

EMAIL MARKETING CAMPAIGNS: THE EASIEST PATH FROM ORGANIZATIONS TO CONSUMERS – AN EXPLORATORY ASSESSMENT

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The email is a valuable marketing tool for conveying short, simple messages that call for action on behalf of the recipient. Usually companies develop email marketing campaigns for attracting new customers, persuading the existing customers to buy again, encourage customer loyalty, announce or remind about special offers or events. For an email marketing campaign to be efficient, it is wanted a greater number of responses from those in the target.

The paper assesses in an exploratory manner the frequency in using the email accounts, the level of exposure to email marketing campaigns as well as the type of information wanted to be received by the Romanian users.

Keywords: email marketing, online marketing, Romanian consumer.

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Introduction

Over the past few years, the tremendous technological development managed to break time and space barriers, but in the same time raise another one, very difficult to pass: the relationship one. The communication challenges rise at the very heart of what should actually represent a favorable relationship climate: living in a multicultural environment and following the globalization trends. The first that have to face it are the companies in their process of creating, developing and maintaining relationships with their “star” stakeholder: the customer (Pop, Petrescu, 2008).

The question is how to address effectively and efficiently customers belonging to different cultural backgrounds, looking for light-speed transactions, and respecting their privacy needs, while gathering valuable information and trying to keep in touch. The marketing tools that seem to have the best offer in terms of CRM are the online ones (Wang et. al, 2009). The reasons range from the low implementation costs when compared to other methods, to great accessibility opportunities, effective managing solutions and confidentiality tools such as online secured privacy policies.

As a consumer, surely no day goes without coming across to at least one of them. The most known are websites, e-mail marketing, blogs, RSS, forums, newsletters, instant messaging, social networks, search engines, etc. Used by companies, all these have in common one thing: creating and managing a relationship with both existing and potential customers (Vegheș, Pantea, 2009). The greatest advantage is that the Internet offers a relatively inexpensive ticket for a big entrance on a vast, continuously increasing market, while also giving a diversified choice of multimedia instruments that could be used in order to reach the audience (Pop, 2006).

In 2006, e-mail marketing won the first place for the most effective tool in increasing demand during holidays in retail business, according to WebTrends, leaving search engine marketing and search engine optimization on the second and, respectively third place. In addition, research shows that the tool is used by 80% of retailers regularly as the main customer relationship management instrument. As a result, investments in marketing for the holidays had their biggest increase in e-mail marketing with 52%, followed closely by 46% in search engine marketing and 38% in search engine optimization. However, the online glamour around some of the e-marketing tools is starting to fade away, as the media power slowly shifted from the company to the consumer, making room for more “pull” oriented

approaches, rather than “push” ones. This is one of the reasons why online banner ads experienced the greatest decrease in spending with 17% (Pantea, Vegheş, 2009).

Literature Review

The email represents the result of the natural evolution of the mailing. Email marketing is used in order to inform potential consumers and current clients by the use of the internet and it is the most popularly used element of the web (Gay, Charlesworth, Esen, 2007). The email or the electronic mail is one of the most efficient tools from the direct marketing’s arsenal on the internet, from the investment’s profitability point of view. The results regarded by an email marketing campaign is achieving sales from 5 to 15% of the cases, as compared with 0,5 to 2% in the case of the banners.

There are two forms of email communications:

Email communication initiated by the consumer: due to the presence on the companies’ websites of a contact page, the organizations offer their potential and / or current clients the opportunity to get in touch with them. The client sends an email where he explains the problems or complaints that he has concerning the product he has bought, or asks for details regarding a certain product. The company will answer also by email in the shortest time. The email is the cheapest web solution of the customer relationship management strategy (eCRM). Its main disadvantage is that it does not offer the opportunity to communicate with the client in real time.

An important aspect is related to the companies’ capacity to manage their clients’ replies to emails. It is imposed that when receiving the message, an email of confirmation to be sent immediately, and the clients’ requirements to be redirected to the responsible departments in the organization.

Email communication initiated by the company: the email is a valuable tool for sending short messages that call for action on behalf of the recipient. The companies usually develop email marketing campaigns with the purpose of maintaining current customers, build buyer’s loyalty, improve the relationship between the client and the seller, announce or remind the clients about different offers or special events they can attend. In order for such a campaign to be efficient, the messages should be addressed to a target, so that the rate of response is high. Usually there are inserted links to a “landing page” (a web page where it is driven the person who click on the link inserted in the email, which offers additional information concerning the products presented in the message). The email is the most spread internet application, which can be used strategically in direct marketing reasoning and in the bilateral communication with the target.

The main advantages of email communication are:

- the informational content and the relationship sender - recipient – the beneficiary can receive complex information (images, audio, video files or documents) rapidly and conveniently. He can read them whenever he wants, without incurring problems such as when using phone communication, where even though there is fast communication, there can be the case when the interlocutor can not talk at the moment of calling or does not understand well the message due to the circumstances he finds himself in. It can also be attached a short presentation movie where the product is presented and its features or there can be added representative pictures about the object of the direct email campaign;
- in most cases, the feedback is more consistent than phone calls or mailing, because the interlocutor can reply whenever he wants, however he wants and whatever he wants;
- probably the costs are the most important advantages to be taken into consideration, both by the organization and the beneficiary of the communication. They are lower then any other existing communication mean. That is why the beneficiary of the communication will have the reasoning to answer, since in most of the cases, he does not incur any additional costs;
- segmentation and targeting – both strategic components receive a special significance when using the email. Thus, the campaigns can be easily customized according to the consumers’ particularities;
- the results of an email marketing campaign can be easily measured with by using special software, which generate reports based on the number of emails opened by the recipients.

When implementing an email marketing campaign it is important to follow seven stages: determine the objectives of the campaign, develop the mailing list, the content, the landing page, test the content and the technology, send the emails and measure the results obtained (Charlesworth, 2009).

When the company inserts links to the landing page, the soft reports how many times those links were accessed. The main advantages of including links in the sent message are, on one hand the increase of traffic on the website, as well as the registered persons.

The electronic message should be developed starting from the current positioning of the organization (including its products / services / brands) and to materialize into an attractive offer for potential consumers (Vegheş, 2003).

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The difference between the email marketing and newsletter is that the email marketing calls for immediate action from the recipient while the newsletters are meant to develop a long-term relationship between the sender and recipient. Newsletters are intended to offer the readers added value; they are more personal and informative.

The newsletter is a periodical message sent online to the company's database of subscribers who have previously agreed to receive it. It usually contains one or more of the following tools: an article / interview / editorial, case study, news, special offers / promotions, new projects / up-coming events, contests, polls or other resources.

When planning the online marketing strategy, the online marketing tools should not be treated separately. For instance, the newsletters sent by email can be promoted on the website and vice-versa. Combining different instruments offered by the internet in a single strategy can improve the rate of its success.

Methodological notes

The specific objectives to be reached through the present exploratory research approach referred to the main aspects concerning the email marketing campaigns and the use of this tool by the consumers: the frequency in using the email account, the level of exposure to receiving commercial messages and the type of information wanted to be received by the public. Questions concerning the email marketing campaigns had represented only a specialized part inside of a consistent questionnaire approaching all the tools consumers are exposed through the online marketing campaigns conducted on the market. Data have been collected online in February-April 2010.

The sample has included 153 respondents (65 male and 88 females), aged 18 to 29, from Bucharest. The focus was on this category, called in the marketing literature as the Generation Y, which is motivated by the significantly higher penetration and, respectively usage of the internet and, particularly of the email services.

Major findings of the research

Nowadays, the use of the email has become compulsory and the results of the survey come to attest the fact that each of the respondents owns at least one active email account (by an active email account it is understood that the respondent checks at least once a day that email account).

Most of the respondents have two active email accounts (45.1%), 23.5% of them own just one active email account, 20.9% check daily at least three email accounts, 11 of the respondents have four email accounts and 5 of the respondents have recognized they check more that five email account each day.

It is important to mention the fact that out of the investigated sample, 89.5% of the respondents have one up to three email accounts. Regarding the remaining percent, it should be mentioned that 6 males as

compared to 5 women own four email accounts, and 4 males as compared to just one woman have more than 5 email accounts to check daily (table 1).

Table 1. Number of active email accounts owned at the level of the investigated sample

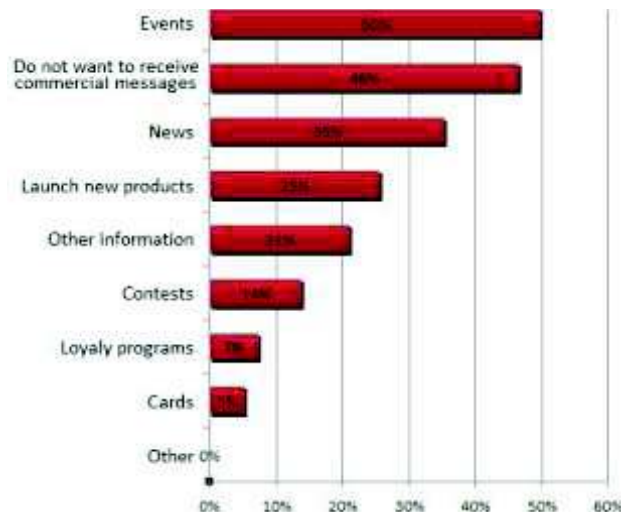
| Number of active email accounts | Male | Women | Total |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | 14 | 22 | 36 |
| 2 | 29 | 40 | 69 |
| 3 | 12 | 20 | 32 |
| 4 | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| above 5 | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Total | 65 | 88 | 153 |

Each day, 63.4% of the respondents receive one up to four commercial emails. These messages promote different products, services, brands or events; 9.15% of them receive five or six emails and only 5.88% receive more than seven commercial messages. However, surprisingly enough, 21.57% of the people interviewed, a number of 33 persons, stated that they do not receive any commercial messages (table 2).

Table 2. The average number of commercial messages received by email per day correlated to the number of active email accounts owned

| Number of active email accounts | Average number of commercial messages received | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
| | none | 1-2 emails | 3-4 emails | 5-6 emails | 7-9 emails | more than 10 emails |
| 1 | 14 | 14 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| 2 | 13 | 32 | 13 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| 3 | 1 | 10 | 13 | 7 | 1 | 0 |
| 4 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| more than 5 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 33 | 59 | 38 | 14 | 4 | 5 |

In what concerns the information that the investigated sample would like to receive by email, daily, most of them mentioned that they would like to be kept updated to the events the companies are organizing (50%), to find out new things about the organizations (35%) and to know information about the new products that are ready to be launched on the market (25%). The consumers are also interested in the contests initiated by the companies (14%), their loyalty programs (7%) or are interested in receiving cards from the companies (5%), for different occasions. It is important to highlight that a number of 71 respondents (46% of the respondents), would not want to receive any commercial emails, fact that suggests that they prefer to search for the information they need to know and do not want to be disturbed with this type of emails.



Conclusions and Limits of the research

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the development and employment of the email marketing campaigns after an exploratory research approach conducted at the level of a rather specific group of consumers. The results of the study are significantly limited by the nature of the sample and this should be one of the further improvements to be made in terms of the research methodology. Another important limit of the study is represented by the orientation of the questions towards the obvious aspects of the existence and employment of the email marketing campaigns.

Still, there are several facts that have been observed based on the results provided by this exploratory approach:

- the majority of the respondents own and check daily two email accounts;
- more than 60% of the investigated sample receive daily one up to four commercial messages;
- the type of information considered to be of interest and wanted to be received by email by the Romanian 18-29 years old respondents are the organization's events, news related to the company, the launch of new products, other type of information, contests organized, details about the loyalty programs and different cards for different occasions;
- about half of the respondents do not prefer to receive commercial messages, but they want to search for the information they need themselves.

Further directions of research to be considered refer to the:

- expanding the dimension of the investigated population through getting out from Bucharest and covering the whole country (including the urban and rural areas), respectively through extending the demographic profile of the sample covering not only the group aged 18-29, but also consumers from other categories (at least members of the active population);
- increasing the complexity of the information generated through the research by introducing supplementary questions about the format of the message received by email, the elements that should be or not found in the commercial message or related to the amount of information that would convince the receiver to buy or contact the organization that developed the campaign.

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