Abstract. *In the past few years, online social networks have rapidly acquired a notable importance both for companies and for consumers all over the world. The purpose of this paper is to shed light upon the Romanian consumers' view regarding online social networks by bringing a new perspective upon the use of online social networks so that companies can fully maximize this opportunity.*
An exploratory research has been conducted, aiming to reflect consumers' awareness of this online marketing tool in the new era of social customers where companies moved from managing customers to having conversations with them. The findings of the conducted exploratory research reveals Romanian consumers' views and attitudes regarding online social networks, the characteristics that influence their usage and the consumer typology based on the usage of online social networks. This entails a sum of conclusions on the potential that online social networks have in reaching out the social customers and recommendations for companies in order to study the phenomenon, adapt this instrument to their needs and take advantage of this opportunity to keep in touch and interact with their customer.

Keywords: online social network, social customer, social media, viral marketing, word-of-mouth.

THE ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE UPON THE SOCIAL CUSTOMER AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

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1. Introduction

There has been a long journey from the caves to the ancient village reunions, then to the fancy balls and gatherings, until communities have finally arrived to the internet era. Today, some people live in online communities, choosing to communicate and interact through social networks within the world-wide web. One could easily explain the concept of social networking to a child by drawing some dots and connecting them. When describing it to a grown-up, it suffices to say Facebook or LinkedIn.

Social networks are dynamic systems which nurture relationships between people through the content they create and share. Recent research has shown that Romania is among the most active Eastern European countries when it comes to online social networking, coming second after Hungary (International Advertising Bureaux, 2010). The rate of usage of these online marketing tools has increased not only in Romania, but world widely. Moreover, social networking has become a fundamental part of the world and "will continue to alter not just the global online landscape, but the consumer experience at large" (Burbank, 2012). The increasing expansion of these communities and the potential they bring in reaching out to consumers has become the main concern of this paper.

Nowadays, social networks have become so popular that people no longer look in the mirror when they wake-up, they check their profile picture instead. Their "status" phrase is their personal statement, their "wall" or "timeline" is their public journal. They join causes, attend events, become fans and share what they like with their friends. All of this has turned these communities into more than social networks – they are now a social phenomenon. Moreover, recent statistics show that Facebook even became more popular than Google, the giant icon of the internet world (Biszok, 2010). Consequently, the boom of social networking has led to the birth of a new type of customer – the social customer. This offers managers a huge opportunity. They have to firstly understand the phenomenon and adapt to this transformation. Brands can talk and so do social customers. A study conducted at the level of 640 heavy internet users from the Czech Republic (Karličeket et al., 2012) suggests that brands should have their profiles on social network sites and they should maintain an active dialog with the consumers.

Nowadays, relationships are vital in business to relate costumers to products, to leverage social networking contacts, to advertise specific audience, for word of mouth advertising, to improve public relationships, to find new employees, offer technical support, access market research and the list can go on.

Despite the general belief that online social networks are used only by teenagers to enhance the communication process between them, this instrument has proved its value and importance in managing customer relationships by building vital business links with customers and prospects. Consumers from social networks register

to view, hear, read and experience new things, therefore are opened to commercial messages. Companies may act as online publishers to provide data, target their costumers and enhance relationships. This is perceived as a natural process.

Besides this, customer relationship managers have always sought to find those instruments that produce minimum costs and maximum effects and now they have it, because the interaction costs on online social networks are minimal or even for free.

Therefore, in the next pages, we will outline the importance of online social networks in customer relationship management, firstly as outlined in the literature and then by presenting our own findings as proved through the exploratory research that we conducted. The conclusions are presented mainly as recommendations and inducements for Romanian customer relationship managers to properly use this instrument and take advantage of this opportunity.

2. Literature review

The social customer lies at the intersection of technology, social media and businesses. The development of technologies has changed the vision of the customer. The proliferation of the world-wide web and the ease of internet access have improved the interpersonal and inter-organizational connectivity. The development of internet software and computer hardware gave companies the possibility to interact easier with their suppliers and workforce (Plant, 2004).

In time, technological improvements have led to the emergence of the so-called social media or consumer-generated media. This type of media includes a diversified set of online means of communication like blogs, forums, chat rooms, consumer to consumer e-mail, product ratings websites, etc. The messages exchanged between customers by means of online social media have an influence upon consumer behavior in terms of awareness, information reliability, opinion, attitude, purchasing behavior, and post-purchasing evaluation of the products or services (Mangol and Faulds, 2009).

Consequently, social media nurtures discussions between customers and between customers and companies. In this way, the control of information switches from managers to customers. Although companies have the ability to influence the conversations between their clients through multimedia formats like audio and visual presentations used in traditional advertising, the control of information in terms of content, timing and frequency has increased greatly in favor of the customers by having greater command than ever before. Consumers gave up to traditional sources of advertising and instead they decided to focus more on social media because it offers them the advantage of immediate access, convenience and control. As social media is considered to be more trustful than traditional elements, companies should diversify their promotion by incorporating social media into their strategies, with an increased

concern upon learning to talk with customers, rather than talking at them (Li and Bernoff, 2008).

The appearance of the internet, combined with the human desire for connection, knowledge and information, have created a new social phenomena, that of the online community. As it sits at the bases of the social costumer development, our discussion will be focused further on upon online social networks. Despite the prevalence of online social networks, there is no consensus for an appropriate definition of this concept. However, a proper view is based on Porter's definition (2004, p. 158): "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms".

„We live today in a so-called network society" (Taatila, Suomalaet et al., 2006), where social networks are „a product of the contexts that bring people together" (Leskovec, Adamicet et al., 2007). In online communities, both personal and professional relationships are developed. On one hand, personal relationships of a non-professional nature evolve around leisure activities, hobbies or other non-professional interests. In professional-oriented relationships, member relations are formed around shared professional interests. The consumer-to-consumer communication has become an important process on the market as social networks can enhance communication between companies and their customers or directly between customers. This has led to the emergence of information upon products, brands, services, personalities and other issues, which is created by customers and it circulates from one individual to another.

Therefore, these online social networks allow the development of heterogeneous collaborations in terms of nationality, place of residence, professional experience and so on in order to overcome the space and time barriers to customers' interactions. Moreover, they can favor product distribution, inform and support fellow users through positive comments about products, by influencing consumer advocacy and behavior in the online context. Participation in an online social networking site is conceptualized as an intentional social action where users regard themselves as part of marketplace.

From a marketing perspective, online social networks work as online marketing tools with the purpose of attracting and retaining customers. The emergence of these tools has encouraged the practice of „network-based marketing as a collection of marketing techniques that take advantage of links between consumers to increase sales" (Hill, Provost et al., 2006).

People talk, it is in their nature. When talking, people tell, they express what is on their minds; they share interests and discuss whatever topics they are interested in. For that reason, one should regard the customer as a social being, an individual in permanent need for communication, in continuous need to share thoughts and views with those alike him. Connecting this behavior with the marketing field leads us to the

definition of what theory calls word-of-mouth[1]. The word-of-mouth phenomenon is often generated by buzz campaigns[2] within the framework of viral marketing[3]. „Viral marketing exploits existing social networks by encouraging customers to share product information with their friends." (Leskovec, Adamicet et al., 2007). In the era of a highly advanced Internet technology, businesses can create their own networks of customers and associates in a friendly environment within online communities.

What is more, personal consumption behavior strongly relies on a social context, as opposed to the certainty some people have that they are making their own consumption behavior. Research shows that "interpersonal sources have a strong impact on consumer preferences and choices" (Arnouldet et al., 2004). The impact of word-of-mouth communication to motivate attitudes and actions is widely recognized and proven. In part, word-of-mouth information has such a great impact because it is salient and vivid and vivid information is easier to remember, thus having a greater impact. "Estimates on the power of negative word-of-mouth communication are especially compelling, suggesting that when consumers are dissatisfied almost 60 percent tell at least one friend or acquaintance" (Arnouldet et al., 2004). What is more, if some time ago, an unsatisfied customer would have told ten people about his/her problem, nowadays, through social communities he/she can tell to 10 million (Gillin, 2007).

Social networks nurture and encourage word-of-mouth and anything related to consumer generated content in the business-to-consumer relationship, thus giving birth to the so-called social customers. A social customer is more like a revolutionary customer, one who lives and grows inside virtual networks, one who feeds on e-markets all around the globe, one who advocates for his rights and dares to ask for more in return for his loyalty. A proactive customer, whose initiative goes beyond personal interest, who wants to get involved and be part of the designing process of the products or services addressed to him, who is honest and interested, with an active desire to know more. The company is not the only one initiating the communication, but also the customer (Carfi, 2004).

This indicates a power shift from the company to the social customer, which can become a threat if not dealt with properly. Marketing has become a conversation with the customer. The customer has to be engaged, but not directed, so there needs to be a genuine collaboration between the company and customer at the peer level. That does not mean the customer is always right, or that all user-created content is good. Therefore, looking at numbers behind the top social networks to get a better picture of network engagement and user demographics, combined with an understanding of the real world needs determines the success or failure of a social media program. "They are not demographics, they are not statistics, they are not avatars, nor are they waiting with baited breath for you to friend or market at them and their network friends" (Solis, 2009).

Moreover, social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, Yelp, and other online communities should transform online marketing into an

opportunity to engage and interact with customers. Social networks have become an obsession for branding, advertising, marketing, and communications between experts and professionals worldwide. Many businesses are building social channels to broadcast messages in a one to many, top-down practice that not only prevents relationship building, but impedes any hope of cultivating communities and empowering customer relationship (Solis, 2009). From another perspective, social networking can be viewed as too time consuming and as not a time-effective use for a company. While social networking requires a minimal investment of money, the low return on time invested limits its desirability as a marketing activity for professionals (Bly, 2009). Nevertheless, social networks seem to be very close to accomplishing their mission of being used mainly as a communication platform (Pantea and Vegheş, 2008).

3. Research methodology

The aim of this exploratory research is to investigate the use of social networks among Romanian social customers, by focusing on four directions: degree of awareness, level of participation, reasons to join and behavioral patterns.

This exploratory research was conducted with the objective of obtaining a relevant insight of the purpose of social networks as an essential component of the customer relationship management tools, provided that the latter domain has recorded a shift towards establishing a communication connection with the consumer. Consequently, by using a set of questions, this initiative intends to present the social networks from the perspective of the Romanian social customers, analyzing variables such as the degree of awareness, the degree of participation, the reasons, and finally the behavior that results out of the three items forehead mentioned.

Therefore, our first objective is to prove the awareness of Romanian social customers regarding the use of online social networks. We assume that90% of the Romanian customers know about at least one social network.

Secondly, we want to prove which are the most three used social networks in order to provide companies insights regarding the proper instruments they can approach in order to keep in touch and enhance their relationship with social customers. We assume that the top three networks in term of rate of usage are Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

The third objective refers to outlining the reasons why customers register and actively participate on a particular online social network. Our hypothesis is based on the fact that most of them use the networks to keep in touch with friends and to meet new people.

More than that, the next objective will be to outline the main characteristics of the respondents behavior on the online social networks platforms, assuming that the main behavior consist in sharing opinions.

Moreover, we want to prove if the reason for joining a social network is influenced by age or gender. The premise is that gender and age influence the reason for joining a network.

In the end, we want to define some clusters based on gender, age, usage of the online social networks, the reason they are being used, so that customer relationship managers can easily target a specific network with a proper message for the targeted gender and age.

The target segment of the research is represented by Romanian customers, aged 18-29 years old, which have at least one computer and have access to the internet and they live in urban areas and they are using online social networks.

The data has been gathered online between January and March 2012 in Bucharest from a sample of 153 people out of which 65 males and 88 females, aged 18 to 29 years, either residents in Bucharest (125) or from another urban (28) area.

Out of the total number of questioned persons, 34.72% were unemployed, while 21.53% had an income counting less than 700 RON. Most of the respondents registered a monthly income between 701-2800 RON and over, averaging 12.85%, 15.63% and respectively 10.76%. Furthermore, 67.69% of the people questioned were students and most of the respondents were high school or university graduates.

The research has been undertaken through an online questionnaire which was applies to a sample of the population. The results have been extended in two steps: using the descriptive phase when we have built a representative sample, followed by the statistical inference phase when the results are extended to the population. The variable which lies at the building of the sample is the condition of the respondents to use online social networks.

4. Major findings

Since online social networks registered an increasingly high usage in the past several years, this paper aims to go deeper into the subject and certify, with valid and relevant data, its development among Romanian social customers. Instead of finding customers for products, the attention is drawn upon finding products for customers, concept that expands to the existing notion of social customer.

Social networks seem to be characterized by an awareness of 100%, since all of the respondents indicated that they know about at least one of them. This proves our first objective; however our hypothesis proves to be wrong, as all of the respondents know about the existence of online social networks.

However, the present research shows that the best in terms of awareness is Facebook. As seen in the Figure 1 below, few years after the Facebook boom in Romania, Hi5 has slowly lost its supremacy in what concerns people's awareness of the social communication tools. You can find Facebook everywhere around. It is like a phone book, year book, planner, blog and more; all in just one user-friendly network

that sets the rules in the nowadays online communities. What seemed like just a fad for college kids turned out to be a phenomenon for everyone. Consequently, it is to be emphasized that the distinctive features such as applications, layout, tools, have built the hierarchy in social networking as in the present case. In terms of awareness, it seems that Twitter occupies the second place, gaining more and more popularity.

As for the others, My Space has been recognized by 118 of the total number of respondents, relatively well positioned against the social networks competitors, while Hi5 has lost its popularity. On the other hand, less known by the consumers are Ringo, Netlog, as well as LinkedIn, one of the most important known CV and socializing platforms which was recalled by only 27 persons. Even less recognition was obtained by the others' group containing Neogen, Last.fm, Ingeri.ro, Ce-faci.ro. Nevertheless, this situation of strong awareness of a few social networks and almost none for the others is also a consequence of the internalization of some of them, like Noi2, Ingeri.ro, Ce-faci.ro, Ringo, while the others are worldwide known and accessed, as well as intensively promoted. Their attractiveness consists not solely on the ease of use but also on the various applications and tools created to attract customers and to please them.

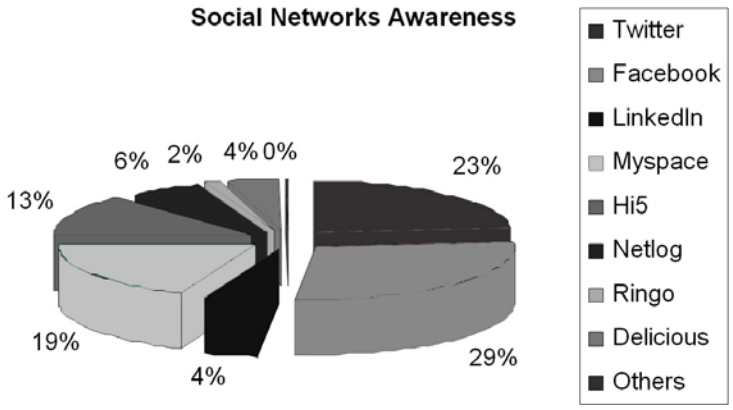


Figure 1. **Respondents' awareness of social networks**

The usage of social networks is in strong correlation with the degree of awareness if simply considering the fact that the most popular social networks are in the same time those with the largest number of members as outlined in Figure 2. Regarding the second objective, in terms of usage, we can prove that the best is Facebook. Facebook has 850 million users and the advantage that businesses can interact with its customers and fans in the same time. Numbers have revealed therefore a 78.4% consumer preference tendency for Facebook over Twitter and My Space that have only accounted for 35.9% respectively 15.0% in the present research. Therefore, the second social network in terms of usage is now occupied by Twitter as proved by

our exploratory research. Twitter has over 140 million active users and daily they are published 340 million messages (tweets). The third most known online social network is represented by MySpace with the main focus upon music, movies, TV and games. This network has over 150 million users worldwide (Popa, 2012).

The clustered market of online communities and social networking programs draws back those communication platforms that cannot keep up with the technological upgrades and consumer preferences that change at lightning speed. That is why there is also a lower percentage of those that adhere to LinkedIn (13.1%), Netlog (7.2%), Ringo (2.6%), Noi2 (2%), Hi5 (4%) and Delicious (0.7%).

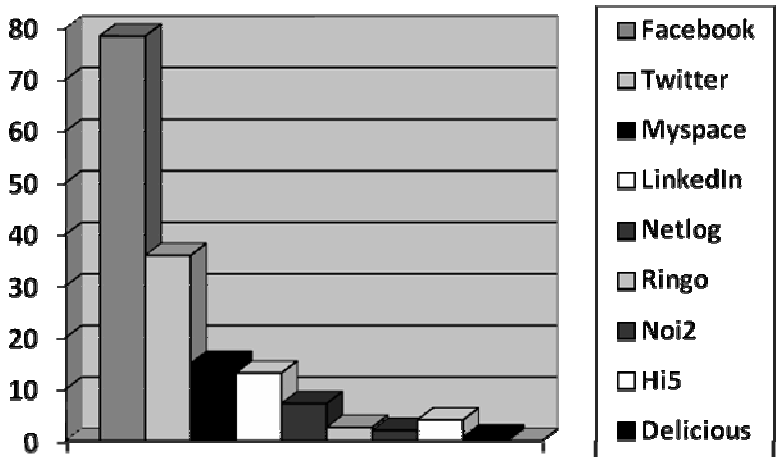


Figure 2. **Respondents' rate of usage of social networks**

Behind each account, on a social network there are several reasons that determine the user's active participation on that particular communication platform as we wanted to outline through one of the research's objectives. Our study revealed that most people connect with friends and keep in touch with them (66.0%) or simply consider these networks as a method of enjoyment and relaxation (42.2%) and as an opportunity of meeting new people (30.7%). Therefore, our hypothesis was partially true. Hence, a social character blueprint is being shaped. People stepped up to another level of interaction, though increasingly impersonal, far more accessible and permissible way.

Nevertheless, social network users contribute significantly in the information sharing among internet consumers, but they slightly take advantage of the important opportunity of personal branding (15%) and self-promotion. People have developed the tendency of gaining useful information in short time and with less effort, comparing opinions and debating topics, activity that is being facilitated by specialized social networking.

Data revealed that only 5.2% of the total respondents of the used sample consider the possibility of getting in connection with a possible or actual business partner, but this could be explained by the fact that most respondents are still students with more or less contact with the employment and business environment. What is more, about one person out of ten plays online games whilst just less than 3% intend to express online their public support towards a public figure, a product or a service, a company or an organization. Thus, the latter reason reveals that there is a big opportunity regarding the utility of a social network that has not been yet explored at its maximum, meaning the possibility of companies to approach customers through this online marketing tool as well as letting themselves informed by the customer itself of his/her preferences towards that company's products and/or services.

Figure 3 presents a classification of the reasons to join a social network as determined by the answers gained in the present research applied to the population sample:

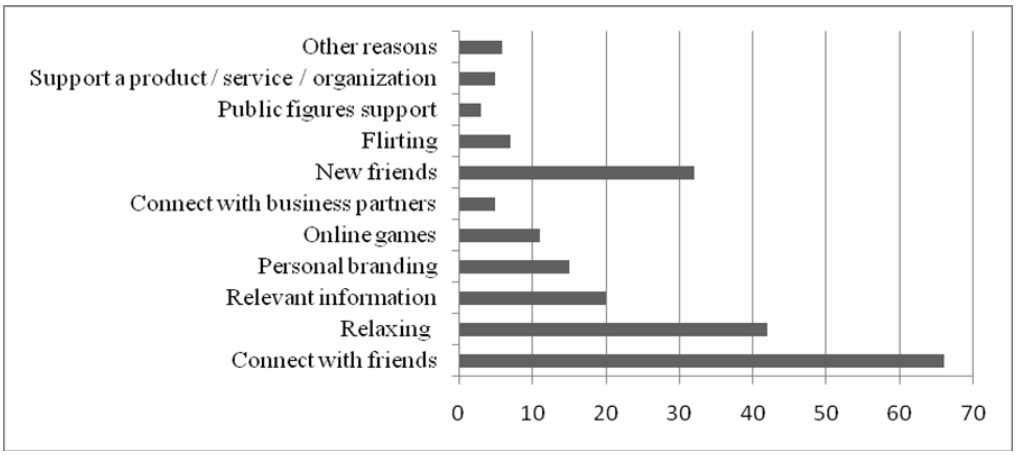


Figure 3. **Reasons for participating in social networking**

Regarding the next objective of our research, the reasons for accessing social networks are the specific behavior patterns that have been developed as a consequence. According to the finding summarized in Figure 4 below, the majority of respondents look forward to reconnecting with older friends and persons that they know, attitude that supports as well the social touch of these communities. If wanting to share opinions with the others, 31.4% of the social network users choose the social platforms being aware that the degree of rapidity with which the information or idea is spread is out of one's control. On the contrary, despite the rapidity of content sharing, only 21.6% persons consider investing their time to make their personal image known, to create a personal brand by using the variety of tools available to them.

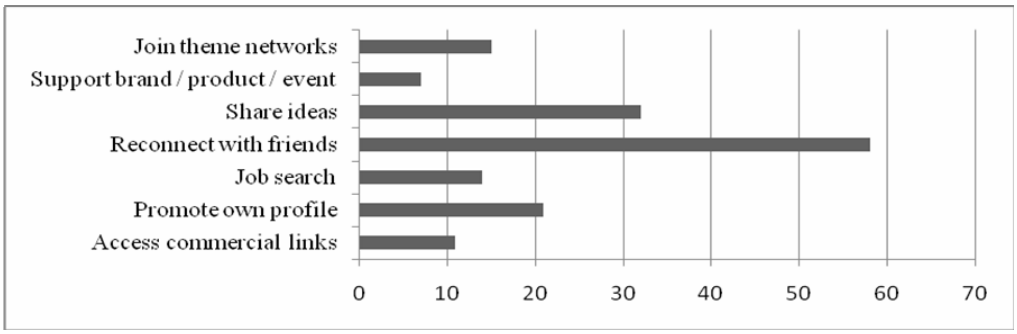


Figure 4. **Respondents' behavior on social network platforms**

Pursuing the desire to belong to a group, people appear to join theme groups (15%) in order to enhance communication, information sharing, socializing and interaction. On the other hand, besides the communication opportunity inside different action groups, 14.4% of the respondents trust these online tools when searching for a job. Put together, it is easier to keep yourself updated with the requirements and the latest news on the labor market if part of a social network where people discuss about this topic as is the case with LinkedIn.

Only 11.1% people use social networks as to access commercial links and even less people (7.2%) act as supporters of a brand, organization, product, service or event. However, this again should be an alarm signal to companies and marketers, because it proves once again that online social networks are an unexplored opportunity to expand promotion and gain more insights into consumers' behavior in order to develop more client-oriented relationships.

In order to outline the statistical significance between the reason to join an online social network and age, we will apply the Wilcoxon test for the dependent variable, meaning the reason to join the network. The test will be applied for two dependent groups as we have the same respondents for the two variables.

We will establish the null and the alternative hypotheses like it follows:

H_0: there are no statistical differences between the reason to join the network and age of the participants

H_1: there are statistical differences between the reason to join the network and age of the participants

In order to prove the null hypothesis, the asymptotic significance has to be greater than 0.05. In this particular case, the asymptotic value 0.000 is smaller than 0.05, therefore there are statistical differences between the two variables, meaning the age of the respondents influence the reason people join online social networks. The same test has been done for the gender variable, proving that it influences the reason people join social networks.

Last, but not least, by using groups analysis we have defined the following clusters in terms of age, gender, rate of usage of social networks, and the reason for using them:

- Cluster 1 – respondents aged between 21-24 years prefer using Facebook, mostly women, and they use it mostly for connecting with friends – includes 65 people;
- Cluster 2 – respondents aged between 27-29 years prefer using Twitter, mostly women, and they use it on order to reach relevant information – includes 57 people;
- Cluster 3 – respondents aged between 24-27 years prefer using LinkedIn, mostly man, and they use it join theme networks – includes 27 people;
- Cluster 4 - respondents aged between 18-21 years prefer using Myspace, mostly women, and they joined for relaxing.

5. Conclusions and future directions of research

Nowadays, social networks have proved to have a high potential in developing and maintaining the relationship with social customers. Understanding the benefits of using social networks as an online marketing tool is an advantage for both customers and companies. This hypothesis applies not only to Romanian market, but also worldwide.

However, the present research is limited by the small number of respondents and the age range restricted mainly to students. Also, the sample was drawn only from population residing in the urban area, focusing on Bucharest. This impeded the study to offer a broader perspective of the topic at a national level. Another important limitation is that the study did not take into account the launch of Google's social networking service – Buzz. Gmail is already becoming more and more popular among e-mail users, which could entail the increase in use for the networking service.

The facts that have been observed based on the findings of this exploratory research are the following:

- Keeping the pace with the global pattern, the awareness of the Romanian customers upon the importance of online social networks has increased greatly in the last period, as most of our respondents are aware and use different social networks (mostly Facebook, Twitter and Myspace).
- Although the social usefulness is more visible than the customer base usage, the social networks can enhance communication and information sharing between companies and customers. Facebook can be mostly used by using videos, images, questions and answers sections. Twitter is useful for monitoring the conversations that are held about company's products, services, brands or even as

customer service tool for solving some problems. LinkedIn can be mostly used in order to create a group where people are interested about the company's industry.

- The purpose of companies to use social networks for developing relationships with customers or to obtain support for different products or services is far from being accomplished, as the behavior in this environment is mainly determined by the opportunity to meet new people, to make friends or keep in touch with the old ones.
- Social networks are used for a various set of reasons, but mostly to communicate and express opinions, ideas, beliefs that may easily generate word-of mouth with a highly concern of upon a certain product or service.
- Although the research have revealed the most used and popular online social networks, the difference between other research results and this one proves that every year appears a new social network leaving behind the old ones which cannot keep the peace with the new technology and be as user friendly as possible. Therefore, companies must take into account the continuous improvement process of their relationship with their customers, by being present on the newest and updated online social networks.
- Each social network has its own typology and this should be studied by every company before registering to get in touch with their customers on a certain network in order to make sure they have reached their target and use properly that network.
- The reason to join and the online networks users' behavior are influenced by some characteristics like age and gender; therefore companies should take them into account when establishing on which social network the company should be present.

Whether the feedback on a company's product is positive or negative, the company should be interested in the customers' opinion and consider it, in order to be able to control it. Consequently, any marketer or customer relationship manager should see social networks as the perfect place to analyze their customers, their needs and wants, to receive feedback and communicate with them in a friendly, informal way. Long gone is the time when companies used to control the decisions upon their products; the new era of social networks brings to front those customers who want to be heard, who want to be involved in the decision making process regarding the products and services that are designed for them.

Understanding customers has always been an issue for any business, as this ensures a sustainable connection on the long-term with the company's customers. As a recommendation, Romanian marketers and customer relationship managers should focus on understanding the utility of social networks and learn how to adapt the facilities they offer to the social customer type that has developed greatly nowadays. In this way, they can create a sustainable relationship with the customers they address to. Knowing their target market is the first step in creating a relationship based on

loyalty, which means that social networks are just the place to start working from. Through social networks companies can reach both actual and potential customers in an informal environment and get a continuous feedback that marketers dream of, the source of improvement and sustainability, increasing in the same time the business and commercial usage of the social networks.

Therefore, for a deeper understanding and better insights on this topic, future research is to be conducted taking into account the following measures:

- Addressing a wider Romanian urban area that, consequently, involves a larger sample of respondents, as well as extending the demographic profile of the sample by considering a wider range of age, from teenagers up to middle – aged respondents; this would create a more specific perspective.
- On the one hand, considering the social customer approach and researching on the customers' attitudes and expectations towards companies' involvement in online social networks.
- On the other hand, understanding the corporate perspective and researching on the extent to which social networks are useful and used by companies and marketers.

Notes

[1] Word-of-mouth can be defined as the act of consumers to provide information to other consumers. (*An introduction to Word of Mouth Marketing*. Retrieved April 2012 from http://womma.org/womm101/)

[2] A buzz campaign is a viral marketing technique that attempts to make each encounter with a consumer appear to be a unique, spontaneous personal exchange of information instead of a calculated marketing pitch choreographed by a professional advertiser. It is meant to generate word-of-mouth. (Adapted from http://searchcrm.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid11_gci 939341,00.html)

[3] Viral marketing is a marketing phenomenon that facilitates and encourages people to pass along a marketing message. (Retrieved April 2012 from: http://www.marketingterms.com/ dictionary/viral_marketing/)

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