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B2B digital marketing strategy: a framework for assessing digital touchpoints and increasing customer loyalty based on Austrian companies from heating, ventilation and air conditioning industry

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Abstract

Research background: Digital marketing has changed the nature of company-to-customer communication. With rising information overload and reduced decision-making time, touchpoints have gained additional importance by yielding customer loyalty. Yet, the existing digital marketing tools have failed to keep pace with these trends. Companies are lacking a simple framework that focuses on a digital marketing strategy built around touchpoints and customer loyalty. This is especially relevant for B2B companies, which due to their specifics are more dependent on customers and less flexible in adapting of new digital trends.

Purpose of the article: A B2B business strategy tailored to digital trends demands a re-evaluation of prior understanding of a product portfolio, a company's internal and external environment. The purpose of the article is to present a framework that helps to undertake the necessary changes and enables the connections with industry.

Methods: The suggested model has been drawn from the literature review and extended based on the findings of a multiple case study of Austrian Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) industry companies. The fieldwork was conducted in early 2017.

Findings & Value added: Aspiring to follow trends in digital marketing and to help B2B companies to adapt their strategy to ongoing changes in company-to-customer communication, a new framework has been developed. The framework aims to increase customer loyalty and focuses on channels/touchpoints, assets, skills, audience and customer journey. The model could be beneficial for Chief Marketing Officers (CMO) and other C-levels by offering a simple and reliable tool for improving a company's position in the digital marketplace. Moreover, it enables continuous adjustment of an already existing business strategy.

Introduction

Digital marketing goes beyond traditional understanding of marketing. Its role has become more strategic and aggregative. A customer has begun to play an active role in brand and company value co-creation. As a result, customer loyalty has become a core element of customer relationship management. Moreover, the growth of omnipresent and multi-channel marketing pushes touchpoints in the center of a digital marketing strategy. As a result, companies have to re-evaluate prior understanding of a product or a service portfolio, a company's external and internal environment.

B2B companies are usually more dependent on customers than B2C companies, and are less flexible in adoption of new trends (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Karjaluoto *et al.*, 2015). It could be more difficult for them to undertake strategic changes. Digital marketing strategy requires clear understanding of a product, a company's and an industry's specific factors. The current article aims to address these factors. More specifically, the article aims, on the one hand, to focus on these three elements and, on the other hand, to provide a holistic view to a digital marketing strategy in the context of B2B industrial companies. The study intends to develop a framework that increases the effectiveness of digital touchpoints and therewith facilitate customer loyalty. The following research question has to be answered: What digital marketing strategy ensures B2B customer loyalty?

Digital marketing trend occurs in the light of skepticism of C-levels regarding the necessity of the foregoing changes. The information derived from the analysis will provide an action plan for further development of digital marketing in organization, and present arguments to explain to C-levels the necessity of the foregoing transformations.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: first, a theoretical framework based on literature review will be presented. Second, the methodological section will present a case study approach to deepen the theoretical findings. Subsequently, the cross-case findings will be used to adapt the theoretical framework to the specifics of B2B industrial companies. In

the final section, the research implications, study limitations and suggested avenues for future research will be discussed.

B2B digital marketing framework

Strategic decisions usually refer to three company levels: product, internal and external environment. Digital marketing goes beyond traditional marketing penetrating almost every business activity, becoming more strategic. Therefore, companies need a framework that reflects a holistic approach to a business strategy. Moreover, such framework could help companies to identify weak strategic areas and the potential for future development. The framework presented in Fig.1 explores seven key areas: Ease of Use, Interactivity and Information Flow, Assets, Skills, Audience/Customer Journey and Touchpoints.

Product

Ease of Use

The construct of (perceived) Ease of Use is often used in connection with adoption of new technologies (Ngai et al., 2015). In recent years, this construct has been mostly used in relation to mobile marketing (Jung, 2014; Lee & Park, 2008; Sinisalo *et al.*, 2007).

Interactivity

Some researchers motivate B2B companies to change from “selling” to helping and interacting with customers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). As a result, the content used in digital marketing becomes more important. One of the characteristics of content marketing, interactivity, becomes one of the main factors facilitating positive customer experience.

The construct of Interactivity has been recently used in connection with websites (Harder & Jordan, 2013; McMillan *et al.*, 2008; Nacar & Burnaz, 2011), social media (Levina & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2015; Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011), mobile touchpoints (Sinisalo *et al.*, 2007).

Information Flow

There are two ways an Information Flow occurs: 1) initiated by a customer searching for information; 2) initiated by a company, when a cus-

tomers interact with a display advertising, receives newsletter or watch video advertising (de Haan *et al.*, 2015).

Digitalization has made the access to data and insights easier. A drawback of this trend is an information overflow and incorrect information. Because decisions in B2B are mostly made based on values, the quality of Information Flow is very important.

Internal environment

Assets

Lack of resources could hinder B2B digital marketing. Reliable IT assets (hardware, software, networks) help companies timely provide analysis of B2B marketing campaigns.

Skills

Digital marketing expands borders of professional knowledge and skills. Nowadays marketers have to be experts in different areas, directly and indirectly connected with marketing (Royle & Laing, 2014). Marketers have to possess excellent IT skills and have technical understanding (Rowley, 2008; Royle & Laing, 2014), be good at writing and storytelling, be capable of analytical thinking, and be able to react actively and timely to different postings and reviews. Analytical skills have become a strategic skill for digital companies (Leefflang *et al.*, 2014; Royle & Laing, 2014).

External environment

Audience/customer journey

In order to understand customer needs and know what motivates customers to take a purchase decision, companies have to map a customer journey. Customer journey represents a life curve of customer needs from the stage of gathering information about a brand or a product to a post-purchase experience (Vázquez *et al.*, 2014).

The model involves four stages: Awareness, Evaluation, Purchase and Post-Purchase-Experience, or Loyalty (based on Vázquez *et al.*, 2014; Chaffey, 2014). Customer goals vary from stage to stage. At the first stage, Awareness, the customer — consciously or unconsciously — aims to collect information about a brand or a product. The quality of information is critical at that stage. During the second stage, Evaluation, a customer aims

to compare information in order to be able to take a purchase decision. An important role at that stage is played by potential Usefulness of a product. If the collected information is convincing, a customer moves to the next stage, Purchase. Within this stage, Ease of Use within a purchase process is critical. Depending on the experience of a customer within the previous stages, as well as the quality of a product or a service, a customer could decide whether to stay with a brand or a product. As a rule, a customer builds loyalty towards a company or a product if they timely receive relevant information, a purchase and the following connection to a product makes their life easier.

The goal of any customer journey map is to build relationship to a customer by meeting the exact needs of the latter, so that a customer builds loyalty to a brand or a product and with the next purchase skips the stages of Awareness and Evaluation. The scheme of a customer journey is depicted on Fig.2.

Touchpoints

Touchpoints occur when a customer interacts with a company or a brand — directly or indirectly (de Haan *et al.*, 2015; Schüller, 2016). A touchpoint goes beyond just a contact point, because it requires a customer's response (Schüller, 2016). The challenge of digital marketing is to build a digital strategy in a way that any contact point of a customer with a company transforms into a touchpoint.

Most studies on touchpoints consider them in the context of multi-channels or omnipresent marketing (Baxendale *et al.*, 2015; de Haan *et al.*, 2015). Straker *et al.* (2015) have tried to look at digital touchpoints from strategic point of view. They created a digital channel model, which helps to identify the most appropriate touchpoints depending on customer needs. This study aims to continue this research.

They used a descriptive method to create a digital channel model, which helps to identify the most appropriate touchpoints depending on the customer needs.

Straker *et al.* (2015) in their study distinguish 34 different digital touchpoints. Based on budget and time allocation, the most commonly used touchpoints for B2B companies are website, mobile applications, email and social media networks and search engine (e.g. Leeflang *et al.*, 2014). These touchpoints (except for the social media networks) have been categorized by Straker *et al.* as functional. They require relative low customer interactions and are characterized by one-directional way of communication (Straker *et al.*, 2015). Following previous research on B2B digital market-

ing, which states that decisions in B2B area are made based on values and not emotions (Gillin & Schwartzman, 2011), it has been decided to focus on these functional touchpoints. Because social media networks aimed to cultivate customer relationships (Järvinen *et al.*, 2012; Leek & Christodoulides, 2011), increase brand awareness and loyalty (Brennan & Croft, 2012), social touchpoints have been added to the scope of analysis.

Research method

To identify the status quo of digital marketing among B2B industrial companies, a case study approach has been selected. Case studies are often used to investigate emerging phenomena in real life context. To better understand the situation on the market, a multiple case study approach has been used. Two case companies operate internationally in one industrial area — Heating, Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC). Both companies have their headquarters in Austria.

The choice of industry was determined by the Author's personal interest. Moreover, there is little empirical research on digital marketing in the HVAC industry. The companies have been chosen from the list of companies representing HVAC industry on the website of the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The total number of 21 companies has been reduced to 9 mother companies. Then the selection has been reduced to two case companies having similar characteristics (number of employees, revenue, market coverage, etc.). This simplified the process of comparison and increased the reliability of the analysis.

The data have been collected by means of personal interview in early 2017. To increase reliability of the data, triangulation techniques were employed. The interviews were conducted with marketing and sales experts. Moreover, multiple materials from the companies' websites, social networks and newsletters have been used. Table 1 presents the core data about the companies.

Data analysis of the case data followed an abductive research process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Abductive research ensures continuous interaction between theory and practical data. The intention of the Author was to use a mixed method of a confirmatory and an abductive research. The objective of the confirmatory study was to investigate whether the suggested framework is confirmed by an empirical research.

Data analysis of the case data followed a three step approach, suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994), including data reduction, data display and verification of conclusions. Data reduction has been performed based on

the constructs used in the theoretical framework of the research. The constructs included the levels and the sublevels of the theoretical framework, for instance, channels, touchpoints, people skills, interactivity, etc. At the second step of the data reduction, by means of descriptive coding, the categories have been grouped according to the content. The data from both cases have been compared and organized by contrasts. At the step of display, the suggested theoretical framework has been updated. To verify the data, the results were sent to the interviewees. No major comments or changes have been requested from the case companies.

Results

The companies recognize that communication with customers has to be improved. They understand the emergence of digital marketing, although they see their companies as “too conservative” to immediately respond to this trend. As one of the main boundaries of the digital marketing in a company they name skepticism of a company manager, low digitalization of services and relatively low activity of customers in digital marketplace.

Product

Ease of Use

Ease of Use is considered mostly with regard to a website and a mobile application. It is expected to expand due to the growth of mobile devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets).

Usefulness

Interactivity has not been mentioned as an important characteristic of digital marketing in the case companies. Contrary, entertaining content is seen as unimportant and distracting. Instead of Interactivity all interviewees name (perceived) Usefulness as a more important factor that facilitates customer loyalty.

Information Flow

Both case companies draw attention to the quality of the information they provide. However, they have stated that the willingness to provide

maximum information could negatively impact Ease of Use and Usefulness.

Internal Environment

Assets

Both case companies poorly assess the quality of the assets been used for the assessment of digital marketing. The case companies have no special hard- and software to measure the effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

The case companies mention high connection of digital marketing with processes in an organization. Among the most important internal processes the respondents mention product and service digitalization and information exchange. The sales manager from Company B depicts high correlation of digital marketing with product and service digitalization.

“It is almost impossible to develop digital marketing without having digital services, for example, a personal account on a website for registered customers.” (Sales, B)

In order to increase trust to digital touchpoints companies have to prove customers that they are familiar with digital tools.

Both companies distinguish the important role of internal communication and information exchange in development of a business strategy. They name information exchange as one of the reasons of slowing down the process of digitalization of company marketing. The respondents mention lack of information exchange in both directions — bottom-up and top down. Bottom-up information exchange is hampered by “pretty low interest of the management in digital marketing” (Sales, Company A). As a result, the skepticism of the C-level decreases motivation of employees. One of the main obstacles for top-down information exchange is the eagerness of the management to concentrate information outcome in one hand. The management wishes herewith to avoid spontaneous and thoughtless appearance in digital marketplace.

Skills

There is no division of traditional and digital marketing in both case companies. The marketing departments are small and have to concentrate all tasks in one hand. Even though the companies are interested in increasing analytical skills, lack of resources, both time and financial, as well as

lack of demand from the manager's side to bring this idea to life boulder further actions.

External Environment

Audience/customer journey

Company A tries to consider customer journey and identifies several customer groups, namely, first contact, irregular customer or regular customer. Company B distinguishes customers only according to customer groups — construction companies, plumbers, plumber schools, blue printing companies, etc. Both companies state a lack of a systematic approach in communication with customers and distinguish a crucial role of a product/project manager in choosing a marketing (also digital) campaign. According to the sales manager in Company B, "...customer journey is considered more on intuitive level than as a structured approach". This is applicable for both case companies.

Touchpoints

The case companies use several digital channels to interact with customers on the Internet. Although companies see a company website as the main communication tool, no or limited (Company B) measuring tools are used.

Social media is used only by Company A, and mostly as a broadcasting tool to post updates about the main achievements, social events, exhibitions and vacancies. The company posts on Facebook and LinkedIn. The postings are irregular, and are posted on demand. The company considers regular postings as not necessary, because "customers are also not active in social media".

Both case companies actively use E-Mail marketing. Company A distributes newsletters with the last updates and sends invitations to exhibitions, seminars and other events. Company B uses E-Mails just to distribute customer magazines, although this has been introduced only recently.

Mobile marketing is used by both case companies. Company A uses three mobile applications. The applications are aimed at informing about the last news in the company, help in installing and use of the products and provide contact data of certain departments to make communication with the company easier. Company B uses four mobile apps to simplify the use of the products. Those apps provide data sheets and guidelines for certain products, and also help in calculations. They are aimed at making the installation process and the use of company products easier. Both companies

see a potential of mobile applications, especially in HVAC industry due to specifics of the industry and the necessity to work for customers out of the office. The role of mobile applications as well as the importance of the construct Ease of Use is expected to grow due to growth of mobile devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets). Nowadays, Ease of Use is hindered due to the willingness of the companies to provide maximum information and lack of motivation from the management side. The structure and functionality is still to be optimized.

Discussions

The interviews have shown that the theoretically based framework, suggested at the beginning of the article, highlights the core elements of the strategy but does not reflect the actual state of the market. Despite the increasing popularity of the idea that interactivity important also in the B2B area, the case companies do not prove that in practice. Both case companies state the importance of such constructs as Ease of Use, Usefulness and Information Flow as a facilitator of customer loyalty.

It should be noted that perceived Usefulness and perceived Ease of Use are often used within a TAM model, which is used in connection with the user's acceptance of a new technology. As digital marketing is a rather new issue for B2B companies, it could be also considered within this context. In general, usefulness is often in relation to customer experience and customer loyalty (Janita & Miranda, 2013; Keinänen & Kuivalainen, 2015), and is connected to the user's intention to adopt new technology. Usefulness refers to "the individual's perception of whether the desired goal can be achieved while using particular technology" (Lacka & Chong, 2016, p. 83). Among the internal elements important for digital marketing, the experts name factors, not directly connected with digital marketing, namely, internal communication, management optimism and digitalization of the processes.

Fig. 4 presents the framework adapted to the specifics of HVAC industry in Austria.

Conclusions

The article provides several theoretical contributions. First, the article presents a framework that focuses on B2B digital touchpoints and has an aim to increase customer loyalty. Second, despite the focus on digital marketing

the article shows that the development of B2B digital touchpoints depends on the organization's strategy and the level of internal communication. Third, the data derived from the article imply that, in general, digital channels are dependent on the level of digitalization in a company. Digital channels alone could not increase customer loyalty if no service is performed digitally. As the fourth major theoretical contribution, the article does not support the view that entertaining content is important for increasing customer loyalty in B2B area. Contrary, B2B companies focus on the usefulness of the provided information, whereas entertaining content is seen as distractive. As its fifth theoretical contribution, it provides analysis of HVAC companies, which are poorly examined in terms of digital marketing.

The interviews show the importance of personal attitude of the C-levels and responsible project or product managers for the development of digital strategy. The provided framework based on theoretical and empirical research presents arguments to explain to the C-levels the necessity of the foregoing transformations. Moreover, CMOs and other managers involved receive a detailed action plan assess digital marketing in organization and identify ways for improvements.

The results of the study have some limitations. First, only two case companies have been covered, and in total four interviews have been provided. The results cannot be generalized to other settings. Second, only the companies from a HVAC industry have been interviewed. The results can be different for other industries. As it often happens in a case study research, the interviews provide different levels of information. In this article, certain parts of digital marketing had more importance for one company than for another. This results in different levels of analysis.

In the light of those limitations, future research in the field is required. Research could cover more representatives from the HVAC industry, or compare the outcomes from different B2B industries. Other research could also examine the customer perspective for the role of digital touchpoints in B2B marketing.

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Annex

Table 1. Background information of the case companies

Company	A	B
Ownership	Public limited company	Public limited company
Number of business areas	One main business	One main business
Annual revenue	200+	250+
Number of employees	ca. 1000	ca. 1200
Number of employees in marketing department	2	3
Headquarters	Austria	Austria
Market coverage	Global, representatives in 16 countries	Global, representatives in 12 countries
Interviewee	Sales manager, marketing specialists	Marketing manager, senior business developer

Figure 1. B2B digital marketing framework

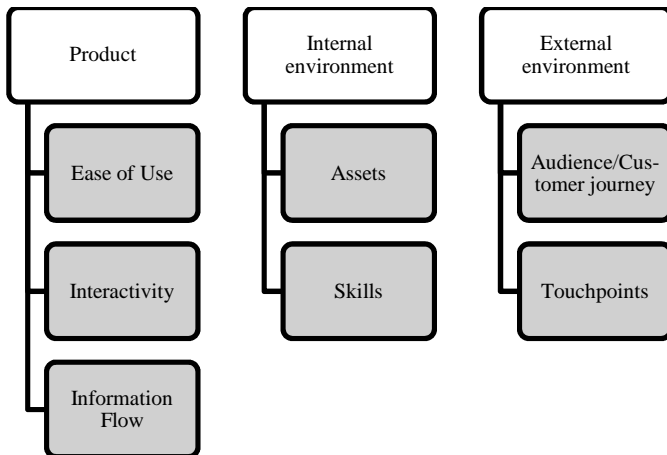
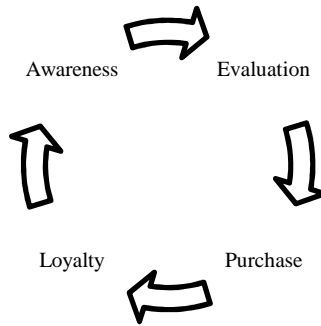


Figure 2. Customer journey model



Source: author work based on Vázquez *et al.* (2014) and Chaffey (2014).

Figure 3. Survey results for companies A and B

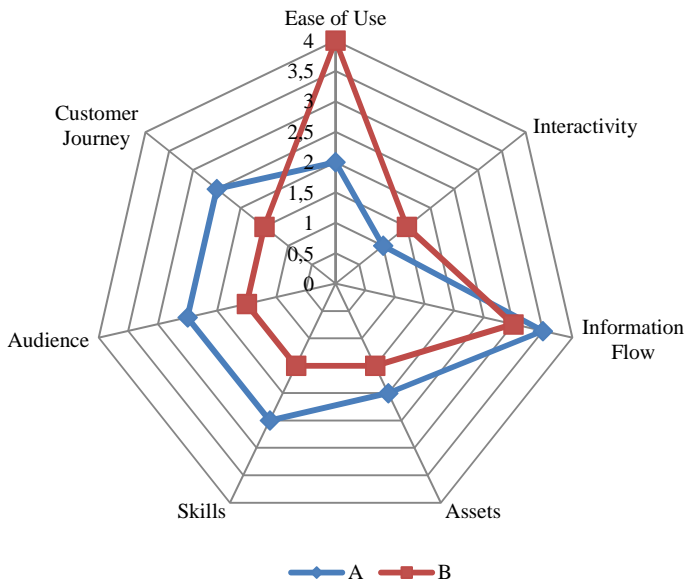


Figure 4. B2B digital marketing framework adapted to the specifics of Austrian HVAC companies

