Chapter 2

Instagram as a New Promotion and Sales Channel

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Abstract: This chapter is devoted to content marketing and the significance of social media, with a particular emphasis on Instagram as a promotional tool and a channel for selling goods and services. The advent of social networks is creating an opportunity for companies to reach out to a very wide audience, craft personalised messages and maintain an optimal self image. Instagram takes the lead on this and is fast proving itself to be a novel means through which companies can reach out to their target audience with products and services, convince, sell and garner loyalty.

Keywords: Instagram, sales channel, promotion channel, social media

Introduction

Contemporary marketing is evolving in step with the development of technology. Customers' attention is attracted by the newest media, and marketing specialists must incorporate these changes into their marketing strategies. Traditional marketing was primarily based on a unilateral flow of promotional messages addressed to mass recipients. However, modern customers, especially those from Generation Z, have no intention of being only passive addressees of increasingly aggressive ads and prefer to

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influence what content and tools are used to reach them. This is how the phenomenon of social media and broadly understood inbound marketing originated.

The aim of this chapter is to discuss selected issues related to the use of social media as an instrument of content marketing management and to present a new channel for selling goods and services. The analysis was based on the example of Instagram, an extremely popular social networking site. Considering the subject undertaken, the chapter is primarily based on foreign language sources, including literature relating to the subject, articles in the professional press, marketing research reports and internet sources.

Content marketing on social media

Inbound marketing can be defined as “the process of helping potential customers find your company – often before they are even looking to make a purchase – and then turning that early awareness into brand preference and, ultimately, into leads and revenue” (Marketo, 2012). Inbound marketing encapsulates content marketing, social media, websites, blogs, forums and is a preferred form of communication due to its speedy nature.

Inbound marketing is strongly connected with content marketing because it involves the creation of interesting, informative and entertaining content which is then distributed through communication channels on the web. In an environment in which Internet users can find information about products and services on offer, the task of marketing specialists is to focus consumer attention, establish long-term relationships, and achieve a transaction. Content marketing is based on creating materials that help potential customers make a purchase decision and positioning the optimal image of the company in the perception of buyers. For example, to illustrate the multitude of options for promoting the offering of an e-store, the following forms of marketing communication can be mentioned: articles on the products offered; company blog entries; books related to the company's operations; information brochures containing case studies; product demos; free samples; live broadcasts of events such as, for example, a book signing session in a bookshop; additional instructions for the use and potential applications of a product; various types of online courses containing product presentation; interviews, reviews, presentations, press conferences, reports, so-called “plug-ins” put on websites in partner programmes and many more. In this multitude of potential and actual actions, the most difficult challenge is to ensure that the developed and implemented content marketing strategy is internally coherent and original. It must be emphasized that if the requirement of originality and creativity is met, online advertising will function independently in the form of word-of-mouth marketing, also known as viral marketing. Thus, this will be free product promotion by thousands or even millions of social media users.

Content marketing can be considered as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action”

(Pulizzi, 2014). This content marketing strategy can be implemented at every stage of the purchasing process using a variety of media channels in order to create positive experiences related to a company's brand and its products. Its task is to expand the amount of information available to the selected target group and provide emotional value to the buyers and users of products while positioning the company as a leader in a given field. The published content should engage potential customers and help them to see and understand the benefits of the presented product offer (Rose, 2011).

Creating and distributing content requires good media management, starting from building appropriate marketing channels through which the company intends to establish relationships with potential clients. Content marketing differs from the typical "push" sales approach as it is based on building emotional connections with consumers by providing them with professionally prepared information on the product offers, which by definition is part of the "pull" strategy. The main assumption of content marketing is that if a company is able to regularly provide valuable information about a given product, service and market, customers will eventually respond by making purchases and maintaining brand loyalty (Pulizzi, 2014).

The concept of content marketing also implies partial or complete abandonment of classic forms of expensive advertising in favour of publishing marketing materials using free media channels available in the online environment. However, a big challenge for marketing specialists is to ensure that the published content achieves high popularity and motivates them to take actions leading to making a purchase, according to the AIDA model. The online sphere is also crowded with numerous rivals who are undertaking content marketing activities of their own, which is why creating a name for oneself as a trusted expert and advisor is a better strategy than aggressive competition. Thus, instead of spending more and more funds on accessing traditional mass media, marketing staff should create their own media channels to respond more effectively to customer information needs. This strategy makes particular sense in situations where potential customers tend to avoid advertising messages from the mass media or where the use of such media is not the optimal way of reaching the specific target group (Lieb, 2012).

The term content marketing was first used in 2001. Although businesses and institutions engaged in the creation and distribution of various types of content much earlier, other terms such as consumer media, corporate media or brand media were previously used to describe this process. The father of content marketing is thought to be John Deree, the founder of Deree & Company, an agricultural equipment firm, and *The Furrow* magazine. In 1895, instead of sending out catalogues with descriptions of available products, Deree launched the magazine, which educated potential clients in the field of agricultural technology. The magazine was not filled with promotional messages aimed at mail-order sales; instead, it contained useful information that helped with, for example, plant cultivation. The owner of the company hired journalists and graphic artists, who in an attractive way presented knowledge relating to agricultural production, which enabled the readers to be successful in this field. Interestingly, despite the passage of time, *The Furrow* magazine still exists and is delivered monthly to 1.5 million farmers in 40 countries in 12 languages. Other examples in pioneering the use of content marketing include a comprehensive 400-page guide for drivers

developed in 1900 by Michelin, a recipe book created in 1904 by Jell-O, as well as a design magazine published for the first time in 1913 by the engineering company Burns & McDonnell (Pulizzi, 2014).

Despite originating over a hundred years ago, it was not until the second decade of the 21st century that content marketing began to gain extraordinary popularity. This was the result of several main factors:

- consumers find most of the information on market offers themselves, using the Internet;
- content created by companies is more reliable and can compete with mass-circulation publications;
- an increasing proportion of marketing budgets is allocated to promotional activities implemented in the online environment;
- the costs of creating and distributing content have been significantly reduced. In most cases, technologies for publishing content on the web are free. The only cost is the time spent on preparing appropriate materials that support sales and image;
- enterprises can actively cooperate with professional writers, musicians and filmmakers, also in the form of telework and temporary projects (Pulizzi, Berrett, 2009).

The marketing model based on content distribution consists of three basic steps. The first one is attracting the attention of potential customers; the second is converting this interest into taking actual actions that will provide companies with revenues; and the third is analysing the results. Gaining the interest of prospective buyers involves a strong focus on building a positive brand image on the Internet. The fragmentation of recipients' attention usually means that most of them rely on intuition and choose solutions that spontaneously come to mind. Modern consumers usually use the Internet to obtain information about the products they are interested in and can at times be confused due to the information overload one receives from a simple search query. It is for this reason that company managers who employ modern management methods focus their attention on building a strong brand image on the web, which in the long run means that they are able to achieve an advantage over competitors. High spontaneous and aided brand awareness reduces the need for further time-consuming searches and, above all, inspires confidence, which is often a more important purchasing determinant than the price. Content promotion should lead to growing brand recognition, increasing the number of contacts that the prospective customer will have with the organization, and achieving a certain level of trust and loyalty along with activities related to so-called word-of-mouth marketing (Kabani, 2013).

Social media are closely connected with content marketing because they are mainly used for the publication and promotion of marketing materials and other information intended to attract the attention of consumers. Using social media can provide the following benefits:

- increasing the number of visitors to the website;

- building high brand recognition;
- creating positive brand-related experiences;
- providing social proof
- attracting brand followers who publish positive opinions about the company's products and services (Fishkin, Høgenhaven, 2013).

Social media can be used chiefly for activities at the very top of a traditional marketing funnel – activities whose primary purpose is to familiarize consumers with the brand. The use of portals such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+ can lead to initial and incidental interest in the company's products. However, it is only at the next stage of the sales cycle that customers realize their needs, consider alternative purchase options, make the final decision and establish long-term relationships with the company. It is for this reason that the content used on social media belongs to the category of entertainment or education. This approach generates curiosity or even emotional fascination with storytelling. In turn, contacts made by means of other media such as email campaigns or industry reports, can lead to establishing business relationships (Kabani, 2013).

The concept of social commerce is increasingly identified not with supporting sales through virtual community mechanisms, but actual sales on social networking sites. For example, Liang and Turban (2011, p. 6) in their definition point out that social commerce is a subcategory of e-commerce which involves the use of social media to support not only e-commerce activities but also transactions. As mentioned earlier, initially social media were identified primarily with activities that did not translate into specific sales results. This began to change when websites introduced the possibility of paid advertising and provided improved analytical tools that made it possible to measure the effects of activities (Miotk, 2016). This led to social networking sites being used to generate traffic to online platforms and stimulate sales (Felix, Rauschnabel, Hinsch 2017, p. 119) by means of call to action buttons, which encouraged writing messages, visiting the website, and even making a quick purchase (Miotk, 2016).

The gradual introduction of shopping on social platforms consisted of placing tabs and applications imitating the store on Facebook; looking for solutions that would enable the transfer of the store, and preferably also the shopping basket, to a different platform; and creating various applications supporting the implementation of these tasks (Dziegieć, 2014). Store software providers have begun to offer modules to support this format of commerce (Feldy, 2012). This is all the more important as the phase of fascination with changes in the communication process is now over, and social media is under constant and growing pressure to generate increasing revenues. The shopping function is thus the next step, following the strategies for monetizing the content of social media sites and taking advantage of the vast base of potential customers (Smilansky, 2015, p. 16).

Instagram as an alternative sales channel

Instagram is an application whose principal feature is sharing attractive photographs with the community. The service has been operating since 2010 and was considered exclusive to iPhone users till an Android and Windows version was released (Todorczuk 2014, p. 61). In 2012 the application was bought by Facebook and since then the two sites have remained strongly integrated, especially in the marketing context (Lisowski 2016, p. 45). The website brings together users who are looking for inspiration with those who inspire others, connecting people who share the same passions (*Instagram dla biznesu...*, 2017, p. 3). In terms of the number of users, only Facebook and YouTube come before Instagram (Clarke, 2019) which has over one billion active accounts every month. The main reason for this vast popularity is adapting to the requirements of consumers, which is connected with constantly developing new applications and adding new functions. At the same time, the creators of the website are constantly developing its marketing aspect: first in terms of advertising and then selling. Within the last few years the application has evolved to such an extent that it has begun to set trends in the world of social media.

The pace of technological progress and the constant emergence on the market of new smartphone models, with increasingly better cameras, have further increased the importance of Instagram. New, easy to use, and professional photo-editing applications are being created for mobile devices, making the capture and sharing of attractive photos much easier. This is the reason for the growing popularity of Instagram and, on the other hand, a result of it. Another reason for the applications success is its minimalist interface, limited possibilities and a predominance of visual content. Images are given prominence over text to cater to the increasing pace of life of today's internet users (Grabiwoda, 2018). This is a natural consequence of the development of the "picture civilization", in which icons and other graphic forms replace traditional text.

The essence of Instagram are photographs as well as relatively short videos that can be recorded via the application or shared from the library of a mobile device. In the News Feed section, which is the user's main screen, there are photos and videos with matching descriptions and hashtags from various user profiles. Initially, the posted video materials had to be very short, but over time their length was extended and now they can last up to a minute. After some time the option of posting multiple photos and videos within one post was introduced.

The next section is the Explore tab, a place with photos of other users which can be constantly refreshed. In 2016, the Instagram Stories section was introduced. The content published in it disappears after twenty-four hours. Since 2017, however, they are automatically saved in private Stories Archives. Stories can be permanently shared on the profile in Story Highlights. Photos and videos can last up to 15 seconds and can be enhanced using a wide selection of add-ons such as text, emoticons, filters, animated overlays, music, location, temperature and gifs. Unlike in the case of posts, Instagram Stories allow users to put links and refer to other addresses on the web. In 2017 the live stream feature was added to the Instagram Stories format. In addition, in 2018 Instagram introduced IGTV – an application for watching long-form vertical videos (Our

Story, n.d.). The selection of posts that the user can see in the application depends on the Instagram algorithm, which is designed to ensure that the content is most closely related to their interests. This is done automatically and is based, for example, on the followed accounts or liked posts. This sort of content sorting was introduced instead of the previously used chronological feed. However, details of the algorithm's mechanism remain confidential and modifications are introduced from time to time (Pollock, 2018). The selection of photos that appear in each user's feed depends not only on the algorithms, but also on promotional budgets. As the number of users and the amount of content increases, Instagram is increasingly monetizing its resources. After the introduction of the algorithmic update, an organic post has only a 2–3% reach, promoting marketers to move towards paid promotions (Grabiwoda, 2018).

Paid advertising on Instagram was only available to selected large companies initially, a tact Facebook did away with in 2015 when it opened advertising to everyone. First, the possibility of promoting posts in the News Feed was introduced, and later also in Instagram Stories. This enables advertisers to pursue various advertising goals, such as activity relating to posts, application installation, site redirect clicks, or website conversion rates. Advertisers can use various advertising formats and optimization methods as well as precise targeting based on age, gender, place of residence, family status, relationship status, level of education, or even such features as recently starting work in a new workplace, owning a mobile device of a particular brand, and previous visits to a given site or performing a specific action on it. Targeting can also be based on an imported database of phone numbers or email addresses (Lisowski, 2016, pp. 45–46).

For a sizable amount of time, Instagram did not include significant selling activity as its main marketing goal was building brand image. The shopping function appeared in 2016 (Zakupy na Instagramie, 2016) and was tested by several companies in the United States, before being introduced in other selected countries. Today it is available in 46 countries, including Poland (Bringing shopping on Instagram..., 2018).

The shopping function, apart from the links in the bio and in Instagram Stories, is the third possibility of conversion from the application (Chacon, 2018). At the beginning, the option of tagging organic posts with links to the online store was introduced (Zakupy na Instagramie, 2016). This product tagging feature was then added to Instagram Stories, allowing users to tap on a tag or sticker, to see the product's name and price. A double tap on the tag or sticker allowed the user to visit a page with product descriptions, additional images and similar items before making the purchase or browsing some more in the application.

Another improvement is the shopping channel in the Explore tab. The selection of posts visible there is determined by algorithms for personalizing brands and products in terms of the preferences of individual users (Przedstawiamy funkcję zakupów..., 2018). In 2019, Instagram introduced the "Checkout on Instagram" option, which means that users no longer have to go to an external website to make purchases. Billing and shipping data is entered within the application. In addition, payment information is stored so consumers do not have to enter those details again, even when buying from different stores. Currently, the new functionality is available to users from the United States, who can buy from over 20 selected companies. After the testing phase, the application

will be widely available to all users and companies. Instagram has already announced that further improvements to the shopping function are going to be introduced in the future (Nowość w Zakupach..., 2019). Users have already become accustomed to the presence of brands on Instagram so shopping seems more natural for this platform (A better shopping experience..., 2017). To a certain extent, this is also influenced by the fact that product tags look just like the popular tags for linking to other profiles. On Instagram, all the elements smoothly connect with and complement one another (Fleming, 2018).

With the Instagram shopping function, consumers smoothly go through stages such as searching for a company, reading information about it, and going to the shopping basket – all with just a few taps, without leaving the application (Chacon, 2018). This shopping function on Instagram provides the convenience of quickly purchasing products and services, reducing the search time to the consumers while increasing conversion rates and revenues for retailers. Another interesting feature is the save for later function which allows users to save items they found interesting for a closer look at another time (Zakupy na Instagramie, 2016).

Selling through this channel brings measurable benefits to businesses as it saves time and provides high measurability. New functionalities of the application have improved measuring and monitoring revenues (Inspirujące spostrzeżenia dla firm..., 2018), allowing advertisers to check the compare the product views against its purchases (A better shopping experience..., 2017).

The “Instagram Shopping” function gives companies the opportunity to reach a wide, precisely defined group of recipients in their natural environment. It facilitates direct access to the younger segments of Internet users who often prefer electronic forms of communication over traditional ones because they have had contact with online media from an early age. They treat the Internet as a source of entertainment, knowledge and an environment for developing social bonds. Customers from generation Y do not have problems with using new technologies, to the extent that in their opinion work is almost impossible without them (Kroenke, 2015). Their ability to use new technologies is better than that of their parents, are very creative, willing to undertake new challenges and seek self-fulfilment in their personal lives. In addition, they have an innate ability to function in a multicultural environment, devoted to developing their passions, making new friends, active leisure and exploring the world (Smolbik-Jęczmień, 2013).

After generation Y comes generation Z, often called Generation C, from the words change or connected. These are people born after the year 2000, have knowledge of foreign languages, a willingness to meet new people, explore new places, a general lack of respect for what the future holds and deserves to be called the global generation. Such young people as per Waśko (2016) can be described people wanting to lead picture-perfect lives .

Many teenagers consider Instagram to be their favourite medium and use it as their medium of choice (Grabiwoda, 2018). The application is used most often on smart-phones and created in a vertical version to suit the mobile first we live in today. It offers

an attractive and functional space for advertising, with a relatively small number of elements that might distract its recipients.

Instagram is a perfect place for creating customer experiences, as its novelty and innovativeness provides a unique experience for consumers. At the same time, the nature of this site makes it possible to efficiently sell a contextual manner, which makes it more likely to be successful. Instagram facilitates storytelling, which builds a deeper, more intimate, longer-lasting, and thus more valuable relationship between the customer and the brand. An important role in this respect is played by Instagram Stories, which offers a range of possibilities for diversifying the message and influencers who gather highly engaged recipients around their profiles. Their importance on this platform is greater than on most other social networking services (Grabiwoda, 2018).

Instagram is a platform that in its purest form is focused on engagement and creating a community (Todorcuk, 2014, p. 63). It has four times more interaction than on Facebook (Buryan, 2018) and sees the highest engagement rate among all social networking sites. The users of this application willingly interact not only with other individual users, but also with brands. They behave differently than on other websites, with a focus on viewing products, discovering trends and innovations (Inspirujące spostrzeżenia dla firm..., 2018). Eighty percent of them admit that they follow business accounts (A better shopping experience..., 2017), and one-third of the most viewed stories come from brand promoters (Przedstawiamy funkcję zakupów..., 2018). The high engagement is connected with the fact that consumers on Instagram create a special relationship with brands as this makes them feel as part of an elite group. Also, the very nature of the application contributes to the high engagement rate as today's consumers prefer to absorb information from images (Smilansky 2015, p. 16).

Even before the introduction of the shopping function, Instagram played an important role in the purchasing decision process as they were most likely to encourage young consumers to consider and plan purchases. In the 2016 Global Web Index research, 50% of Instagram users declared that they obtained information about products from this service (Grabiwoda, 2018). Today these rates are much higher with Instagram data showing 130 million users displaying product tags in shopping posts in a month (Nowość w Zakupach..., 2019). It's also important to note that Instagram (14%) ranks best among all social media sites with regard to the use of the "Shop" button when compared against Pinterest (13%), Twitter (13%), and Facebook (9%) (Business Insider report 2015, as cited in Miotk 2016, p. 50). Instagram also appears to be a great boost for sales as 54% of consumers declared that seeing a product or service on Instagram prompted them to make a purchase (How Instagram Boosts..., 2019).

After the introduction of the shopping function on Instagram, consumers no longer need to go through the hassle of many buying stages. Many users ask for the names, prices and links to the presented product in comments, send messages via Instagram Direct function, or look for the products on the search engine and on the store's website (Inspirujące spostrzeżenia dla firm..., 2018). Instagram aficionados are eager to buy online and have no reservations about using mobile technologies for this purpose. In 2015, over a third of users made purchases via m-commerce channel, making them

more likely to make purchases on mobile devices than people who do not use this application (Buckle, 2015).

Instagram users tend to associate each section of the application with different uses. In the marketing context, therefore, the News Feed and Instagram Stories sections have different roles. Research indicates that Instagram users use the News Feed to search for information and find out about products and brands, as with a storefront. This section is used by brands to present their offers so that consumers can browse the published content and stop at items that they like or are interested in. For this reason, photos and videos published directly in the profile are carefully prepared. Although the News Feed is more strongly associated with discovering brands and products, recipients search for brand-related content and products also in Stories. A characteristic feature of the 24-hour stories is their free, authentic and casual nature allowing it to be a great tool for strengthening brand engagement (Jak są postrzegane i używane..., 2018).

Instagram users value highly aesthetic, creative and high-quality posts, as well as those which are created especially for this medium and are not available elsewhere. The application is used primarily in people's spare time (Lisowski, 2016, pp. 46–47) and primarily focused on the consumption of entertainment and lifestyle content. Its most ardent users are people who want to be up to date with global trends (Todorczuk, 2014, p. 62), such as in fashion. The strong relationship between fashion and this social networking site is evidenced by the fact that within its structure, Instagram has a director of fashion partnerships. Since 2015, this position has been held by Eva Chen, former editor of such magazines as *Elle*, *Teen Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Lucky* (The Power of Passions..., 2017). Fashion is also one of the most popular categories in the Explore tab and is the subject of the most popular hashtags, such as #fashion and #ootd (outfit of the day) (Tam gdzie pasja spotyka się z modą..., 2017). Also, influencers commonly share on Instagram pictures of the clothes they wear and information about them (Smilansky, 2015, p. 16).

Research confirms the significant role of Instagram in shopping for clothes, especially in the case of women, who tend to be more susceptible to psychological and cultural factors, and attach more importance to the appearance of products (Al Mukhaini, Ismael, Al-Dhuhli 2014, pp. 8–9). Many consumers use Instagram to stay up to date with new products and trends, and to share their own styling. As many as 45% of users follow a brand or fashion celebrity, looking for image and shopping inspiration (Tam gdzie pasja spotyka się z modą..., 2017). People interested in fashion are the most engaged Instagram users as they open the application 15 times a day and view 5 times more photos than ordinary users. They have on average 3.6 times more followers and they follow 2.2 times more accounts, including those belonging to brand creators. The probability of them publishing something is 16 times higher, 12 times higher for comments, 2.4 times for watching videos and follow it for longer (Fashion on Facebook and Instagram..., 2017).

An interesting example of omnichannel retailing is presented by Rigby (2011) who describes the case of buying a dress for a holiday trip, over the years. A few years ago, this kind of shopping was done at a shopping centre, where customers would walk from store to store and compare the clothes on offer. Stores could then collect data

based on their loyalty cards, where information about customers' transactions was recorded. Nowadays, this type of shopping begins with browsing the collections available in various stores on a mobile device, comparing the prices, choice of products, reviews, etc. According to Rigby, such web browsing will soon be replaced by a virtual advisor who, being a fashion expert, will compare the clothes available in nearby stores and make some suggestions based on the customer's previous purchases. The customer can then make a decision based on the offers received and go to the nearest store, where the dress will be waiting for her in the changing room with matching accessories. The data gathered from this purchase can then be used to personalize future offers more precisely and accurately.

Conclusions

We are currently experiencing a revolution in terms of the methods of market communication with customers. Almost everyone who is looking for a product or is seeking advice turns on their mobile device, starts the search engine and begins to search for information. A large proportion of young people treat this as a kind of release from having to use mainstream media. Such aversion to traditional media is a result of, among other things, long commercial breaks, aggressive advertising, or unappealing content in many similar stations. This has given rise to the development of the inbound marketing concept, where the target is clearly defined, attracted and converted into potential customers (Ciechomski, 2015). Inbound marketing strategies make it possible for companies to expand their customer reach as well as increasing brand popularity and recognition.

Over two decades ago, Bill Gates, one of the visionaries of modern business, authored an essay entitled "Content is king" (Gates, 1996), in which he emphasised the fact that consumers are beginning to significantly change their approach to shopping with the advent of the internet. Gates compared this to the television revolution of the 1950s and 60s, which spawned a number of industries and allowed those in the entertainment industry to reap profits. In his opinion, the internet would do the same due to the relative ease with which anyone could be a publisher. Today, over 20 years later, the essay is even more topical than when it was first published as the success of YouTube, Instagram and other social networks proves. In this text, the authors wanted to emphasize the fact that today Instagram is becoming not only a key tool used for content marketing communications, but also an important prospective sales channel for goods and services.

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