

## **Implementing and managing social media marketing within SMEs.**

### **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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In recent years, authors have pointed to the relevance of social media technologies as a new panacea for the marketing of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) (e.g. Harris and Rae, 2010; Barnes et al. 2012; Michaelidou et al. 2012; Stockdale et al. 2012). Putting the emphasis on the cost advantage and the apparent simplicity of these technologies, authors consider that social media represents a huge opportunity for SMEs. According to Barnes et al. (2012, 688) “many of the tools of Web 2.0 are cheap to acquire and operate, and require little technical expertise”, what makes them particularly suitable for smaller businesses. Harris and Rae (2010) stated that social media will have a critical role in the survival of small firms and change the dimension of their competition with larger businesses.

As a matter of fact, a growing number of SMEs are currently experiencing with social media. A study of Michaelidou et al. (2011) shows that most of them have the intention to increase their spending on social media. As a result, for many small businesses, social media has become their largest web presence, overtaking their corporate websites programmes (Neff, 2010).

Research on the use of social media in a SME context has been growing since a couple of years. From this stream of literature, authors have investigated the uses small businesses are making of social media technologies and the benefits they could derive from such uses (Chua et al., 2009; Rae and Harris, 2010; Michaelidou et al., 2011; Barnes et al., 2012; Nakara et al., 2012; Persaud et al., 2012). As far as marketing objectives are concerned, authors’ suggestions and empirical findings generally converge towards the same set of opportunities offered by social media in a SME context, ranging from attracting new customers to brand building, and community management.

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Nakara et al. (2012) highlight that SMEs actually use social media tools mainly for networking, reputation building and advertising. Nevertheless, authors point out that small firms still underuse these technologies. Michaelidou et al. (2011) found that the main barrier to using social media in SMEs derives from a lack of perceived relevance of these tools. As interest for SMEs approaches on social media grows, researchers are calling for further investigation into the potential of Web 2.0 and social media technologies within small firms (Barnes et al., 2012; Persaud et al., 2012). In particular, no research has yet investigated how smaller companies actually implement and manage social media tools and derive the benefits promised by researchers and practitioners alike.

The literature, mostly hogged by consultants and practitioners, is replete with recommendations on how to implement and benefit from social media technologies (e.g. Weber, 2009; Weinberg, 2009; Safko, 2012). Nevertheless, most of the literature available on social media focuses on large businesses, with little academic research studying how social media can be adopted by SMEs (Chua et al., 2009).

In this context, it is now useful that researchers and practitioners question the peculiarities of the implementation and uses of social media technologies in a SME context. Indeed, the specific context in which SMEs are operating makes the propositions found in the literature less relevant to their peculiarities in terms of planning, resource availability (e.i. time, money and expertise) and *modus operandi*. This lack of research into the actual practices of SMEs regarding social media technologies and the pertaining strategies provides the impetus for our study.

The objective of this paper is to analyse how SMEs are actually implementing and managing their social media presence in the framework of their marketing efforts. In this perspective, the research should answer the following questions: how are social media tools implemented and managed in SMEs? What are the different stages of their implementation? Who are the players involved in this process? How are the decisions pertaining to the strategy and the day-to-day management organised?

In line with the objectives of our research, Cova, Mazet and Salle (1994) show that an exploratory approach can be valuable in bringing a better knowledge of an underexplored subject. A multiple case study (Yin, 1991) using the Decision Systems Analysis (Capon and Hulbert, 1975) has been realized with a sample of 6 SMEs (in UK and in Belgium) having implemented an active social media presence. Following the recommendations of Capon and

Hulbert (1975), our data collection is based on a hypothetical model, built from our literature review and from managerial recommendations. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the players involved in the social media implementation and management processes within these SMEs (owner-manager, marketing manager or employees, etc.). Data have been complemented with managerial documents, when they were available (copy-strategy, strategic guidelines, action plan, etc.)

The data collected are being analysed in the light of a literature review of SMEs specificities in terms of marketing (e.g. Carson, 1990; Gilmore et al., 2001; O'Donnell, 2011), and have allowed us to adapt the model and to identify the different stages of the implementation and management processes of social media strategies in the context of SMEs.

First results show that the development of social media efforts in SMEs is rather reactive and impulsive, and their implementation does not follow a structured and standardised process.

Nevertheless, as experience with social media increases, management becomes more organised and introduces action plans and a distribution of specialised tasks among players.

The day-to-day management of social media varies according to the size and expertise of the SME and, in all cases, has implied an increased workload for the owner-manager.

Interestingly, whereas marketing communication in small firms usually relies on mere oral communication and word-of-mouth and is rather spontaneous (Hogarth-Scott et al., 1996; Pacitto et al., 2007), the use of social media tools by SMEs seems to make owner-managers more aware of the notion of branding and leads them to improve their overall marketing and communication approaches.

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