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Word-Of-Mouth in Social Media. The Case of Polish Tourist Industry

Abstract

The core objective of this paper is to determine the level of online dialogue in social media between the tourist industry leaders and their customers. This study applies sequential explanatory industry-representative comparison with statistical and qualitative analysis of online word-of-mouth communication. Its main finding is that even if online marketing is a hot topic, online channels seem to be neglected by the companies failing to provide real-time dialogue services. This results in the loss of customer attention and engagement and can be linked with overall corporate relationship management immaturity. In addition, the article offers vital insight into customer value creation chain of hotel and tour operators.

Keywords: electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), hotel, online marketing, relationship approach, social media, tour operator, tourism, word-of-mouth (WOM)

JEL: M31, L22, L83

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Introduction

The implementation of the relationship orientation in many companies has offered significantly more power to the customers, because sound relations can only be built on the basis of partnership and balanced mutual benefits. Consequently, the relationship orientation emerged not only as a new marketing paradigm but also a vital part of the prominent contemporary theory of the company and competitive advantage – the Resourced Based View (RBV) [Deszczyński, 2014].

The basic goal of a relationship oriented company is not only to sell, but also to retain solid customer base and to invest time and effort in the most profitable relations. The only way to do this is to know the customers better and to proactively engage them not only by presenting supplementary offers but also by staying open for a dialogue and even to offer them entertainment [Deszczyński, 2012]. Platforms for this dialogue are commonly composed by tools/channels such as database marketing, hotline and direct contact. All of them present an ideal space for two-way communication, however in a company-controlled environment with relationships remaining discrete affairs. This has changed with the emergence of social media, which brought democratization of knowledge resulting from customer experiences and empowerment of the individual units [Mills, 2012].

Given the above, this article presents the methodology and research findings aimed at examining the corporate policies towards word-of-mouth communication in social media on the example of the Polish tourist industry. It is supplemented by some early findings of similar research that has been initiated on the UK market. The background for the research analysis is the phenomenon of the customers empowered by social media. The article brings not only the insight into contemporary advancement in the use of new media by the leaders of the important industry but also offers some practical advice on leveraging overall corporate performance in terms of the modern relationship development. Additionally, it gives vital insight into customer value creation chain of hotel and tour operators.

Paper begins with the customer empowerment and value co-creation in the social media phenomena explanation. The first section brings also the discussion on the nature and importance of a customer – company dialogue and electronic word-of-mouth in particular. It concludes with three hypotheses, which build on the expected underperformance of business actors in dialogic communication. Next comes presentation of the research method and the discussion of research findings structured in several sections. The final part brings both generalized and tourist industry specific conclusions. It also discusses research limitations and its possible extension.

Empowered Customers and Social Media

“Customer is the king”. This old saying gets a new meaning in the era of social media. Access to knowledge, available multiple options and the willingness to use the interactive virtual communication platforms to comment on the products, services and their providers, have dethroned the company from the dominant position in the postindustrial knowledge economy [Seppä, Tanev, 2011].

To compete in this environment, companies have to adopt the Service Dominant Logic (S-D logic). The S-D logic, which was proclaimed for the first time by Vargo and Lusch [2006] implies that the business entities instead of targeting and managing customers to create, communicate and deliver value at a profit [Kotler, 2008], have to acknowledge not just the right of the customers to co-create value, but their key role in this process [Grönroos, 2009]. Although there still exist segments of the market, where customers buy goods and services treating them just as resources, the general orientation of S-D logic applies to all businesses, as all of them primarily consist service systems [Lovelock, Wirtz, 2007; Vargo, Lusch, 2008; Vargo, Lusch, 2016].

Social media seem to be an ideal vehicle to pursue co-creation strategies, as they offer effective solutions for all four components of Prahalad's and Ramaswamy's DART model [2004], which constitutes a popular framework of conceptualizing and guiding implementation of customer value co-creation. The DART model consists of [Mazur, Zaborek, 2014, p. 108]:

- dialogue, which refers to the interactivity between the partners, eagerness to act and to learn,
- access, which can be understood as offering the right tools for communication resulting in increased freedom of choice for the customers,
- risk assessment, which represents customer's right to be informed about the consequences of his choices,
- transparency, which means resigning from information asymmetry between the customer and the supplier.

Social media truly constitute a meeting place, a platform for an open dialogue rather than a monologue. This creates a situation, where managers learn from their customers and customers learn from the technology-enabled communication originating from the company [Niininen, Buhalis, March, 2007, p. 269].

The role of social media in empowering the customers is also substantiated in the Gruning's excellence theory in public relations [Gruning, 2006]. According to his two-way symmetrical communication model, interactions between company and its stakeholders should be based on partnership, sincere resolution of the problems and on mutual understanding, which helps to prevent aggravation of the conflicts and creates mutual value [Wojcik, 2011].

Undoubtedly, diffusion of information through electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is one of the most important roles of social media [Kim, Lim, Bryner, 2015, p. 165]. However, the word-of-mouth (WOM) phenomenon defined as communication between independent purchasers about their supplier and his offer [Sotiriadis, van Zyl, 2013, pp. 108–109], is nothing new in the history of trade. Already ancient and medieval communities relied on WOM as the primary enabler of economic and social activity [Dellarocas, 2003, pp. 1409–1410]. The differences between WOM and eWOM lie in the unprecedented scale and the speed of diffusion of the latter, as well as in the change of the affected communities [Cheung, Thadani, 2012, p. 462]. Traditionally, community and WOM have been used in the context of familiarity, where people knew each other and formed direct relationships with each other [Lange, Elliot, 2012, p. 197]. In the context of eWOM, the spread of recommendations is not limited by the physical proximity, personal acquaintance and concurrent presence of the communicators [Zeng, Gerritsen, 2014, p. 31; Cheung, Thadani, 2012, p. 462]. Even though it is usually provided by total strangers, eWOM, as previously classic WOM, was found a far more credible source of information for the customers than the corporate advertising [Brown, Broderick, Lee, 2007, p. 6; Bulchand-Gidumal et al., 2013, p. 44]. Hence it is also far more influential in terms of brand selection and purchase decision making [Kim, Lim, Bryner, 2015, p. 165; Callarisa et al., 2012, p. 73], especially in case of an unfamiliar brand [Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan, 2008, p. 460].

To sum up, social media and eWOM have radically changed the situation of the customers in relation to the companies. Once alienated recipients of professional marketing communication, customers turned into broadcasters, sometimes even prominent content makers who can trump company's marketing, sales and service efforts with unprecedented immediacy and reach [Baird, Parasnis, 2011]. What could previously seem to be a private problem of an individual, now can be easily shared with much more people than ever before or be even transformed into a crisis situation demanding high profile actions from the CXO-level management [Sparks, Browning, 2011, p. 1311].

The eminent example of how the customers can utilize their power is the crisis of two Polish TV platforms – “Telewizja n” and “Cyfra+”. They merged in 2013 and took this as an opportunity to impose unfavorable offer conditions affecting most popular tv packages. As a reaction to this, a spontaneous movement started on Facebook (page: Anty NC+ / Anti NC+), which mobilized 50 000+ angry customers in a month forcing the company to extraordinary actions. The CEO of NC+ Julien Verley issued an official open letter to the founder of the community – a young student, inviting him to talks. In the end, the company let go some of its leading executives and changed customer-unfriendly offer, while still suffering losses of approx. 200 000 customers [Facebook, 2013; Dziadul, 2013; Stysiak, 2013]. As this article will reveal, online channels seem to be still neglected by the companies, which do not apply the same standards to the online and offline communication channels and correspondingly fail to provide real-time dialogue services.

Even with the company's best will, engaging customers in a dialogue may be problematic in a buzz of approximately several hundred advertisements competing for attention of an average consumer a day [Storbacka, Lehtinen, 2001, pp. 89–91; Kotler, 2012, p. 118; Hill Holiday, 2015]. In addition, some industries suffer from poor emotional potential of their products, which significantly hinders the introduction of customer relationship management strategies [Deszczyński, 2008]. Nonetheless, the basis for an effective online dialogue lies in the readiness to monitor and support the core activities that shape social media, which are: conversation, sharing, publishing and participation [Buchnowska, 2013]. This was perfectly exemplified in 2009 Domino's Pizza prank videos crisis, which showed some of its employees contaminating food. Prompt and honest reaction of the Domino's CEO and *PizzaTurnaround* campaign resulted in 10 000 related tweets, 80 000 new fans on Facebook and an increase of 14.3% in sales – one of the largest growths ever recorded by major fast-food chain in the United States [Cream, 2010; Reilly, 2015].

In a day-to-day business, less spectacular actions should support the development of relations through online engagement both with the existing and potential buyers. The basic elements of dialogic communication include [Cabiddu, De Carlo, Piccoli, 2014, p. 185; Kim, Kim, Nam, 2014, p. 2606; Bonsón, Ratkai, 2013, p. 795; Callarisa et al., 2012, p. 78]:

- involving as many people as possible,
- easing the interface of communication,
- listening to what they say,
- addressing the immediacy of conversations,
- engaging people by proactively providing useful information,
- maintaining a dialogic loop.

However, this is easier said than done. Social media are still a new tool for the most Polish companies (53% of the biggest Polish companies have at least one social media service [Buchnowska, 2013, p. 64] but in average only 8.1% to 21.7% of all companies use this communication channel regularly [Biznes.pl, 2015; Wyborcza.pl, 2015]). How many of them provide high quality customer service in social media is unknown. Hence this article is aimed to at least partially answer this question based on the example of the tourist industry.

Intangible nature of services makes its pre-purchase trial impossible, thus stressing the importance of eWOM [Rosman, Stuhura, 2013, p. 23]. Particularly affected are complex hospitality and tourism products, which are generally associated with high perceived risks. Therefore, most consumers rely on eWOM to reduce those risks before they make any purchases [Buhalis, Law, 2008, p. 613; Litvin, Goldsmith, Pan, 2008, p. 458]. Approximately 90% of the British customers browse online in search for the best offers [Deloitte, 2015]. Correspondingly, 68% of Polish tourists made a purchase based on online research. Even more interesting fact is that 28% of them decided not to try an offer after they had read negative comments about its provider [Rak, 2015]. It means that central control of time and subject of communication can no longer dominate strategies of customer-oriented companies [McQuail, 2007]. Moreover, they should try to take part in every information

exchange between their customers and influence such interactions with their openness to listen and respond, thus accepting the rules of equal partnership in dialogue.

Meanwhile, the tourist industry is struggling to incorporate social media into business processes [Zeng, Gerritsen, 2014, p. 34]. Understanding the role of new technology and generating meaningful interactions with consumers seem to be a particular challenge [Chathoth et al., 2014, p. 188]. In his 500-hotel sample research, O'Connor demonstrated that less than 1% of hotel managers responded to online reviews posted on TripAdvisor (a major peer-to-peer reviewing platform) [2010, p. 768]. Chan and Guillet found a little more heartening but still unsatisfactory performance of Hong Kong hotel managers, who hit a 24%-level response rate [2011, pp. 353–354]. In his subsequent publications devoted to opportunity management across several industries, the author of this article found that approximately 30% of online customers' offer inquiries will never be responded and most of the rest will likely get an one-off response only [Deszczyński, 2016a; 2016b]. Therefore, even if the potential and effective influence of social media and eWOM in the tourist industry seems to have a strong background both in the theory and practical studies of customer behavior, based on the above, following hypotheses are made:

H1: Most of the companies in the tourist industry underestimate social media and eWOM by failing to apply the same response standards to online dialogue as to face-to-face communication.

H2: Underperformance in social media dialogue is partially result of lacking resources.

H3: Underperformance in social media dialogue is also result of immature corporate online communication policies.

Research Methodology

Research was designed as a sequential explanatory industry-representative comparison. Following the definition of Ivankowa, Creswel and Stick, it contains a quantitative and qualitative phases [2006, p. 5]. However, unlike in the traditional approach to the precise division of phases, statistical and qualitative analyses were partly pursued at the same time with the exception of the last step in qualitative phase – the interviews taken with managers of companies, whose clients opinions were taken into consideration in the first phase.

The original data in this research included customer comments posted in the leading social network (Facebook) and on the web pages of intermediary travel services providers (TripAdvisor, easy.go) between December 2012–December 2014, which were manually screened. Such a long period was chosen deliberately to ensure no seasonal (i.e., local busy times) or accidental (e.g., hotel renovation) distortions affected the results. Four hundred and five opinions were examined in detail out of all available, chosen upon such criteria as: complexity of the opinion (preferred longer, informative statements), concentration on one type of service provider (tour operator or hotel), equal distribution in time (quarterly),

equal distribution of social parameters (age and marital status). Such a selection procedure poses a little risk of subjectivity, but is a common social media research practice in the tourist industry [Rhee, Yang, 2014]. If customer remarks were referring to both positive and negative aspects of the offer, general grade given by the customer would be decisive (numeric scale +50%, or more stars than the half of the best possible grade were considered a positive comment).

Tourist organizations chosen for the study are clear industry leaders with more than 50% combined market share. The group of tour operators consisted of five biggest companies (in terms of number of customers) [German, 2013]:

- Itaka,
- TUI Poland,
- Rainbow Tours,
- Neckermann Poland,
- Wezyr Holidays.

The group of hotels was made up by seven biggest chains (in terms of number of beds) [Mitulski, 2013]:

- Accor (including Mercure, Novotel and Ibis brands),
- Louvre Group (Golden Tulip, Campanile, Premiere Classe brands),
- Best Western,
- Rezidor (Radisson Blu brand),
- Gołębiewski,
- Qubus.

The research team included Poznań University of Economics International Tourist Business MA students led by the author of this article. The goals of the research were to determine, in terms of industry leaders (IL) / social media (SM):

- what are the characteristics of the presence of the IL in SM?
- does positive or negative eWOM dominate?
- what are the customers praising or complaining about in detail?
- what are the motives of the customers to share their opinions in SM?
- to what extent praises and complaints are commented/responded by other SM users?
- whether IL follow basic “listen and respond” principle of SM and engage customers in value creating dialogue?
- what is official IL policy towards word-of-mouth in SM?

General Characteristics of Social Media Presence

All tour operators and hotel chains have their own Facebook fan page. Some of the hotels have even sites designed for particular locations (however research focuses on

centrally managed services). The usual content concentrates on presentation of particular travel destinations with lots of pictures, some descriptions and encouragement for opinion sharing on topics associated with the destination (e.g., food preferences), contests connected with traveling and festivities (e.g., St. Valentine's day) and traditional promotions. Other social services such as Twitter and YouTube were excluded from the research, as not every company had an account there. Moreover, existing profiles found minor audience (up to 2 000 Twitter observers and 300 YouTube subscribers).

The presence in travel intermediary services providers media, such as TripAdvisor and easy.go, depends on their customers' preferences. The offer of all industry leaders is extensively commented in these services with up to 2 700 opinions (tour operators – e.g., Itaka) / 1 500 reviews (single hotel location – i.e., Novotel Centrum Warszawa). Some industry leaders actively use their presence in TripAdvisor and publish direct links to reviews found there (e.g., Accor and Neckermann), while others provide opinion services on their own websites (e.g., Itaka), or do not provide links to intermediary services at all (e.g., Wezyr).

Characteristics of the Customers' Comments

The word-of-mouth communication has two faces. It can be a powerful tool for winning new customers convinced by independent assessment of their satisfied fellows. On the other hand, people tend to comment on all aspects of the offer conditions. Different authors present various studies on this matter, but the general opinion is that the negative news is proliferated on more extensive scale. It is reported that dissatisfied customer shares his opinions with approx. 5–11 acquaintances, while satisfied customer reports it to 3–4 only [Richins, 1987, pp. 24–31; Deszczyński, 2005, p. 390; Jain, 2012, p. 65]. Contrary to these common perceptions, positive customer feedback in this study reached very high level. In case of tour operators, it amounted to 49% and for hotels it even reached 69% irrespectively of brand positioning and price levels.

It was not the aim of this research to study the psychological background of customer opinion making and in fact the rate of positive feedback was somewhat a surprise for the article's author especially in face of traditional Polish tendency to complain [Wojciszko, Baryła, 2001]. However, communication tools examined in the research could have impacted these results. Site's regulations exclude vulgar expressions, which can be found on unofficial forums and their main aim is not to collect representative opinions what is not the case if forum is raised by e.g., "the victims of Itaka" [itakaforum.pl, 2015]. On the other hand the media platforms chosen to extract customer feedback are representative, though it is possible some of positive opinions may be brought by marketing agencies hired by hotels and tour operators themselves. However, such presumptions should be examined further in a separate article.

The research procedure encompassed evaluation of each comment in 10 (tour operators) or 9 (hotels) attributes dealing with both tangible and intangible elements of the offer. The detailed results are shown in Figure 1. To guarantee high quality and comparability of the evaluation each attribute was precisely defined:

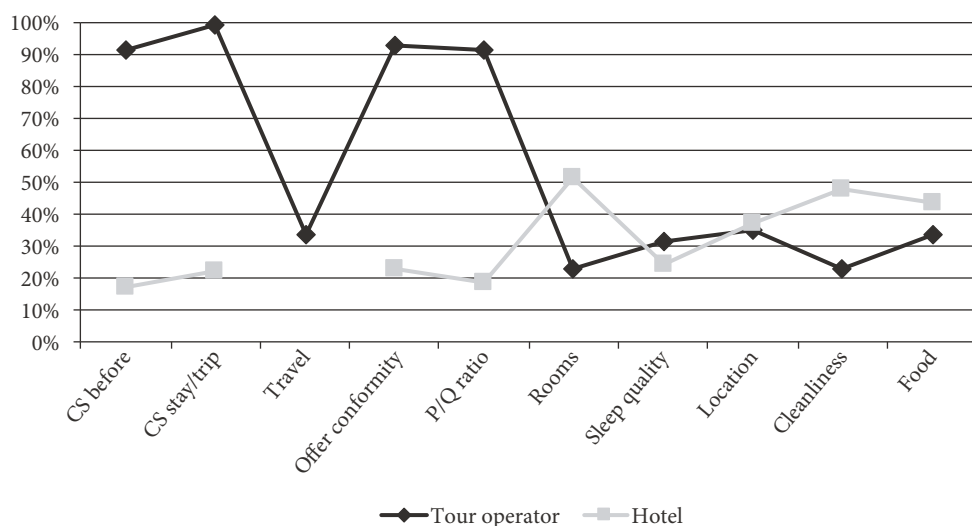
- customer service before trip/stay: offer inquiry, booking procedures,
- customer service during trip/stay including all customer remarks about the services delivery during the stay/trip not directly specified elsewhere, especially the attitude of local staff,
- travel to and back from tourist destination (tour operators only) including shuttle services and departure from the airports,
- conformity of the offer (promised vs delivered): comparison between description of the offer presented in the marketing materials and during the contacts with the company's representatives and the actual perception of services delivered (customer has to specify whether the company did or did not keep its promises),
- price/quality ratio: all remarks expressing disappointment or satisfaction in relation to the level of services and price paid, especially if the offer is compared to the rival's,
- rooms: room size, furnishings, equipment (excluding cleanliness and sleep quality),
- sleep quality: bed size, bed comfort, silence,
- location: customer comments on area surrounding hotel and its general location i.e., closeness to the sea shore, city center, sea shore quality,
- cleanliness: including room, bathroom, restaurants, pool and other hotel facilities,
- food: served in the restaurants, bars and other hotel premises including food brought by the room service, especially if the remarks deal with the quantity, quality or diversity.

Researchers were sensitized to analyze the comments from multiple angles as customers usually describe different aspects of tourist services, especially in longer texts. Therefore, e.g., if sleep quality was affected by external factors connected with location, such as noisy area, both attributes were classified. The remarks on the rooms were also often connected with the cleanliness and sleep quality.

Customers make comments on the performance of tour operators and hotels with different intensity. Four attributes absolutely dominate regarding tour operators: customer service before and during stay/trip, offer conformity and price/quality ratio. They appear in more than 90% of the opinions examined, while in the case of hotels only approx. 20% of the tourists mention one of them. In the case of tour operators, this can be linked with relatively complicated customer servicing process including contacts with several levels of own employees and employees of external partners e.g., travel agents. Moreover, customer care at final destination is executed by the local representatives, mostly temporary employees with limited authority and motivation to solve customers' problems. The equally high position of the offer conformity and price/quality ratio can be again linked with the complexity of the offer and the discrepancies in its perception over time. Because most of the tourists socialize in a group at least for a week (in the hotel, during facultative trips),

it enables them to make comparisons, which can change their individual calculation of marginal utility they had made before the trip was booked.

FIGURE 1. Customer comments by attribute



Source: own study.

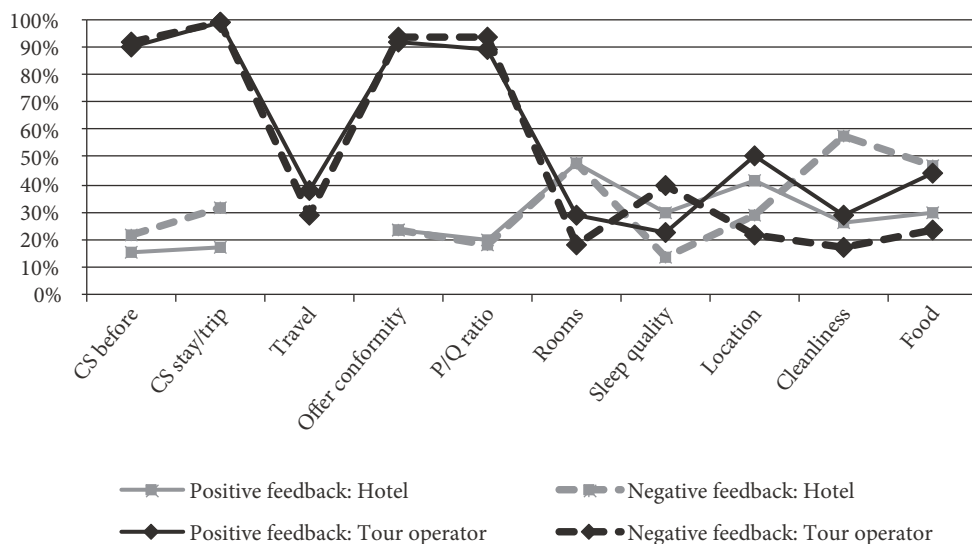
Customers' comments on the hotel offers are much more equally dispersed and generally less informative. However, around 50% of them indicate the rooms including their cleanliness as major topics, with food coming third with 44%. Such concentration on physical part of the offer can be interpreted in the light of less complicated customer service process that is more likely to come as a routine and the fact that the room and food respond to the core customer needs.

The results of conjoint analysis linking the offer attributes and the positive/negative ranking are shown in Figure 2. The percentage rates indicate how many customers out of those commenting positively/negatively their stay/trip included remarks on the particular attribute. In case of tour operators, the highest ranked attributes are widely commented almost by every person indifferently whether praising or complaining. This only confirms the fact that the performance in this field is crucial for those businesses. Among other categories the differences between positive and negative feedback are less than 20%, except of food and the location. Especially in terms of the location, positive comments dominate what can be possibly linked with the improvements which the tour operators have made in the descriptions of their offers in printed and online media. Traditional categories such as e.g., "closeness to see shore" were supplemented by new behavioral expressions as e.g.,

“family friendly” attracting parents with shallow pools and kids’ animations and on the other hand warning those looking for silence about possible noise. This could have significantly narrowed the expectations gap improving customer satisfaction [Deszczyński, 2011].

Also, top commented hotel’s attribute enjoys the balance between positive and negative feedback, which proves that rooms should always attract the most attention from the hotel management as both underperformance and good performance in this field directly affect the overall customer satisfaction. Other top commented attributes fall far below the quality levels customers expect – hotel class irrespectively. This affects in particular cleanliness. This attribute was mentioned by 58% of the customers complaining about the hoteliers’ performance (32% less than in in the case of praises). In this context cleanliness seems to be a hygienic offer attribute [Crompton, 2003]. It is perceived as a basic standard bringing much anger if not met, however in most cases without potential to cause customer’s delight. As in the case of tour operators, location proved to be a category with primarily positive feedback (it was mentioned in 41% of the positive comments and in 29% of the negative ones). In fact, this attribute seems to be also one of the most important hotel’s customers satisfaction drivers, if assumed people only spend time describing major positive offer aspects.

FIGURE 2. Positive vs. Negative Comments by Attribute



Source: own study.

The comments were also analyzed in regard to their publishing motives and their communication impact. However, the responsiveness of Facebook comments authors to our questions was far below expectations. This method also excluded analysis of the

intermediary travel services as they do not usually give such a contact opportunity. Alternatively, all posts were manually screened. It wasn't a surprise that every customer (100% in case of hotels / 96% in case of tour operators) who posted positive comment wanted to recommend place of his visit (either directly encouraging others to come or making an overall destination advice). A little more fragmented situation was revealed after the analysis of negative comments. Most of the customers wanted to warn the others (73% in case of tour operators / 49% in case of hotels). In addition, approx. 11% of the hotel guests wanted to use social media to skip the official bureaucratic complaint handling procedures. The motives of remaining groups were not expressed directly, however they can be associated with many of the top options listed in the Global WebIndex such as: sharing opinions, filling up spare time, general networking with other people, sharing details of one's own daily life [Desreumaux, 2015].

What comes as a little surprise is the overall little impact of the customers' comments on the other Internet users. Only 5% of the posts were commented, responded or marked as useful (depending on media platform). It does not mean that the actual impact of the customers' comments is so marginal. According to Nielsen Institute, 92% of the customers believe recommendations from family and friends [Whitler, 2014] and 70% of them use social media to get familiar with other people's experiences before making a purchase decision [Nielsen, 2012]. It seems however that most of the customers limit their engagement to getting acquainted with the newest opinions about the given destination and the aggregated review indicators.

Corporate Use of Social Media Dialogue Platforms

Statistics showing relatively poor advancement in the use of social media by the Polish companies called in this article (see: Empowered customers and social media) are also substantiated by this research. Having corporate Facebook profile does not automatically bring engaged fans and customers, if it copies one-way communication and display-only model of the traditional Web 1.0 services [Barefoot, Szabo, 2011]. In order to be effective, social media need interactions, which can be developed into intangible social relational assets with multiple independent stakeholders (potential customers, existing loyal customers, ex-customers and the other attracted individuals). If this dialogue is a result of a formal strategy, it can create value in terms of market knowledge, strong marketing presence and reinforce individual relations irrespectively of their stage (e.g., attracting new customers, strengthening loyalty of existing customers [Deszczyński, 2014]). Meanwhile, only 37% of marketers think their Facebook efforts are effective and 88% of them would like to engage customers more applying the social media techniques [Stelzner, 2013]. It seems that the first thing to do is simply to follow the basic "listen and

respond” principle i.e., answering/commenting the customer posts on daily, preferably live, basis. Meanwhile, 34% of the customers’ comments in this research were left without any corporate reaction². In addition, further 38% of the posts got only general answer clearly based on simple templates. Whether it’s due to undervaluation of staff responsible for social media services, or lack of control on its performance, such poor feedback can be interpreted as “we don’t care” approach by the interested person and the others who read this conversation. Following conversation on Itaka’s Facebook fan page is a good example of such a situation:

- [Customer 1 and 2 lengthily commenting Itaka’s promotional offer in the light of problems they faced during their holidays],
- [Customer 3 joins and asks] – “Does Itaka execute control over the work of its local travel representatives?”,
- [Itaka @ Customer 3] – “If you have objections dealing with the performance of our local representatives please contact Customer Servicing Center dok@itaka.pl directly”,
- [Customer 1 @ Itaka] – “I have contacted them and what? And nothing! I got a blurred answer which had nothing to do with my complaint”.

This conversation shows incompetence/indifference of a given corporate interlocutor. However, it is also an “end-product” of overall organizational incompetence starting with the recruitment and management of local travel representatives to conclude with lacking support of domestic customer care office. It also confirms vividly the shift in power between the companies and the customers. If companies and corporate processes are not customer-oriented, consumers will find platforms to share their ruthless reviews and will spend time deliberating over their mistreatment by a given company, which will affect the wider audience.

But there are also positive examples. Individual responses were given to 28% of the comments, referring to customer name or nickname, to the exact case described and often offering a solution to the problems raised. This comes in line with the “addressability of marketing” postulated already in 1991 by Blattberg and Deighton [1991] and is included in every social media guide e.g., “engage in conversations with your customers” [Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010], “always respond and thank for feedback” [Adams, 2014] or “follow-up, listen and personalize fan experience” [Shukle, 2015]. A following conversation of Ikar hotel guest with its staff is a nice example of these practices:

- [Customer] – “Socialist styled rooms, air conditioning does not work, balcony closed, no room for smokers, food excellent, room dirty, dust, dirt, ...”.
- [Hotel] – Mrs. Violetta, next time you come please consider our superior rooms. Price is only a little bit higher for a much better standard. I hope we will be able to change first bad impression. Cordial regards, Hotel Ikar team in Poznań”.
- [Customer] – Thank you for honest and loyal response and I wish you more success and less mishaps [emotikon]”.

To make the research complete, representatives of the tour operators and hotels were interviewed and asked about the engagement of their organizations in social media. The responsiveness rate was 80% (tour operators) and 30% (hotels) with overall level at 47%. Following questions were asked:

- do you regularly monitor consumer opinions in social media?
- do you regularly monitor consumer opinions in travel advising Internet media?
- do you directly respond to comments placed in the Internet?
- what kind of company unit is responsible for evaluating the results of Internet monitoring?
- do you take corrective measures upon evaluated results?

All interviewed participants confirmed that they monitor consumer opinions in social media on regular basis and as much as 86% do so in regard to travel advising Internet media. These results are not surprising and go in line with the general trends [see: Empowered customers and social media].

The third question brought mixed answers. Almost one-third (29%) of the companies declared that they always respond to all comments, while 43% said they do it in most cases or usually. On the other hand, 29% of them gave no clear answer. It indicates two major problems. One is that, while some companies declare paying attention to all customer contacts, in fact they fail to do this. The discrepancy between what is declared and reported to the senior executives and the day-to-day practice in terms of customer service may be a common situation. Companies often lose customers not because they offer bad quality in terms of core and actual product, but because of lacking attention to augmented product, especially poor customer service performance [Stopczyński, 2012]. It happens not only in contacts via social media but also while executing processes directly responsible for sales, such as lead management. In the 2012 research devoted to lead management in automotive industry conducted by the author of this article, 25% of the online queries were left with no answer, while 52% of them got slow or/and general feedback only [Deszczyński, Mielcarek, 2015, p. 28]. In spite of the fact that direct contacts were of much better quality, cumulated losses across four online and offline points of contact in analyzed process reached more than 98% (if one assumes that prospect buyers only convert into customers when they are offered the best service at every stage) [Deszczyński, Mielcarek, 2014, pp. 46–47]. It is no wonder that if customer service can be poor at a point so close to sales, it may be even worse in managing online pre-sales relations, as it was proved in this research. However, such an approach can only lead to artificial dichotomy in online and offline spheres of interaction, which results, in the light of contemporary media multiplexity theory, in the loss of the chance for developing strong relations. According to this theory, multimodality (the use of multiple media) is positively associated with the relationships' strength or so called interdependence level. Furthermore, the more available communication channels are used, the better the outcomes are [Haythronthwaite et al., 2007; Ledbetter, Mazer, 2014].

The second problem lies in the fact that while some companies do not fully support online dialogue with their customers due to lacking performance in the execution of the communication strategy, others do it intentionally. To make the impact of such fatal practice clearer, one should imagine a situation when a customer who comes in person to the showroom is ignored by the staff. No professional organization could afford to waste such an opportunity, yet so many of them do it in case of the online contacts. Customers should always feel a company's genuine interest in them and their needs. Furthermore, they should see that the company appreciates their feedback and makes use of it [Paluch, 2011]. The nature and content of word-of-mouth communication will probably differ depending on how long was the customer involved in the interaction [Grönroos, 2004], but in order for this to happen, all the parties have to listen and respond to messages.

Partial reason behind why companies pay unsatisfactory attention to the social media dialogue can be found in the organizational anchoring of this process. Some managers interviewed in this research said that marketing department (50%), or front office (13%) are responsible for it, while many of them were not exactly sure who (37%). Correspondingly, 38% of the managers stated that corrective measures are taken upon evaluated results of the social media monitoring, 25% said that they are usually taken into consideration, and 37% could not confirm such a process even exists. Probably the difficulty in mastering the social media dialogue is linked with its dual character. Marketing department is definitely responsible for the corporate generated content (outbound communication initiating dialogue). However, the task of responding to inbound contacts should be organizationally supported either by an outsourced professional, or by a traditional front office unit. In the first case of the so called "delegated listening", benefits of hearing to the customers' voice, rapid responding to their concerns and gaining insight into how they speak about the company are sharply reduced [Crawford, 2009]. Therefore, own customer care team, which usually possesses factual information much needed in conversations, might be a better option. However, this unit is still not specialized in developing new programs that should be initiated after the analysis of the most frequently reported problems. This in turn is a domain of the quality departments or customer complaint offices. Finally, exploitation of the customer feedback potential should also involve sales units [Montalvo, 2011; Baird, Parasnis, 2011].

Customer social media dialogue, as a cross-border process, needs an advanced coordination effort, a clear goal setting, an accountable management and allocation of resources. In such context, this research uncovered immaturity of the Polish market leaders in organizing important part of the customer service. But this may not be national peculiarity only. I have initiated a pilot study applying the same methodology to London area tourist market. The preliminary results based on 200 comments show much similarity to the Polish market. In particular, tendency not to respond to customer feedback given in social media was vividly reflected in 19% response rate in case of the

leader of aforementioned spot check – Hilton hotels and 0% response rate in case of the UK market leader Travelodge. Even if these results could potentially improve after research is carried out in the full scale, it indicates that exploiting the potential of word-of-mouth in social media may be underestimated by the most companies, not only in Poland but also across Europe and beyond.

Conclusions

Social media is commonly described as a technology that has enabled the phenomenon of the 21st century with potentially huge impact on marketing communication due to numerous users of leading platforms and advanced targeting possibilities. What is often overseen is that the human passion to share news and to ordinarily chatter has always been present in every society [Papazolomou, Melanthiou, 2012]. Hence socializing or contacting via social media are the subject to the same basic rules of being able to “listen and respond”, as in face-to-face conversation.

In addition, proliferation of social media has to be analyzed in the light of deep societal changes represented by the shift towards individualization characterizing modern “societies of risk” [Tillmann, 2005]. This cultural mega trend formed a foundation for more demanding customers and coincided with global trade deregulation, which in turn intensified competition. All this, together with growing wealth, placed an individual, empowered customer in a superior position towards companies in many industries, giving him a potential to mobilize enough followers to actively influence corporate strategies or policies.

Meanwhile – as this research showed, companies are not taking the full advantage of the new social communication possibilities – as the hypothesis (H1) stated. Both the research on the online communities and the managerial survey confirmed that in most cases social media are used in a traditional manner e.g., as broadcasting platform of one sender not really interested in a sincere dialogue with its audience. Companies adopt a tool invented to socialize and at the same time neglect the way people normally make dialogue or develop relations and attempt to lead monologue instead, which confirms the second hypothesis (H2). Of course, this kind of an open dialogue brings risk and losing control is not something that companies are willing to do [Bonsón, Ratkai, 2013, pp. 795–796]. However, transparency and trust are essential for effective dialogue. If the companies do not adjust their policies to these conditions, the dialogue will be continued without them having a chance to contribute [Verhagen et al., 2016, p. 341].

According to the third hypothesis (H3), which was positively tested in the managerial survey carried out in this research, the organizational weakness of the companies striving to implement relationship approach in their business practice may be also the reason for underperformance in online communication. In spite of a superficial technical view that

might pigeonhole eWOM as a technology focused phenomenon or a marketing plaything, this is truly a relationship management venture. In the end, it is not the machine or a company that communicates with the customers, but its employees. Therefore, the online eWOM is likely to contribute to the development of reputation and ultimately sales, if the company provides resources that support qualitative online customer encounter [Sparks, Browning, 2011, p. 1311]. The discussion on the organizational anchoring of online dialogue process provided in the section Corporate use of social media dialogue platforms, has highlighted some elementary managerial dilemmas, which apparently are not being solved properly.

Recalling the specific tourist industry oriented conclusions, the article brought some important managerial insights into the customer preferences towards the tourist products. It turned out that, while core value provided by the hoteliers and tour operators is similar, customers tend to pay attention to different attributes when assessing their offers. The research also uncovered the areas of unsatisfactory performance of the tourist industry leaders, which were again different in both lines of businesses and should be carefully analyzed in order to be improved.

The concentration on one industry is one of the article's strengths, because it brings important practical knowledge useful for managers. But it is also its weakness, on the other hand. The description of such a general phenomenon like social media should be continued in relation to the other industries with a special focus on general penchant for positive/negative word-of-mouth and its influencing factors, as well as corporate ability to make a dialogue, use eWOM and develop relations with the use of these new tools.

Another point is that even if the chosen companies represent more than a half of the tourist market, they all constitute the same type of big multi-site entities. Although their business impact is huge, a future research should include boutique hotels and smaller travel agencies or travel brokers to shed some more light on the organizational conditions of the successful use of word-of-mouth in social media (e.g., comparison of the big corporations vs small entities).

Finally, the research should be repeated to capture the overall tendency in word-of-mouth communication in social media with even bigger sample of customer comments. It can be also extended into other national markets (as it has been already initiated for the UK market) to deliver conclusions relating not only to Poland.

Summing up the process of the customer dialogue seems to require the maturity in relationship management [Deszczyński, 2016c]. This implies not only acknowledging the empowered customers but also empowered employees and other stakeholders [Deszczyński, 2016d; Smith, 2006; Johnson, Redmond, 1998]. The co-creation journey always begins from the inside of the organization [Ramaswamy, 2009]. Social media seems to be an ideal tool to facilitate such mass collaboration and value co-creation, what marks the eve of the social organizations [Bradley, McDonald, 2011]. However, companies may have a long way to achieve this goal.

Notes

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² This part of research included hotels only.

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