <p>e.g. [8], Mar 26, 13: "Spring not available" [reflecting on the unnaturally long winter] (+link to meme picture)</p> <p>e.g. [13], Mar 01, 2013: "Winter is over! Spring is here at last and the new menu! Hurry up, because it will last only three months!"</p> <p>e.g. [12], Mar 20, 2013: "Elvis drinks coffee, too. Drop in for a coffee to us, maybe you will meet! You 're welcome in [12]!" (+link to picture) [see picture 8 beside]</p> <p>e.g. [3] Mar 26, 2013: "Good morning! Now that there's only a few days left till Christmas, I hope everybody is OK with presents! Keeping up the atmosphere, our first 100 guests get 100 free APPLE products!" (+link to picture showing an apple fruit with an apple ipod's characteristic lines painted on it) [<i>see picture 9 beside</i>]</p> <p>e.g. [6], Mar 26, 2013: "If it's snowing, are you coming to [6]? We're organizing a trip to Perinbaba, because we'd like to grab this rotten pillow from her hands to have sunshine, good weather and to be able to put out the benches! We're waiting for you today :!!!!"</p>	<p>picture 8:</p>  <p>picture 9:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pictures or comments of special events (e.g. Women's day, Easter, Christmas, etc.) <p>e.g. [6], Mar 08, 2013: "Dear Ladies! We'd like to salute you on Women's Day! :) Come to our place today to make this day for You even more beautiful! With Love, [6]"</p> <p>e.g. [18], Mar 08, 2013: "[18] wishes beautiful and very happy Women's Day to every woman!" (+link to picture)</p> <p>e.g. [4], Mar 08, 2013: "We wish our dear readers a happy Women's Day!" (+link to picture) [see picture 10 beside]</p>	<p>picture 10:</p> 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • games (making recipes, virtual cooking, etc.) <p>e.g. [12], Mar 15, 2013: "Competition between fans who share the link of the company with their friends. The award is a cake!"</p>	
<p>Notes: <i>Notes between brackets and/or in italic are added by the authors. Non-textual contents related to the referred posts are described following each example in parentheses, preceded by a "+" sign. The respective names of the businesses are replaced in every case by their numbers in our sample database.</i></p>	

Source: own elaboration

When content is equivalent with the SME's activity

A remarkable amount of posts concern the SME's very main activity. Posts based on the service or the product itself abound (e.g. [1], Feb 05, 2013; Feb 18, 2013; [8], Mar 06, 2013: give information about a physical product and receive numerous shares and comments, mostly about suggestions for redesigning the package [product information and information about its attributes]). Further comments enquire about the physical place of the SME and how to find it, usually with de-

tails of the opening hours (place information). Other user-generated questions arise in connection with the price of the product, or equivalently, the marketing communications channels are present in the SM posts (promotion information, e.g. [6], Feb 01, 2013: promotion of the firm's webpage on its Facebook page).

Besides this direct manifestation of the firms' marketing-mix, numerous posts give short notes about a particular type of fine food or beverage, or they add some kind of supplemental information adding to provide a unique nature to the business (e.g. [1], Jan 29, 2013: highlighting their specific, naturally manufactured and Hungarian dairy products as the positioning

of their activity or [4], Mar 01, 2013: the company uploads the weekend menu only on Facebook, privileging their fans present on the platform in this way).

Analyzed SMEs not only present their products, but sometimes organize games for their fans (e.g. [10], Feb 27, 2013; [2], Jan 31, 2013, Mar 06, 2013; [7], Feb 14, 2013, Feb 18, 2013: “Bizarre ice cream selection, who knows what’s in it?”). Many of them equally involve fans to comment on questions, to give ideas and play quizzes or vote for a product, while having a good time (i.e. satisfying their need for entertainment). In these cases, humor is usually present in posts, giving the opportunity for entertainment for the audience besides the provision of information (e.g. [18], Feb 26, 2013: “beer day”, the post contains a picture of a woman holding a big beer barrel). This kind of media content distribution emerges the presumption that SM content is more and more focused on not simply giving prosaic information of the SME and its marketing-mix, but rather trying to communicate with their audiences and generate buzz around a specific (mostly activity-related) topic.

When content is equivalent but diverse from the SME’s activity

Another group of posts are equally based around the sector activity these firms operate in, but from a farther perspective than simply and tightly presenting the firm’s marketing-mix elements. Among these, posts share with the audience a story or give the details of an event (e.g. [7], Jan 29, 2013, Jan 30, 2013; [4], Jan 30, 2013: one chef of the restaurant was present and awarded at the Bocuse d’Or chef competition, representing Hungary as part of the cutting edge of gastronomy). These posts are in some way in the role of a PR campaign for the firm, or in other relations, these are the posts that make the invisible parts of the service provided visible by the aid of the social media platform (i.e. showing the organization and the process to the audience by giving news about the chef, who is normally not face-to-face to the customers).

Some SMEs create their own media content based around the theme of specific occasions (e.g. Valentine’s Day, falling into the period of analysis: [6], Feb 14, 2013; [20], Feb 14, 2013: a picture with two chicken hearts and a bard, wishing Happy Valentine’s Day to everyone) and filling it with a unique atmosphere and humor. This kind of content is not directly in relation with the firm, even though it can be related to the firm and adds a unique touch to its communications.

In some cases, SMEs only try to wish a message filled with positive content for their audience (e.g.

[10], Feb 21, 2013: “Enjoy your meal and have a nice day!”). In these cases, content is not really relevant, but somehow connected to the general activity of the SME (food, drinks and eating), and surprisingly generated a relatively high amount of buzz among fans.

When content differs from the SME’s activity

The third category of posts and comments is not linked directly to the activity of the SME. These posts can be grouped around different aims (e.g. [2], Feb 20, 2013: the restaurant promotes another restaurant in the city, informing about the opening date, its location, etc.), but their main attribute is that the posts are not connected to the specific SME’s marketing-mix or marketing strategy. For instance, a few SMEs even during the period of analysis undertook their own recruiting activities on this very platform, looking for new employees (e.g. [3], Mar 22, 2013), adding the HR function to the existing Facebook brand page.

There are other cases when posts do generate a relatively high buzz, but are not really exact in their purposes (e.g. [20], Feb 01, 2013: a picture is showing the audience some food and a note that the chef has many presents from Lyon. Different question arise: who are the presents for? Why was the chef in Lyon? Why is the post on the firm’s Facebook wall?). Other categories of posts are about creating a media content which is entertaining (e.g. [6], Feb 19, 2013: “Béla”, the teddy bear is presented on a photograph among the employees of the restaurant, creating a relatively high buzz) and funny, but the main purpose is unknown, as most of these posts are not continued in any way. Therefore, these posts are not really linked to the SME, but are generating conversation about the topic on the brand page, making the SM content distributable and viable among the audience.

SMEs’ SM content and the virtual transmission of the invisible elements of services

The posts can be categorized into different groups, based on their information content. Predominantly, and looking at the main company purposes, SM messages still contain the physical product itself (*see Table 2*). A lot of posts concentrate on the appropriate interpretation of the food or beverage and its production process, which is surely the main and most visible manifestation of the otherwise invisible and hard-to-grab services of restaurants. Referring to Kotler and Keller (2012) and Langeard et al. (1981), services are produced in a quite complex process. Beyond the marketing-mix of physical products (product, price, place, promotion),

there exist three additional marketing mix-dimensions for services, namely: people, physical evidence and process (Langeard et al., 1981). In the scope of our research, people refer to employees (waiters, cashiers) who are directly in contact with the customer and serve them face-to-face, so they are a significant factor of their impression. In the analyzed SM posts, they were rarely visible on the Facebook wall, because they are rather physically needed in the process and pushing them in SM does not seem to be predominantly useful. Physical evidences (e.g. furniture, design, hygiene) are more observable in the SM environment (e.g. at [13], Feb 22, 2013: inner design of the SME is shown to the audience, enabling the presentation of the physical manifestation not only face-to-face, but virtually, on the SM platform).

More interestingly, processes are the elements of the services, which are normally not visible to the audience, preventing them from looking “behind the curtain”. In the case of our research, chefs are good examples of the process, because they rarely cook their meals in front of the eyes of their customers. However, pictures and/or comments of the chefs quite often evolve among the analyzed posts, making avid fans initiates to a certain extent of the restaurant’s “tribe” (e.g. [17], Jan 31, 2013: “...and when he is focusing on the next meal...” e.g. [12], Mar 14, 2013: “Good morning everybody! We’re doing our best to make you choose from our wonderful dishes! Come in!”; e.g. [4], Feb 26, 2013: “Laci is working at the moment... :)”.

This result can modify the original servuction model (see Figure 1), where customers get their benefits from the whole provision of a service, which includes visible but also invisible parts (Langeard et al., 1981). By using SM the “invisible” processes become quasi-visible in the virtual sphere to the community on a Facebook brand page (e.g. showing them a picture or a short comment of the chefs’ latest creations), making it possible to contribute to customers’ sum of benefits by the whole service process. Therefore the customer can evaluate both the visible parts of the service (e.g. pictures or comments of employees, and physical evidence like furniture or design) and in some way the quasi-invisible parts (e.g. the inner state of the kitchen on a picture, which is normally not open to the public).

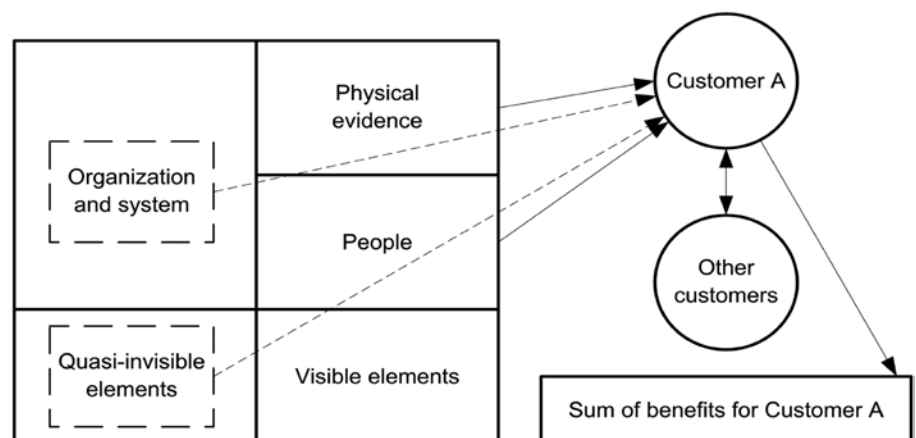
Discussion

In sum, SMEs’ content on the SM platform is very varying in themes and has different relations with the company’s activity itself. The analyzed posts were the ones that generated the most activity on the Facebook brand page, i.e. creating the most likes, comments and shares from the audience. What comes as a surprise is that even these popular posts still basically inform about the marketing-mix of the given SME (product, price, place, promotion completed with service marketing’s people, process and physical evidence), and are a representation of an elemental positioning strategy, which differentiates the company and/or product from the competitors’ (Q3). Content is generally linked to the industry activity directly or indirectly, getting the fans up-to-date about important information concerning the firm, containing the visible and the fundamentally invisible parts of the specific service (e.g. giving the opportunity to look “behind the curtains”, presenting the kitchen, the chef, the life of the SME, etc.), therefore making it difficult to entirely interpret the analyzed firms’ SM communications as media content (Q4). However, by presenting these invisible parts of the service and the related processes (i.e. posting information, pictures, stories, etc. about the activity of the firms “ordinary” customers would rarely have access to), these firms are still able to use media content to contribute to creating added value to their fan community who already expressed their interest in the companies’ operations by becoming fans of their SM pages (Q2).

In this sense, SMEs still ought to use the SM platform as a media content distribution system which not only gives informative content, but entertains the audience in different ways (e.g. games, quizzes, votes, fun-

Figure 1

The servuction model in the SM sphere – the case of SMEs



Source: own elaboration, based on Langeard et al. (1981)

ny pictures and posts, etc.), letting users enjoy spending time on these firms' SM surfaces, and with the brand. SM therefore means an additional value for consumers who are generators of content in this sphere, enabling them to be a part of the content creation process hereby entertaining them at the same time (Q1).

As a managerial implication our exploratory study's results show that diffusing content generally acts for SMEs as a facilitator to engaging fans by offering a thematized space for them to manifest themselves in company-related topics. In another way round, content (and fans' response thereto) adds to the firms' (otherwise limited) possibilities of brand positioning by offering a reflection of fans' company- and content-related behavior. In the perspective of SMEs' low market power and level of capital, this might prove to be a supplementary source of information (e.g. to some extent, overcome inaccessible traditional marketing research activities) and a tool for engaging users, making them benefit from being part of the firm's "community" (e.g. to act as an accessible and relatively cost-effective yet customer-friendly relationship management tool).

As an exploratory study, our research bears a certain number of limitations. First, only one small area within the SME sphere was examined, our results need confirmation from other fields and sectors. Moreover, restaurants as business entities bear the advantage to more likely belong to what was referred to as a "love brand" and therefore be liked by a greater number of users on a social networking site like Facebook. However, this methodological consideration that enabled us to collect a sample of study for a preliminary study can be bypassed by examining what types of social media can be fit for companies in a given sector to be used a marketing communications channel (e.g. LinkedIn for professional, B2B companies) which is equally a possible topic for further research.

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