
Editorial – Part 1

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1 Introduction

From the very beginnings of the web, voices from many different backgrounds warned of the potential of this revolutionary public communication infrastructure to foster individualistic behaviour in people (e.g., Baruch, 2001). This reasoning looked on the internet, and the web in particular, as a 'place' where each individual could get into a process that isolated him/her from their physical context of reference. This fact was even said to lead, when considered from a worldwide perspective, to autistic societies.

Just one decade later, the net social benefits of the web are unquestionable, as is its social dimension. The continuous advances in new internet tools and applications have metamorphosed the web communication model tremendously in the past years. Basically, the internet has evolved from being a space for organisations to publish information, with little opportunity for users to take their own communicational initiatives, towards a collaborative platform where every user becomes a potential publisher. Such a platform is articulated in diverse new concepts and a growing number of services like the e-communities, social networks, blogs, wikis, podcasting, videocasting and so on (e.g., Scott, 2008; Singh et al., 2008; Tuten, 2008). With this new scenario, there is an obvious transference of power and informational control from the online organisations, those mainly responsible for editing contents in the past web model, to the massive population of internet users (e.g., Boimabeau, 2009; Christodoulides, 2009); organisations are currently aggregators of information, not broadcasters (Weber, 2009). Doubtless, the web is nowadays more democratic than ever, individuals love it and this cannot be ignored by companies and organisations, in general, which operate in the web.

Taking a commercial perspective, this implies talking about an evolution from the classic transactional web-based model to what has recently been called *the social web model* (Weber, 2007). This kind of web is obviously much more difficult for companies to control. In the present time, the companies' sites are just one of the thousands of websites where current or potential customers can find information about their offers. So, there are more and more sources of information about the companies' offers, which they cannot control. This strategic issue needs to be managed, if one takes into account that people are increasingly more involved, in general, with a web-based model of social interaction. Consequently, visiting these places becomes increasingly common for customers when developing their consumption processes, as they rely more on information about the brands' evaluations posted there by other users. Therefore, just as being online was not enough a couple of years ago for a company to be successful on the internet, the current web model requires more than just creating an online brand community (e.g., Weinberg, 2009). In fact, this marketing decision is probably, except in certain cases, of little interest to the firm's customers of today. Indeed, considerable thought on how current e-marketing mindsets, applications and tools should evolve in order to suitably manage this new web model is more than necessary.

With this special editorial project we aim to promote a key research field in the marketing of today, i.e., the evolution of the e-marketing mindset towards the new social web model. We are delighted to present a broad set of outstanding papers, which have undergone a rigorous double-blind review process. The reviewing time for all these manuscripts took about ten months.

In accordance with the size of the average issue of *IJEMR*, the contributions selected for publication have been divided between two issues (i.e., Part 1 and Part 2). However, though it would have been desirable due to the variety of research themes undertaken, it

has been difficult to split the contributions into homogeneous thematic blocks. So, we have opted to distribute them to obtain a size balance in both editions. Throughout these two issues, a wide range of marketing aspects related to the social web are tackled. Nevertheless, the reader should be aware that this special editorial project does not exhaustively cover all plausible themes in the research framework being addressed. This is difficult to achieve, as the general topic of this issue is still taking off and a variety of particular themes are still appearing. Notwithstanding, the collection of papers presented here is timely and there are valuable contributions to this emerging research area.

Hopefully, these two issues will provide insights that promote and inspire future research into these exciting topics.

2 Contributions to the special issue – Part 1

In the first article, ‘Social networks and marketing: potential and pitfalls’, Tanuja Singh and Joe Cullinane provide an excellent approach to the possibilities that social networks have to be exploited by organisations and businesses. The authors first offer an exploratory look at the phenomenon of social networks from socio-cultural and business perspectives. Here, it is shown how social networks are emerging strongly, as shown by the interest of business in having a presence in this ‘movement’. What is also remarkable is the authors’ efforts to develop an integrated theoretical framework of social networks. Particularly interesting is the illustration, with a clear applied approach, on the uses of social networks as strategic tools in the overall strategy of a company.

The second article is by Hanna-Kaisa Ellonen and Miia Kosonen. In ‘Treat your customers as equals! Fostering customer collaboration through social media’, they explore how companies and customers interact using social media and analyse how social-media-mediated interactions support customer collaboration. They identify two modes of interaction:

- 1 the instrumental mode, related to a traditional transaction-oriented marketing paradigm
- 2 the relationship-oriented mode, characterised by ongoing, reciprocal communications, where consumers are seen actively participating on the website.

Based on the exploratory results of four ad-hoc case studies, the authors suggest that relationship-oriented interaction is related to the diversity of the different forms of customer collaboration. There are several main conclusions that can be extracted: an effective online interaction with customers requires capabilities that not every firm necessarily possesses; relationship-oriented social-media interaction supports customer collaboration; although a predominant mode of interaction is not determined by the social-media applications, it *is* set by the host company. Finally, the authors make some practical recommendations. In particular, managers should be aware of their ‘mode of operation’ in terms of customer orientation. Also, in order to exploit plausible benefits of virtual customer collaboration via social media, firms should see their customers as equals, trying to work with the appropriate mode of interaction for the customer environments.

The third article, ‘Consumers bite on the social web about the film *Snakes on a Plane*’, is by Dan Fisher and Scott Smith. They advocate the current role played by

consumers and brand communities, thanks to the social web facilities, in the co-creation of value. The authors note that, though this novel technological context is still in an early stage of development, structural changes are expected in the way products and services are researched, developed, marketed and supported. These questions are interestingly discussed and practically illustrated with a case study of the movie *'Snake on a Plane'*.

The next article, 'That item is mine!' Consumer competitiveness and need for control: a study of internet auction bidding' by Bridget Satinover Nichols and Daniel J. Flint, attends to the social processes involved in the act of bidding via the internet auction companies; in particular, it focuses on the popular online auction business *eBay.com*. The authors explore concepts and theories related to internet purchasing, decision-making, the role of emotions in purchase situations, and consumer learning and socialisation. Then, an exploratory, qualitative empirical study is articulated by the traditional grounded theory methodology; this is an appropriate research methodology for the specific characteristics of the consumption environment being analysed. The authors discuss several interesting findings. In particular, apart from obvious benefits provided by the internet auction sites, these also create an engaging, jointly created communal environment of social exchange, which is found to be a precursor of bidding behaviour. In this context, they also observe a relationship between intrapersonal struggles for control, feelings of competitiveness, and a conflict regarding communal norms. In sum, these are just a few notes on an original paper, especially rich in qualitative information to support the theoretical questions.

The last article, 'Third-person effect comparison between US and Chinese social networking website users: implications for online marketing and word-of-mouth communication', by Jie Zhang and Terry Daugherty, deals with the adaptation of the third-person effect (TPE) general theoretic framework to the powerful emerging context of social networking websites (SNWs); this is probably the first attempt at doing this, which adds special value to the paper. Likewise, the authors develop the analysis in two culturally distant samples – i.e., USA and China – in order to consider potential differences of the TPE between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. They rigorously analyse and respond to a set of timely research questions, of which the following can be highlighted: Does the TPE exist in the SNW context? If so, how does the TPE in the SNW context differ from that in a traditional media context in each country? How does perceptual bias vary with different referent 'others' in each country? What are the similarities and differences across countries? Do perceptual differentials potentially lead to behavioural outcomes in each country? Diverse research hypotheses are theoretically discussed and empirically analysed; most of them are supported. Finally, useful managerial implications and future research opportunities are commented on.

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