THE ONLINE CONSUMERS' RECOMMENDATIONS

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ABSTRACT: *The Internet and social media influenced the change of the business and communication environment on the market. Enterprises are doing online marketing activities. They use new communication tools, acquiring experience, and even the skills of their consumers. Consumers on the Internet spread their opinions about enterprises and products, they are co-creators of the new business space in the virtual world - prosumers. The Internet provides them with free communication and dissemination of information about companies, brands, recommendations about products. Consumers generate knowledge and transform the business market, the way of transactional relations and the implementation of social expectations. The article presents the specifics of recommendation marketing and identifies changes in consumer behavior in the context of creating and perceiving marketing content in the Internet. General premises of the use of Internet recommendations, threats and instruments of recommendation marketing used by Polish enterprises have also been indicated.*

KEY WORDS: *consumer; marketing; recommendation marketing.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS : *M300, M310, O350.*

1. THE DEFINITION OF RECOMMENDATION MARKETING

In the modern world, traditional forms of marketing communication no longer show adequate effectiveness in the face of new technological and social phenomena. Enterprises are searching for alternative forms of communication with the market. The development of the Internet and changes in information technology have revolutionized mutual relations and communication. The Internet allows companies to freely communicate informally and quickly exchange the information they need on the web. An important element in this process is the presence and activity of consumers. As Internet users they communicate with each other, share their content and opinions about products. It is a new form of informal communication that can be effectively used in word-of-mouth marketing (WoMM). WoMM marketing is an activity aimed at triggering the recommendation of a product, brand or service to potential clients. The

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recommendation can spread in any environment, and the Internet seems to be the perfect place. This is mainly favored by the nature and specificity of communication on the web and the evolution that the modern consumer has undergone, transforming into an active and conscious prosumer. He has a huge resource of useful knowledge and information. His knowledge is available and very useful for the implementation of enterprises in a demanding and rapidly changing market. Prosumerism is generally defined as "the concept of customer participation (usually the consumer) in creating an enterprise offer by actively promoting it, mainly through modern forms of communication" [Niedzielska 2016, p. 350].

Contemporary prosumers co-create content, products and services, shape consumer opinions and images of companies, brands and products, actively seek information, share their consumer knowledge. Advertising information from the manufacturer or service provider in the traditional way is insufficient. The unilateral message has been replaced by interactive communication, and consumer choices are influenced by opinions and recommendations of others available online on the web. For modern prosumers, these are much more valuable and more reliable sources of knowledge than information comming directly from producers or from advertising. The recommendation is defined as a direct and verbal way of communication between two or more people, which contains positive, negative or neutral information about the company or its offer. Its non-commercial nature is emphasized. This means that the person providing the recommendation does not receive material benefits from their transfer [Tewes 2003, p. 100]. A distinction should also be made between active and passive recommendations. Active recommendations rely on intentional and conscious transfer of information, while passive on unconscious impact on other buyers [Wille 2005, p. 153].

As the results of consumer surveys show, the most important factor affecting the customer's recommendation potential is his commitment to purchase. Very often, consumer engagement is considered as a basic category describing consumer behavior after purchase. Product and situational engagement can be distinguished. The first one is based on long-term, internal, not related to a specific purchase situation, the consumer's interest in a given product category. It results in an intensive search for information by the customer, thus acquiring knowledge about the product. As a consequence, it strongly determines its future recommendations in the long-term. On the other hand, situational engagement is short-lived and occurs just before and immediately after the purchase. His influence on the recommendations may be very strong, but short-lived [Wagenheim 2003, pp. 90-92].

2. REASONS FOR APPLYING RECOMMENDATION MARKETING

The basic factor conducive to the use of recommendation marketing is primarily the development of social media and relationships in the Internet network along with the resources of knowledge that have become the main source for obtaining marketing information. Other factors are: less effective impact on consumers of traditional marketing instruments and a change in consumer behavior on the Internet. These factors will be briefly presented.

New business environment conditions set different approaches to marketing issues. Changes in marketing result from the fact that in recent years the roles and expectations of consumers have changed, they have become co-creators of the electronic space, they often form huge network groups that communicate through social media. At present, it is believed that efficient communication of enterprises with their clients using social media is the basis for shaping the right relations between the company and the environment. A. Kaplan and M. Haenlein define social media as a "group based on web-based application solutions that rely on the ideological and technological basis of Web 2.0 and which enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content" [Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 59]. The essence of these media is the creation of such content that is readily reproduced on other websites, blogs and is generally easily spread on the Internet. They are completely independent of the company and have the greatest impact on the reputation and image of the company. Social media are today the strongest and most influential medium of communication, because they have all the features necessary for effective online information exchange: simplicity, honesty, trust in the sender, openness, impartiality, etc. Positive opinions and comments in the media are the most valuable for smaller ones companies that can promote their products and compete with well-known brands.

The development of the Internet and social media has also contributed to the creation of new marketing promotion techniques. They provide interesting opportunities from the point of view of the company to reach the larger group of customers, employees or representatives of public opinion. These include: viral advertising, WoMM marketing, web marketing (SEO), Web 2.0 marketing, e-mail marketing, e-branding and e-CRM [Budzyński 2011, pp. 184-189]. All mentioned promotion techniques can be used on the Internet and widely used in creating and monitoring the image of a company, brand or specific product. In this way, enterprises gain opportunities to build new business models, strategic and marketing activities in the virtual and real space.

Other elements favoring the use of recommendation marketing are related to changes in consumer behavior and expectations on the Internet. The process of making purchase decisions differs radically from traditional behaviors and consumer decisions. In general, there were two types of changes. The first change concerns the process of purchase decisions. The second change concerns the problem of trust in people grouped in social networks and the credibility of content passed between them.

Consumer's decision making process has been transformed. The traditional decision-making process is based on the consumer's gradual selection of potential offers, and after making the purchase, the relationship with the brand or company has not always been established. Such an approach to the decision-making process does not take into account the conditions that accompany modern consumers, that is, their active involvement in virtual social relations. The contemporary consumer behaves completely differently, makes purchase decisions very quickly and often follows the opinion of other users. Research on new media indicates a change in the consumer's decision-making process, followed by the stages of: consideration, purchase, evaluation and recommendation. The phases of consideration and purchase are much shorter, while the evaluation and recommendation phases are extended and

strengthened. The consumer is suggested by the opinions and rankings of other members of social networks and is increasingly looking for information after making a purchase in order to confirm his decision. For example, the latest research from 2017 indicate that online opinions and recommendations affect purchase decisions among 90% of buyers [Hawlk 2017]. What's more, the indications from the respondents indicate that:

- 84% of people consider the opinion on the Internet to be reliable (it considers it as a personal recommendation);
- 54% of people visit company websites after reading positive reviews;
- 74% of people trust companies after reading positive reviews;
- 58% of people think that consumer ratings posted online are the most important source of information for them [Hawlk 2017].

Reports from research carried out in 2012 by Jupiter Research confirm the growing importance of recommendations on the Internet. According to the Jupiter Research report from this period: "77% of buyers read product reviews on various internet forums, and about 60% of respondents appreciate the opinions of other buyers from expert opinions and in their opinion the opinions of Internet users are the most valuable source of information" [Nielsen.com 2012]. In the last five years, therefore, the importance of consumer recommendations placed online has increased. The highest percentage of indications occurred in the group of consumers aged 22-29 [68%], in other age groups it gradually decreased to 42% of indications for buyers over 75 years of age [Rudawska 2012, p. 286]. These results show that the majority of Internet users increasingly base their purchase decisions on the product rating of the network. If the user does not find reviews about the brand and product on the web, he usually treats this as a lack of confidence and does not make a purchase. The lack of other people's assessments is a sufficient reason to look for another product, recommended by network users, with whom it combines a sense of belonging and trust resulting from it [Czarnecka 2012, pp. 170-178].

These facts suggest the necessity for the enterprise to change its marketing strategy, which should be focused on content creation and management in social media [Edelman 2011, pp. 99-102]. Effectively conducted communication in social networks brings a favorable assessment of the brand chosen by the consumer and positive opinions published on the web, which are extremely important for building consumer awareness and encouraging other users to buy. The new consumer decision-making method is also important due to the separation of the new phase - recommending, and thus building strong virtual relations on the Internet [Czarnecka 2012, pp. 170-178]. Social networks have strengthened the way network users interact. The mechanism of exerting influence, known from the real world, is intensified by almost instant access to opinions and rankings of others, because the network for many consumers is a favorite place for seeking recommendations [Nielsen.com 2012]. Due to high awareness of the needs, consumers more frequently provide feedback to enterprises, but above all to each other [Rudawska 2012, pp. 282-289]. Therefore, it becomes important to involve enterprises and consumers themselves in the virtual social relations.

The second aspect of considerations regarding consumer decision making concerns the problem of online trust. A novelty brought about by social networks is

increased trust in people from the network, in contrary to people recognized socially as authorities. This is an important signal for companies that have so far promoted their products using the services of sports or pop culture stars. However, according to the rules of exerting influence, the people who we trust and recognize as familiar are more convincing. Network users feel safe in the group of people who have invited them to their circle of friends or whom their relatives know. Using the recommendations of people from a known and trusted social group is much more frequent among Internet users than referring to authorities or imitating celebrities [Czarnecka 2012, pp. 170-178]. These trends are also confirmed by the Global Web Index report, which reveals data on Internet users' activity in the network. It turns out that they primarily look for opportunities and promotional prices, make purchases, communicate with other Internet users and establish relationships. Consumers are also aware of their needs, know how to satisfy them and look for products that in the rankings of other users were the best [Global Web Index 2016].

3. APPLICATION OF RECOMMENDATION MARKETING IN POLAND

The Americans are the world's precursors to recommendation marketing. In 2001, the world's first agency specialized in the activities of Word of Mouth - Tremor/VocalPoint was created by Procter & Gamble. In Poland and simultaneously in Europe, the first WoMM agency - Streetcom Polska was established in 2004 [Juszczyk 2014, p. 74]. Since that period in Poland, there has been an increase in interest in modern marketing instruments adapted to the conditions of Internet space. Not without significance for the popularity of recommendation marketing is the fact that traditional forms of advertising and promotion are insufficient and inadequate to the needs of today's consumers.

As it was indicated in the article, recommendation marketing has a significant impact on consumer decisions, especially in the Internet, resulting in the activation of activities in this field, both from customers and enterprises on the Polish market. According to a survey carried out by the research firm Nielsen, in 2009, among over 25,000 people in 50 countries around the world, including Poland, 90% trust their friends' recommendations before making purchases [in section 2, similar data was presented; see also: Dwornik 2010, p. 6]. Generally, it can be stated that the published content about a brand or product, including reviews, play a very important role in the decision-making process, regardless of whether the purchase is made online or offline. Analyzes show that depending on the type of product, up to 85% of internet users follow the initial stage of purchasing decisions, and 69% of customers are convinced of their credibility. The assessment of the credibility of the review increases with the age of the respondents, 67% of people aged 15-24, 70% of people aged 25-34 and 72% of people aged 35 and over consider them a reliable source of information [Andreasik 2015, p. 69]. On the basis of the research, it was also shown that consumer recommendations placed in real and virtual space generate about 13% of sales [Zając 2015, p. 78]. Recommendation marketing always reinforces the effect achieved through promotional activities undertaken by enterprises in commercial media by 15%. According to other data, the marketing of recommendations in real space increases

sales five times than other paid advertisements in various types of media [Juszczyk 2014, p. 74].

Recommendation marketing can take many different forms to be used in parallel, complementarily or in an integrated manner. In Poland, most enterprises combine traditional and new marketing tools. The most commonly used marketing instruments of recommendation are: shill marketing, internet amplifying (reinforcing), blogging and social media, product seeding campaigns with online participation of experts and opinion leaders, and e-commerce platform.

One of the classic forms of recommendation marketing is shill marketing. In his case, the information carrier should primarily be customers (brand ambassadors) who have good experience with the company and want to share them with others, usually in accordance with the rule of reciprocity, according to which a person would like to reciprocate with good advice to others, because beforehand someone did it's for him. An excellent indication of this type of activities are customer reviews posted on comparison websites and online stores, e.g. ceneo.pl; bonprix.pl. Before purchasing a specific product, you can read the opinions of people who have previously purchased it and its averaged rating on a scale from 1 to 5. This is extremely helpful, because it allows you to obtain objective (both positive and negative) information, including on the quality of clothing, size, fabric condition after washing, etc.

An example of activities in the field of recommendation marketing using the opinions of brand ambassadors was the Morning Fresh dishwashing fluid produced by PZ Cussons Polska SA campaign organized at the end of 2014 by the company Streetcom. The aim of the campaign was to increase brand awareness, inform about the qualities of the product, and gathering brand recommendations. The action was attended by 300 ambassadors who received a package with two of the four liquid variants available on the market and information materials about them. The ambassadors' task was first test the products and then recommend them friends and posting opinions on social media. The main emphasis, however, was on online activity. During the five weeks of the campaign its overall reach in virtual and real space amounted to over 1.5 million people, with an initial assumption of 400,000, and the recommended product gained a significant advantage over other brands - both among ambassadors and their friends [Zając 2015, p. 79].

Another form of recommendation marketing is internet amplifying, which mainly involves communication with consumers on forums websites, but also placing reviews on sharing sites (e.g. YouTube, Slideshare) or social networks. The Internet amplifying most often takes the form of e-Spokesman for the brand and online Expert. e-Spokesman of the brand is its official representative who speaks in a discussion expressing the official position of the organization and answering questions. The e-Spokesman's function is completely public, which ensures credibility of the message and distinguishes suspicion about dishonest practices in the field of marketing carried out by alleged clients, and in fact employees of the enterprise [Ratuszniak 2010, p. 22]. Online Expert is a form of the e-Spokesman of the brand, supported by constant network monitoring. The main task of the online Expert is to manage the brand's reputation on the web, which is an important element of SERM (Search Engine Reputation Management), through impact on the positioning of positive and neutral

threads in the search engine, as well as locating threats and preventing the development of crisis situations [Niedzielska 2016, p. 348].

An ideal environment for the development of recommendation marketing is the blogosphere. Blogs are understood as a systematic, chronological publication of own opinions and beliefs for non-commercial purposes by Internet users [Bednarska 2015, p. 14]. A modern blog is a website characterized by frequent entries, with a personal, informal style that can be commented on by Internet users. Not all blogs are, however, suitable for a recommendation platform, and not every blogger can be an effective amplifier. Blog must be very popular and credible, its author - honest and trustworthy. Recommendations on blogs, in addition to many positive elements, such as the use of the opinion of a recognized person for the authority in specific circles or the opportunity to reach a broad but targeted group, they also have a negative aspect. Very unethical action in this area may be running so-called flogs, or false blogs presenting products specified brands in the most favorable light. Such activities led, among others Sony or Wal-Mart. These blogs, after the discovery of fraud by Internet users, have been ceased.

Other recommendation marketing tools are product seeding campaigns, as well as the activity of trendsetters and opinion leaders. Product seeding consists in providing campaign participants, usually opinion leaders, with a full-fledged product for testing, and in the next stage on stimulating testers for recommendations. In many seeding campaigns, opinion leaders receive not only products, but also their samples, which facilitates their recommendation when distributing the tested product among friends and increases the reach of the seeding campaign. In Poland, many enterprises use this method of running a campaign, locating their productive various forums, and above all in social media. In Poland, there is a clear trend of growth in the number of social media users and communicators through phones, in the last year it was a 20% increase in population. The most popular social media are YouTube and Facebook, Poles use it much more willingly than the average users in the world. Almost 60-64% of network users in Poland use at least once a day YouTube or Facebook, while on average in the world declared it to 45.7% respondents. According to the Gemius study, these websites are at the forefront of their category in Poland - over 22 million real users of Facebook on a monthly basis, and almost 20 million of YouTube. The ranking of the most common social media that is used, at least once daily, is following [Global Web Index 2016]:

- YouTube 64%;
- Facebook 62%;
- Google+ 33%;
- Fb Messenger 32%;
- Skype 25%;
- Twitter 24%.

In Poland, however, there is a low interest in using the WhatsApp communicator. According to the study, it is used by 38% of people globally, while in Poland only by 11%. The communication application taken over by Facebook has never gained much popularity in Poland, and Poles prefer to chat with FB Messenger [Global Web Index 2016].

There are other solutions on the Polish market based on recommendation marketing. Such an interesting solution that has big development perspectives are social commerce sites, which are a combination of e-commerce platforms with an active user community system. It is a solution based not only on consumer recommendations but, above all, using social relations and a communication system between Internet users built on them. Users of this type of services can optimize their purchasing decisions and reduce the associated risk using information provided by other users. The basic idea behind the creation of this type of services is the assumption that most purchase decisions are made under the recommendation of other people, and social commerce platforms are an ideal place where Internet users can exchange information about specific products, evaluate them, recommend and verify information provided by producers, and also follow the opinions of people who personally checked the product or used a specific service. However, social commerce services are fundamentally different from comparison websites or websites that publish consumer opinions. The idea of their creation is not impersonal and anonymous generation of reviews and opinions. Their functioning is based on social relations and mutual trust of users. The value and quality of the opinions posted there results mainly from the fact that users receive them from well-known and trusted people with whom they connect their real relationships. The most popular social commerce site in Poland is Allegro.pl auction platform, where consumers can post their recommendations and reviews online and make purchases. They also have the opportunity to meet in the real world, because Allegro.pl has been organizing meetings for its users since 2000 in order to increase loyalty, trust and willingness to cooperate between them [Karaś 2017, p. 106].

4. CONCLUSION

Recommendation marketing in Poland is developing intensively, there are more and more network users who are very active in the Internet space. There are indications that the growth tendency will continue. According to data from the Central Statistical Office, "about 82% of Poles use the Internet in 2016, and 3/4 of them declare to have an account on a social network" [Rajchel 2017, p. 128]. In this context, the prospects for the development of recommendation marketing, especially in social media, may prove to be a source of success for many enterprises. The use of appropriate marketing tools - activating consumers as carriers of recommendations - can be successfully used in social media. Their recipients are primarily young people, because in the case of people aged 15-24, the percentage of people using the network and portals reach almost 100%. In the future, they will be potential users of various products or services and will strongly influence the way of market transactions in the virtual world [Bednarska 2015, p. 27]. Recommendation marketing in social media currently adopts the most common form:

- running profiles and funpages;
- running applications, competitions and games, including on Facebook or Google+;
- launching video channels on YouTube and other platforms;

- monitoring and testing the condition of brands in the Internet;
- conducting campaigns on online forums [Niedzielska 2016, p. 350].

The analysis of the subject literature presented in the article and selected research results available in secondary sources confirm the significant impact of recommendation marketing on consumer purchasing decisions. Contemporary consumers are active people, they search the Internet space in order to gain knowledge and help in meeting their needs. They connect to various social groups, using modern technological and communication solutions. The prospects for the development of recommendation marketing are huge, especially in the Internet, which results in the continuous activation of activities in this field, both from customers and enterprises. Recommendation marketing can turn out to be a very effective form of action on the real or virtual market provided that they are ethical and reliable.

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