

## ANALYSIS OF IT METHODS APPLICATION IN THE EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION PROCESS IN SME SECTOR

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### Summary

*In this work the analysis of IT methods improving the communication process between all actors of business processes running in SMEs was made. One can observe that continuously developing Internet services and different digital tools enable the information transfer among smaller business units more and more cheaply and effectively. In particular, updated communicators like GADU-GADU, CHAT and others create more and more possibilities to satisfy better management functions like customer servicing, contract preparation and performance, common sell and buy transaction realizations, etc. However, permanent trainings of SME users from the area of IT application in business communication is necessary to avoid the mistakes resulting from non-appropriate usage of available tools.*

**Keywords:** IT methods, SME, business communication process

### 1. Introduction

The term e-economy (electronic economy) is not unambiguous. There are other functioning terms such as new economy, nude economy. The specific feature of new economy introduces modern information technologies and unprecedented knowledge resources into economical processes. Therefore, new economy can be referred to as knowledge-based economy, digital economy and network economy etc. [1].

Knowledge-based economy requires more and more effective information systems including all the company partners both from its nearer and farther surroundings. Especially mutual connections between SME's are the most important for their development and solid comparative advantages. Communication channels play the most important role in cooperation strategies of SME agri-food sector networking organizations, which was positively verified by the findings of TOWARDS project [2, 3, 4].

Hence, the analysis of IT methods improving the communication process among all actors of business processes including SMEs seemed to be an interesting research issue, especially in a view of such efficiency criteria as cheapness and availability of communication services.

### 2. Communication tools in the context of SME management methods

The possibilities of communicating with exterior and interior customers with the use of service offered by companies providing telecommunication service allow the companies from SME sector the use of different canals, for example wireless telephony, the Internet (mainly WWW pages)..

Usually, organizations start to use new communication channels for business purposes, ad hoc, imitating, and experimenting. After such a first stage of learning and experimenting there often arises a need for a more systematic approach to identify business options for new communications channels [5].

*In case of business contacts it is advisable to use the channels below:*

- Discussion forums on WWW pages.
- Interactive forms on WWW pages.
- Online chat or/and tools such as instant messengers.
- SMS service.
- Hotline also called an automatic signaling service *ringdown*, or *off-hook service*.

A discussion forum may be one of the three tools the use of which can be worth considering in case of economic subject cooperation. The forum enables its customers to label matters important for them and determine both their mutual beneficial contacts and the inside of their formal branch organizations as well. A discussion forum offers an interesting functionality and in case of adopting an important topic (thread) by a guest of the forum and its commenting, (e.g. a milk supplier can describe the behavior of a cistern driver who collects milk from farmers), other forum users may add their suggestions to this topic or provide arguments against its importance and the author of the topic can exaggerate some rather unimportant problem or event. Thus, forum users themselves identify, order and eliminate the most important factors that decide about effective cooperation. It is usually the administrator that takes care of a forum and can modify the whole contents. The situation in which some forum administrators perceive their role in the forum service as searching and deleting all negative opinions about the company is rather unfavorable.

Very often, many consumers want to share their bad experiences with other consumers. Companies react by adopting anti-domain sites in an attempt to prevent the creation of such complaint forums. Companies such as Volvo and Chase Manhattan are attempting to defend themselves by setting up anti-domains. For example, Volvo owns an anti-domain site, *volvosucks.com*. Chase Manhattan was particularly protective, registering four site names: *chasesucks.com*, *ihatechase.com*, *chasestinks.com* and *chaseblows.com*. Vail Resorts owns at least six such sites. The question for these companies is 'how many name variations does it take to protect the company?' Newer firms have a unique opportunity to block consumer complaint sites before their name is known. For example, a discount airline site Priceline registered *Priceline-sucks.com* three days before the company's actual site launched. In all, at least two dozen companies – or their advertising or PR firms – have registered anti-domains so far[6].

*The examples mentioned above show how companies 'canalize' customers' dissatisfaction. However, it is vital to use valuable negative opinions for the purpose of offering improvement not only concerning the positive image.*

Interactive forms on WWW pages constitute the abridged form of a discussion forum; they also enable the registration of new customers with the base (or only guests on WWW pages where the forum appears). The abridged version of a discussion forum means that such a form allows to express a short opinion on a particular topic, for instance a specific product (through a window enabling comment writing and a second one for a presumptive signature).

An online chat or tools such as instant messengers capacitate more interactive communication than a forum by bringing a relatively quick or almost instant answer to a problem or inquiry. A number of companies endow customers with the possibility of contact through the mediation of

such instant messengers as GADU-GADU or SKYPE where written or voice and video communication is possible.

In addition, contact among contracting parties in real time may take place with the use of Moderated Group Chat (MGC). MGC is defined as on-line, real-time interactions between groups of customer with an active coordinating role of a company representative and a commercial objective [7]. In that situation the company asking chat users a particular question may collect a number of valuable opinions about its functioning.

*Web surveys are one of the fastest growing methods of data collection. Despite their advantages, their use is plagued by three main problems:*

- not all people have access to the Internet and those who do are different from those who do not,
- the reliance on non-probability of self-selected samples or recruited panels, which are due to the lack of sample frames of web users. This results in an inability to generate random email addresses, a fact made worse by anti-spamming legislation, the observed low response rates of surveys in general and web surveys in particular [8].

Taking into consideration the above reasons it is worth starting to use the other two tools, that is an SMS service and hotline also called an automatic signaling service.

Based on their rationale and experience with using SMS, Balabanis, Mitchell and Heinonen-Mavrovouniotis propose that SMS can be used effectively for probability web surveys by using it either with Couper's mixed-mode method [9]. (e.g. provide an option to receive a survey via phone call or web) or a pre-recruitment method of panels of respondents to achieve better coverage of the population and response rates [10].

An SMS service is relatively the least known service in case of contacts on *Business-to-Business* market (B2B). This service is very popular and known on the market for individual customers because of competitions, charity actions, TV voting in live programmes. However, it seems that few companies are aware that the service in such form can be used for contacts between supplier and recipient, for instance.

There is a service that enables sending the contents of an SMS to an e-mail address or into an Internet script (which can store messages in the database, for example and then display in the form of a transparent opinion list adopted to every worker in the company etc.). Taking into consideration one company's SMS offers on the Polish market, the cheapest available connector (the number where the service is located) costs 0,50 PLN (net) for sending one SMS message from sender to recipient. There are usually no additional costs for companies associated with possessing an account in SMS service. The cost of the service very often includes an opportunity to send a reversible SMS from a recipient with acknowledgement.

The activity of a contracting party in case of such a service is vital, taking into account the fact that there is a possibility of receiving too many reversible text messages from the recipient. Consumers' perceptions of SMS ads are rather negative. The highest willingness to give permission to receive SMS ads occurs when consumers have a high control over opt-in conditions, when an SMS ad is relevant and when a brand is familiar [11]. Therefore, the allowance that is expressed by sending a text message to that service with an opinion or comment is equal to adding a person to a customers' database. Recipients often care about striving good contacts with formal suppliers' decision makers, not considering the possibility of some decision makers caring about the opinion of people having a real contact with a recipient. If a spouse of a farmer managing a considerable cowshed finds out that it is better to change a recipient because a cistern driver does

not fulfill the conditions determined by the spouse, the ideal contact between the director and the farmer himself does not have to support the maintenance of trade relations between the farmer and the creamery. The farmer prefers not to come into conflict with his wife and is willing to change the milk recipient for the more polite one.

The costs of SMS service functioning for a company that wants to run it are about several PLN a month. Instead of an SMS service a company interested in customers' opinions sent in the form of a text message may simply provide a mobile phone number of the wholesale manager.

A hotline is a well-known tool of a customer – enterprise contact and it does not require an extensive description. However, it is worth mentioning that the name 'hotline' suggests that its employees should be open to current problems and suggestions and not only to questions associated with an offer which can be found on WWW pages. Unfortunately, it happens quite frequently that hotline workers put customers through to other departments where customers are registered. That type of behavior evokes much greater irritation and intensifies reluctance to a particular supplier or recipient.

The comment on a hotline may appear to be the reason for undertaking an attempt to balance the tools mentioned above (Fig. 1.) in the context of rational and emotional customer approach to tools usage on the B2B market. Rationality refers here to an attempt to excuse an inappropriate customer service.

An improperly treated customer (not necessarily in the complaint context) will react emotionally and will try to abreact this frustration on the unpleasant situation that he came across in the company he cooperates with. It is important that the company provides the possibility to vent one's frustration and nervousness with the benefit for itself. It means enabling such a customer to present the reasons for his negative opinion. If the customer is very annoyed, it is probable that he will want to defuse emotions immediately. It seems that emotional approach has one disadvantage as it does not refer to a rational approach to a problem. Yet, for some people it can be a beneficial feature in the sense that only key reasons to a problem are taken into account and there is no justification of the inconvenience that could be the real reason for customer's negative opinion.

In case of a hotline it is possible to admit that there is a substantial emotional approach to the problem and simultaneously a customer does not try to justify incorrect activities of the company himself. In addition, greater emotions appear shortly after the event and the nervousness fades away with time. A hotline enables a customer to express his opinions with no limit of time. However, in terms of an SMS service there is a need to send a short factual message. A discussion forum enables a contacting party to express a more precise and extensive opinion about the matter of his interest. Access to the tool can take place long after an event and a relaxed customer formulates more rational opinions.

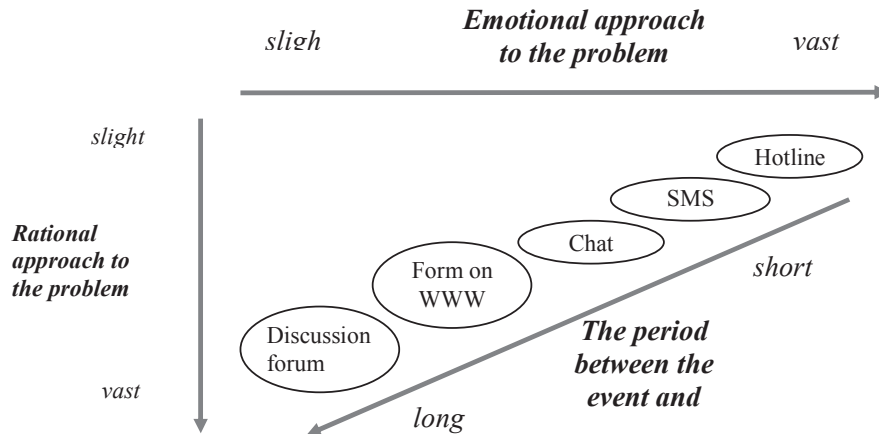


Fig. 1. Communicating tools with a suggested division into rational and emotional conditions in a customer's attempt to use them on B2B market considering the period between the event and reaction to it.

Source: Own elaboration

### 3. Conclusion

The tools mentioned above can be used in business contacts in the following way:

- on the market, a producer released a new line of nutrients to porkers, the description of which may be found on a producer's website,
- a regional distributor can place an order on the WWW page with the use of an interactive form; it is possible to gain a discount having a password,
- the producer and distributor can familiarize themselves with comments of individual recipients inserted by them on the web page and with the description of the product (nutrient) on a discussion forum,
- on that web page the distributor and individual recipient can familiarize themselves with the clues regarding optimal swine nutrition through the nutrient mentioned. The individual recipient can do it for his own education and the distributor for professional training of his sales assistants for the purpose of more effective product sale,
- the individual recipient may place an order in an interactive form on the WWW page. If he defined his profile before on the producer's web page, the method of an order can be even more simplified and implemented with the use of a communicating tool such as Skype, a hotline or a text message - the customer may use his number in the contracting party's database as a signature.
- the players from the same branch organizations like breeders of pigs or dairy cows can interact very easily for many business management problems like common transactions of means production purchase or sell the products or others.

Information technologies on the grocery product market can be used taking into consideration EPCglobal networks (open global network using an electronic code of a product). It is quite

relevant as the distribution of farming products requires a good organization diminishing the risk of rotting a product [12].

Undoubtedly the analyzed IT methods improving the communication process between SMEs give them chances to develop and reach solid competitive advantages because cheapness and arability of described tools create real chances to have the same superb communication channels like big corporations. Permanent trainings of SME users from the area of IT applications in business communication is necessary.

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