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The Use of Social Media by Local Government Units to Communicate with Stakeholders

BACKGROUND

In these times of growing competition among local government units (LGUs) to win domestic and foreign clients, promotion is becoming increasingly important. Traditionally, promotion was associated with messages and incentives to use the subproducts on offer. Also, it involved LGUs' efforts to remain distinct from the competition. These functions now prove insufficient, however, as consumption is shifting towards the virtual world as a result of the emergence of new technologies and ever-growing access to the Internet. It has become necessary for LGUs to build interactions that enable cities and regions to pursue publicity and encourage the use of their services, as well as to gain valuable information to, for instance, see whether their decisions are right, or to identify the weaknesses of the local products and services. This shift in the approach to promotion is facilitated by an ever-increasing customer engagement in co-creating local value.

Given the ongoing transformations within the environment of LGUs, there is growing reason to shift from the traditional promotion strategy driven by one-way communication towards marketing communication, which is "a specific process of interaction and dialogue" [Wiktor, 2013, p. 14] between an LGU and its target audience. Due to the specific nature of the audiences, who "are involved in and affected by LGUs' efforts to achieve their objectives, thereby indirectly influencing the way entire LGUs function", these audiences should be considered as stakeholders [Kuźniar, 2013, p. 9].

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The aim of this paper is to show the importance of social media in LGUs' communication with stakeholders in the context of emerging ICT technologies.

As well as offering a critical analysis of the literature on the subject and discussing information from the websites of selected cities, this paper used the questionnaire-based survey method. The survey was conducted in January 2015 among 223 respondents – all of them students of the University of Rzeszów (57.4% women and 42.6% men). The survey employed a non-random accidental sampling method.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES
AND THE MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS

Like enterprises, local government units operate in a market environment where the development of new ICT technologies, including especially the Internet, is a key driver of change.

Being the fastest as well as one of the most affordable means of communication, the Internet is a powerful tool for the image-building of cities and regions. Indeed, not only does it help to reach audiences from all continents, but it also provides opportunities for the direct stakeholders (e.g. local population, entrepreneurs, and students) and indirect stakeholders (e.g. tourists) to share their experiences and opinions. This potential for a multi-way relationship underlies the communication model of "many to many". As J.W. Wiktor notes, this model does not constitute a simple synthesis of the interpersonal and mass communication models, although it combines and makes use of these categories [Wiktor, 2013, p. 47]. Not only does this model redefine the concept of the message, but it also introduces a different type of interaction. Within this model, audiences are no longer only passive recipients of information – they can also respond to the content and share their opinions and suggestions, as well as give their ratings. In extreme cases, this model can become a source of valuable ideas and innovations, as reflected by the concept of User-Driven Innovation [Wise, Hogenhaven, 2008, p. 20]. This concept is essentially about tapping into the insights, ideas and suggestions of consumers to implement innovations (user-driven innovation).

Underlying this hypermedia-based model of marketing communications is Internet-enabled communication beyond social, economic and political barriers. Marketing messages are personalised regardless of where the customer lives. For local government units, this means that the values of local products and services can be communicated to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Local government units can use the Internet to communicate with their environment in a number of different ways. The most popular form of the online activities of communes and regions include website and social-media presence.

Major cities use the features of their websites to the fullest extent, as can be ex-emplified by the promotional web portal "szczecin.eu" of the city of Szczecin. This web portal is divided into four main parts: "Visit Szczecin", "Community", "Investment" and "About Szczecin" [more on the subject in Smalec, 2014, p. 686]. The solutions employed by the web portal reflect the qualities of all three models of marketing communications. These models intersect, not only enabling the informational and promotional functions, but also providing the conditions to create and strengthen the city's relationship with both key stakeholders and those who have not been involved with the local government unit.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A FORM OF DIALOGUE WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Social networking services represent a primary form of websites whose un-derlying purpose is to provide a platform for people who share similar interests, and to ensure transparent information-sharing between the users. The main asset of social media is that it enables unlimited interaction and communication on a large scale [Podlaski, 2011, p. 6–7].

LGUs use social media primarily to run official city profiles, which can be informational in nature as well as less formal – oriented towards culture and entertainment. The content delivered by an LGU depends on the type of the so-cial network services it uses as well as on the size of the LGU. In the case of smaller communes, this typically involves information about ongoing and up-coming events, current local affairs (such as traffic warnings or weather alerts), and local successes. It is becoming increasingly popular, especially among major cities, to create accounts dedicated to individual LGU-related projects and events (for instance, the City of Rzeszów has a dedicated account for the Carpathia Festival), organise contests and present multimedia materials. The messages delivered by LGUs are reinforced by the social-media efforts of other public institutions operating within LGUs, and also by local and regional tourist organi-sations. Their online activities support the development of individual local and regional subproducts, including especially in the areas of culture, entertainment, education, public services, and tourism.

In addition to official portals, unofficial portals launched by local users are also on the rise. These users are usually enthusiasts of specific places and events, and they create these sites, accounts and profiles on their own to bring together other enthusiasts. Notably, these sites are often more popular than their official counterparts, except that the decision-makers of LGUs have little influence over their content – and this content, due to its popularity, has a powerful image-building potential for LGUs.

Despite local government units (especially big cities) showing relatively high levels of social media activity, they need to constantly look for new attractive ways

of communicating online. It might be a good idea to create channels on video-sharing websites to promote LGUs, and provide online coverage of various LGU-related events. Also, local decision-makers of all levels might consider keeping their blogs. Some local government units take advantage of virtual platforms (such as Cracow's *Second Life*, which has been in place since 2007), and also embrace virtual-touring opportunities. Virtual office hours, with councillors and members of local boards communicating with the citizens online, are also gaining in popularity.

In order to establish stakeholder relationships and engage in stakeholder dialogue, it is particularly important that the website administrators update the contents and take care of the technicalities. Visitors to the profile of a city or rural commune should be able to access information about the author of the social-media content, even if the author uses a pseudonym. This author should know how social media work, be familiar with Internet slang (e.g. acronyms), and, most importantly, have extensive knowledge on the territorial entity, its assets and current events, in order to be able to interact even with the most demanding of visitors. There is a growing awareness of the importance of social media management, as reflected in the actions of some local government units. For instance, many local authorities establish special departments (such as Cracow's Electronic Media Department) and provide for dedicated positions (such as Wrocław's Social Media Specialist). With no updates on local events and willingness to interact, a city or commune profile will not be used to the fullest potential offered by social media. One of the factors that certainly has the potential to reinforce this means of communication is social participation in the sense of engaging local communities in the creation of the message, and thus embracing their creativity (as exemplified by the "Dobre Pomysły" – "Good Ideas" platform launched in Rzeszów) and empowering them to take co-responsibility for the development of their "little homelands" [Kuźniar, 2012, p. 142].

THE SOCIAL-MEDIA ACTIVITY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS AND INTEREST FROM YOUNG RESIDENTS – CONCLUSIONS FROM THE AUTHOR'S OWN RESEARCH

The observations of and studies into the social-media activity of Polish local government units reveal a varied picture in terms of the levels of advancement and application [Brzeziński, Jasiński, 2014, p. 17]. Local government units prefer primarily such online communication channels as Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, Google+, NK.pl, Instagram, and also Flickr, YouTube, and Pinterest, the last three being used to present multimedia materials. Individual portals are usually assigned with specific functions. For instance, Facebook and Google+ help to build long-lasting stakeholder relationships. Twitter, Foursquare and Instagram are useful tools to engage with visitors to a tourist destination. They have

grown very popular in recent years due to the increasing number of smartphone users and lower Internet charges. These services enable tourists to give their ratings of destinations and upload pictures as they go, among other possibilities.

A survey of social-media presence, conducted in February 2015 among 30 largest cities in Poland, revealed that the most popular services include Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare (100% of the surveyed cities had their profiles on these services). These were followed by Google+ (97%), NK.pl (57%), and Instagram (53%). The most social-media active cities include: Warsaw, Cracow, Wrocław, Gdańsk, Bydgoszcz, Gdynia, Toruń, Kielce, Gliwice, and Olsztyn (these use all of the analysed services). Bielsko-Biała and Ruda Śląska were the least active in this area, being present on only three social-media services at the time of the survey.

The growing efforts of local government units in engaging stakeholders through social media were not fully reflected in the opinions of the surveyed residents of the Podkarpackie Voivodeship. Indeed, more than half the respondents did not show any interest in the social-media profiles of their cities, towns, and villages. This is further reflected in Table 1.

Table 1. Interest in social-media profiles of cities, towns and villages by gender (%)

Description	Total	By gender	
		Men	Women
Not interested at all	4.5	6.3	3.1
Not interested	35.9	28.4	41.4
Rather not interested	19.3	11.6	25.0
Hard to say	14.3	16.8	12.5
Rather yes	13.5	18.9	9.4
Yes	9.8	13.7	7.0
Absolutely yes	2.7	4.2	1.6

Source: Author's own calculations based on survey data.

The surveys reveal that only one in four respondents was interested in the social-media activity of his/her city/town/village, and only a small percentage of these respondents followed the profiles on a regular basis. Men are more active in this respect. The websites of respective cities/towns/villages generated much greater interest from the respondents, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. City/town/village website visit frequency by gender (%)

Description	Total	By gender	
		Men	Women
Several times a week	12.5	3.2	19.5
Several times a month	28.7	40.0	20.3
Several times a year	48.0	46.3	49.2
Never	10.8	10.5	10.9

Source: Author's own calculations based on survey data.

The surveys revealed that only one in ten respondents had never been interested in the website of his/her city/town/village, and almost half the respondents visited such websites several times a year. It is important to note that as opposed to social networking services, websites enjoy more interest from women, as one in five of the women respondents stated that they visited websites several times a week.

In summary, the surveyed group of students demonstrated a rather weak interest in local affairs and little willingness to engage. This suggests that the respondents' form a group with a low participatory level in terms of developing their "little homelands".

CONCLUSION

The spread of social media has substantially expanded the opportunities for local government units to communicate with their stakeholders. Indeed, local government units are becoming increasingly active in the area of general profiles as well as specific profiles dedicated to individual projects and events. It should be emphasised, however, that social media are used to a varying extent. Author's studies within the Podkarpackie Vioivodeship suggest that there are still many communes, including especially rural communes, that fail to recognise this form of marketing communications. Their efforts are confined to one-way messages, making interaction with their audiences impossible. To improve stakeholder dialogue in the years to come, territorial entities should focus more on aligning their messages with the specific nature of each social networking service, as these services are identified through specific groups of users (for instance, Twitter is a primary medium for communicating with journalists, while NK.pl is used to reach communities of smaller towns).

As consumption is shifting towards the virtual world, it is reasonable to expect that communications in the hypermedia computer environment will be growing in importance not only in cities, which are already very professional at tapping into the possibilities of the Internet, but also in rural communes. This development will help to build and strengthen the interrelationships between the senders and receivers of messages, feeding into the network-based paradigm of regional development.

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Summary

The article presents trends in marketing communication of local government units, with particular emphasis on the role of social media. In recent years territorial units observe a gradual enrichment (and sometimes replacement) of a model of interpersonal communication and mass communication model by a marketing communication model in a hypermedia computing environment. *One-to-one* relationships and *one-to-many* relationships are therefore supplemented by *many-to-many* relationships.

In light of these changes, which are related to the process of virtualisation, the classic forms of promotion such as advertising, personal promotion, sales promotion and public relations are enriched with new types of marketing communications, among which an increasingly important role is played by social media. All of the 30 biggest Polish cities have their own profiles on Facebook, Twitter, and Foursquare, and as many as 97% on Google+.

Local government units use social media not only to run official profiles of cities, but they also create accounts on individual projects or events associated with unit's functioning. Apart from official portals, a trend is observed to create informal ones, initiated by portal users of a given territory. While in the first case, the representatives of units have unlimited influence on the content presented, informal portals give little opportunities of influence to authorities.

The study of 223 students of University of Rzeszow have shown that young people are not really interested in social networks as the forms of communication of their local government units with residents. They also show moderate interest in a website of their city / municipality. To counteract this trend, the presented content should be more attractive, encouraging residents to engage in dialogue and establish relationships with local authorities.

Keywords: territorial units, marketing communication, social media, Internet, dialogue

**Wykorzystanie mediów społecznościowych
w procesie komunikacji jednostki samorządu terytorialnego z interesariuszami**

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono tendencje zmian w komunikacji marketingowej jednostek terytorialnych, ze szczególnym zaakcentowaniem roli mediów społecznościowych. W ostatnich latach obserwuje się w jednostkach terytorialnych stopniowe wzbogacanie (a czasem nawet zastępowanie) modelu komunikacji interpersonalnej i modelu masowej komunikacji marketingowej mode-

lem komunikacji w hipermedialnym środowisku komputerowym. Relacje jeden do jeden i jeden do wielu uzupełniane są zatem relacjami typu: wielu do wielu.

W świetle zachodzących zmian związanych z procesem wirtualizacji klasyczne formy promocji takie jak: reklama, promocja osobista, promocja dodatkowa i public relations wzbogacane są nowymi rodzajami komunikacji marketingowej, wśród których coraz ważniejszą rolę pełnią media społecznościowe. Spośród 30 największych miast Polski, wszystkie mają swoje profile na portalach: Facebook, Twitter oraz Foursquare, natomiast na Google+ aż 97%.

Jednostki terytorialne wykorzystują media społecznościowe nie tylko do prowadzenia oficjalnych profili miast, ale również tworzą konta poświęcone poszczególnym projektom czy eventom związanym z funkcjonowaniem jednostki. Poza oficjalnymi portalami obserwuje się również rozwój nieformalnych, inicjowanych przez użytkowników prywatnych portali danego terytorium. O ile w pierwszym przypadku przedstawiciele jednostek mają nieograniczony wpływ na prezentowane treści, to w odniesieniu do nieoficjalnych portali możliwość oddziaływania władz jest niewielka.

Przeprowadzone badania wśród 223 studentów Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego wykazały, że młodzi ludzie dość słabo zainteresowani są portalami społecznościowymi jako formami komunikacji swoich jednostek z mieszkańcami. Wykazują oni również umiarkowane zainteresowanie stroną internetową swojego miasta/gminy. Aby temu przeciwdziałać należy uatrakcyjniać prezentowane treści, zachęcając mieszkańców do dialogu i kreowania relacji z władzami samorządowymi.

Słowa kluczowe: marketing terytorialny, komunikacja marketingowa, media społecznościowe, Internet, dialog

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