

## MARKETING ASPECTS OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA BY FASHION BRANDS IN POLAND

Barbara Mróz-Gorgoń  
Wroclaw University of Economics, Poland  
barbara.mroz-gorgon@ue.wroc.pl

### **Abstract:**

The fashion industry has always been an important part of social life in Poland, even in the times of the communist regime. Last year, the fashion industry recorded the highest increase in sales. The potential of this great market along with its tremendous competition are thus significantly increasing all the time. The main goal of this article is to point to the marketing possibilities of using social media by fashion brands in Poland as well as to explore the issue of building their values through the use of the potential of social websites. At present, every third Internet user visits the websites of fashion brands and as far as the market of social media is concerned, the leading position is occupied by the brands of LPP company (Reserved, Cropp, House). The major distinguishing feature of the “new media” is the possibility of dialoguing with consumers, which is a great chance of brand idea development; however, if led improperly, such dialogues may also become threats.

*Keywords: social media, brand image, fashion industry*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of a tool with the characteristics of a global, virtual information network was a revolutionary change to the way societies functioned, nearly in all the dimensions, including the economic and social ones. The Internet has significantly influenced the social reality, both from the global as well as local perspectives.

As a result of the development of the Internet, the changes are observed in the conditions of competition on the market. Its effects are the changes of presenting products – on the Internet they are presented not in a physical way but by means of an image, sound, text. All borders vanish and this pertains to the traditional borders between countries, between economic sectors. Likewise, the borders between companies and consumers will become more and more blurred because consumers have a greater influence on the way new products are shaped. Moreover, the competitive strength of consumers increases as – thanks to clicking the mouse – they can easily move to a new producer (Rosa & Smalec, 2012, p. 176). In this place it should be emphasised that the great intensification of the phenomenon under analysis has taken place recently thanks to the more and more widespread use of mobile, pocket-size devices, *i.e.* smartphones (the first model was developed in 1997 by Nokia; it was *Nokia 9000i communicator*). Owing to these technological inventions, people need no access to the computer nor appropriate conditions for accessing the Internet. It is enough to have the telephone and surf the information websites, browse the websites of e-shops, use different browsers and it all can be done even on a tram or during a walk. Thanks to such possibilities, many aspects of the way business activity is run have undergone changes and this concerns in particular the distribution channels and business organisation. Similarly, many people who could previously not make a decision about establishing their own business, mainly because of no capital needed to invest in the developing company (among others, financial means needed to buy or rent a place, to pay for the interior design, so important in the clothing sector whose core is aesthetics, service, *i.e.* salaries for employees *etc.*) have seen the opportunity to sell their items on Internet websites, the development of which requires incomparably smaller amounts of money.

Thus, the creation of the Internet determined the great increase of market competition. However, at the same time, it allowed its users to obtain information at a pace unparalleled so far. The power of the Internet is the object of many studies carried out by the representatives of science and the media. Since the development (the ban on the commercial use of the Internet was abandoned in 1991 and the first web browser was developed in 1995), the Internet has become one of the most important media and one of the most influential communication channels.

Modern society, in particular young people, almost naturally reach for the Internet every time they look for some information in order to fulfil the need for knowledge. As the results of the study conducted by Taylor Nelsons Sofres show, as many as 95% of young people feel that the Internet and computers are important to them, 53% are of the opinion that the Internet makes their lives easier, helping them in contact with friends whereas 44% claim that the Internet makes it easier for them to be in touch with their friends (Kubiak, 2012, p. 173).

In the business context, what is essential is the possibility, given to the users, of fast browsing, comparing and selecting from a multitude of market offers (in the fashion industry, this diversity is huge) as well as purchasing without leaving home. Consumers would probably have not believed in such ease of access to websites by means of the aforementioned smartphones twenty years ago.

The intensified market competition forces companies to look for new and more effective forms of marketing communication. In response to the increased needs of consumers, companies open their Internet websites, on-line shops and even employ staff to take care of their blogs. However, today's Internet-aided communication is not limited solely to the Internet media such as on-line bulletins, newspapers, television or e-zines. Internet social websites (*i.e. social media*) are becoming more and more important because in one place they gather thousands or even millions of people with similar interests, preferences and expectations. These communities constitute not only a numerous group but also – what is most important – a group who is a great prime mover, who – only by the activity of an individual person – can contribute to the development and popularisation of any situation or event. All this occurs in a fast and uncontrolled manner ( Kubiak, 2012, p.174).

The goal of this article is to point to the marketing possibilities of using social media by fashion brands in Poland as well as to explore the issue of building their values through the use of the potential of social websites.

The article has been written on the basis of literature studies. However, the author has also adopted the method of the analysis of data available in sector reports. These data concern the use of social media in Poland.

## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE WORLD AND IN POLAND

Social media owe their existence to the Internet. In media studies, it was Marshall McLuhan who is considered the precursor of the so-called *World Wide Web*. He forecast the development of modern technology and its influence on culture already in the first half of the twentieth century. This outstanding author and researcher of communication theories distinguished cool and hot media and the criterion of their division which he applied was the involvement of human senses. Those involving a single sense, transmitting little information and requiring the increased participation of the receiver were classified as cool. Hot media were the transfer channels with the so-called “high resolution”, *i.e.* with the element of high saturation with data.

Analysing the above statement, we can conclude that the Internet as a mixture of the features of hot and cool media, cannot be unambiguously classified into one of the groups distinguished by McLuhan. There are such areas of the Internet which do not require much involvement of the receiver, for instance, a press article or the Internet radio. Others require active participation and the examples are Internet television or dialogues in discussion groups or on various fora. It can thus be stated that the Internet is located on the border between cool and hot media, thereby creating a kind of hybrid of all available kinds of communication channels ( Kubiak 2012, p. 179).

Like McLuhan, who in his studies divided the phases of civilisation development into 1. Tribal village, 2. Printing civilisation and 3. Global village (“the new era”), Ward Christensen is regarded as the forerunner of social fora. In 1978, in cooperation with Randy Suess, he created the CBBS program (*Computerized Bulletin Board System*), which made the exchange of information between individuals possible.

One of the oldest social networks is SixDegrees.com (which – at its peak – had one million users), created in 1997. It functioned until 2001. Recently, it has been opened anew but access to it is restricted only to those users who had been previously registered or who were invited by their friends. There are also plans to open the network for all people but it will happen after the redevelopment of the website.

Blogger is also worth mentioning in this context. It was opened in 1999. Today this is a very strong brand which benefited much after it had been taken over by Google (2003) and integrated with Picasa ( Kawik, 2013). Subsequently, the next players on this market appeared. Today they are the most popular social media websites and they include LinkedIn (May 2003), MySpace (July 2003), Facebook (February 2004) and Twitter (March 2006). The Polish concept, opened on 11 November 2006, was the social network called Nasza Klasa which – in the beginning – was extremely popular and at present (August 2013), as disclosed by the study of Megapanel ( Szewczyk, 2013), the number of *real users* is estimated at 7 897 607, which shows a significant decrease (by 680 496).

From the global perspective, Facebook is the leader among all social media with more than 1.15 billion active users monthly. The next places are occupied by Google+ (more than 343 million active users monthly) and Twitter (more than 288 million active users monthly). Altogether, the number of the Polish users of Facebook equals 11.56 million, of which 5.98 million are women. Over 1.6 million female users are aged from 19 to 25 ( Poczęsna, 2013). With those data, we may assume which sectors can achieve market success by means of Facebook as a means of marketing communication or even in which way they can build the strategies of their brands. Many companies have noticed this possibility and most successful sectors on Facebook are those addressed to the group of young women. These are the film industry, the music industry, the publishing industry and, most of all, the fashion industry which enjoys the greatest popularity and which – next to design – constitutes the major research area of the author of this article.

### 3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND THEIR MARKETING USE

At present, *World Wide Web*, i.e. the Internet, has not completely supplanted the traditional mass media (radio, television, press) but it supplements them. However, it should be emphasised that its strength is still increasing and companies find newer and newer possibilities of using it, in particular now when, thanks to the aforementioned devices, people can virtually all the time be connected to the Internet.

In 2010 M. Polasik and J. Kunowski (Polasik & Kunowski, 2012, p. 256) carried out a study, in which they stated that one of the most interesting new phenomena related to e-commerce was the continually growing role of social networks and the trend of using them in e-business created a great potential for their use. As claimed by the authors, 45% of the studied shops decided to set up an account with a social network and the most frequent way of using these networks was to inform customers about new products (78.8%), providing updates on company's activity (63.6%), permanent communication with customers and finding their opinions (57.6%) as well as special promotions/contests for network users.

Nowadays, social media, as a relatively new formula, constitute an essential element of marketing communication. Within several years, social networks have attracted hundreds of millions of Internet users, thereby arousing more and more interest among marketing and sale specialists. However, as the authors of the report "Polish companies in social media" (Sumara, 2013, p.2) claim, few companies really know how to move around in this environment, how to reach potential customers, how to promote their products or services or – finally – how to increase sales. As a result, what gets most publicity is the image crises of companies and brands in social media and not the successes which would allow to build the involvement of thousands of Internet users. The report authors also give the example of Adidas clothing brand, which was given the permission by the Polish authorities to paint the wall in the Warsaw district of Służewiec in order to place their advertising mural there and paint in black the popular works of graffiti painters.

As a consequence, the fans of graffiti immediately organised themselves and by means of the Internet they united their forces and created a Facebook website criticising the activities of Adidas. This action was immediately supported by almost twenty thousand people and only within twenty four hours – thanks to the power of social media – did the representatives of the Polish hip-hop world and other people outraged over the company's conduct start regarding wearing Adidas clothes as *passé*.

As a global concern, Adidas reacted fast and, seeing the possibility of the consumer boycott, officially apologised for this and admitted to having made a mistake. The wall was returned to the local artists. This example illustrated the possibility of social media influence thanks to their strength (reach) and the fast reaction time (creating the public opinion) – so far unparalleled in history. Therefore, the instrument under discussion can become, or actually it is, an ideal tool – the source of information for marketers who in the past could only dream of having such a (real-time) possibility of gaining knowledge of their customers. Social media can provide companies with both many chances as well as many threats which, as a result of no appropriate reaction, can lead to a serious image crisis. This – along with the increasing and prolonged dissatisfaction – can have serious financial consequences. The present-day marketing communication manifests itself in the fact that it exists in social media. However, companies should also take heed of several basic principles related to the management of crisis in social media and these are (Kubiak, 2012, p. 190):

- media tracking or monitoring allows to have constant control and become up-to-date with the possible crisis situation,
- concentrate the consumers' attention and cumulate the "base" for running the dialogue with them in one place (on one portal) in order to avoid communication interferences,
- in a crisis situation, companies should react in a fast way, not ignoring Internet users,
- taking communicative actions in social media, companies should put a particular emphasis on the coherence, transparency and honesty of all statements.

In this place, it is worth referring to one of the conclusions included in the report entitled: "Social media – PR use" (PRoto & IMM, 2013, p. 15) from the study carried out in 2011 and 2012. As the authors of this document hold, there is still a low number of companies in the Polish market, in which there is a written protocol of crisis situation procedure. The report "The Study of Social Media Brand Index 2010" (Rosa & Smalec, 2012, pp. 184-185) shows that the companies in Poland spend a small part of their

marketing budgets on the activities taken in social media. More than half of them (52%) allocate less than 5% of the entirety of the marketing-devoted funds to such activities. The next 39% declare their budget for this type of promotion to be at the level of from 5% to 10%. Only 9% of the companies spend more than 10% on such activities but no company participating in the survey spends more than half of their funds. What is essential is the fact that there are some barriers which restrict the development of this form of promotion such as, for example, the difficulty of measuring effectiveness in the conditions of the Internet. The problem with determining the return on the investment in such activities is indicated by 44% of the respondents. Some of them (13%), who are the people responsible for marketing in the company, deem “the decision-makers’ reluctance or incomprehension” as an essential barrier. It is worth stressing that the aim of company’s activities on the Internet should not be the maximisation of users’ activity statistics. Instead, companies should strive for achieving business effects and supplementing the company business model. Therefore, by developing the strategy of the existence in social media and calculating ROI, companies should take a look at the wider strategy of customer relation management, company’s business goals, brand strategy or company’s inclination towards innovation (Martyniuk, Jar & Suszek, 2013, p. 18).

#### 4. THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY POLISH FASHION BRANDS

As the authors of the report *Global Powers of Consumer Products 2012* (Deloitte, 2012, p. 29) claim, last year the fashion industry recorded the highest increase in sale (growth was at the level of 15%). The Polish market was also indicated as the expansion direction by 33% of the respondents of the questionnaire survey conducted by CBRE (Frątczak, 2013) (a global company dealing with real estate consultancy) on the intentions and directions of development among international retail chains. Thus, if the potential of this market significantly grows, as does competition, there arises the question about whether and if yes – in what way, fashion brands make use of the latent potential of social media in Poland.

Foreign brands, which have been exploring this potential for a long time, are a good case in point. Levi’s uses Instagram for its promotional activities, by sharing the products which will be launched in the future and thereby generating an interest in the brand. Another brand which is very active on Instagram is Yves Saint Laurent (over 100 hundred followers). Marc Jacobs acts very dynamically, integrating its website with such social media channels as Foursquare. However, as far as involvement is concerned, the best brands are Asos, Zara and TopShop (Młynarczyk, 2013). The results of the study carried out among a sample of Internet users who use Facebook and who have declared that among the pages they like are the websites of clothing brands, indicate that there are several most important reasons, for which Facebook users click “I like it!” button on the websites of clothing brands. The most important ones are the wish to know the offer and present promotions (51%), the positive emotional attitude to the brand (48%), satisfaction with the purchase (42%) as well as participation in contests (38%)( Młynarczyk, 2013).

Among the clothing brands functioning in Poland, the leader in the market of social media is LPP. It is just the brands belonging to this corporation based in Gdańsk (Reserved, Cropp, House) that have the biggest numbers of fans and there is an enormous chasm between this company and others. It is obviously praiseworthy. However, if we take a closer look at these websites, we will notice that these large numbers of fans result from the general strength and recognisability of these brands on the Polish market rather than from the intensive, fascinating campaigns (Budzelewski, 2013, p. 178).

#### 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Social media seem to be predestined to the communicative activities related to building the value of a brand (Witczak, 2013, p. 449). Thanks to their properties, the elements connected with brand visual identification can be particularly emphasised. This is a key factor leading to success in the world of fashion. Thanks to these new possibilities, the consumer more often becomes the prosumer, in particular in the market which is governed by setting new trends.

Social media allow the fashion industry to have direct contact with the receiver, mainly because of the possibility of interaction with the brand. Now it is not only a message about the product/designer published in the media but also a possibility of a dialogue – a dialogue which may be an evaluation, suggestion as to consumers’ predilections, their style, reasons for making a purchase decision. Over



five years, the reach of the Internet users interested in the fashion industry has increased from 7% to 35% (Megapanel/Gemius) (Młynarczyk, 2013). It means that at present every third Internet user makes use of these websites. According to the researchers of this issue, the factors which determine such state of affairs, are, among others, the so-called "light" topic, visual content, the possibility of making a purchase. However, what needs to be particularly paid attention to is the possibility of the dialogue with the brand as well as the possibility of expressing the opinion on a given product, style or activities of a given company.

Fashion bloggers, who more and more often become trend setters, are the examples of prosumers – a new phenomenon generated just thanks to social media.

At present, every third Internet user visits the websites of fashion brands and as far as the market of social media is concerned, the leading position is occupied by the brands of LPP company (Reserved, Cropp, House). The major distinguishing feature of the "new media" is the possibility of dialoguing with consumers, which is a great chance of brand idea development. However, if led improperly, this may also become a threat.

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