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SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF E-MAIL AS A MARKETING TOOL

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ABSTRACT

Through their development modern digital communication channels modify newly established patterns and very quickly influence changes in marketing practice. Starting from the questions of whether marketing messages sent to consumers via e-mail are useful or can they be used as a standalone tool, this paper presents a preliminary study conducted on a sample of 192 respondents. The study aims at collecting guidelines for a larger study on the impact of modern digital communication channels on consumer behavior, i.e. on the necessary adaptations in marketing practices that are already based on digital technologies. The paper specifically focuses on electronic marketing messages and newsletters as frequently used modern marketing tools. The research was conducted through a specially designed questionnaire and it has determined that e-mail as a standalone marketing tool is not effective and should be used in combination with some other tools. It has not been found that email positively influences the purchase decision nor is the newsletter as a marketing tool completely positively accepted by the respondents.

Keywords: *modern marketing communication channels; e-mail as marketing tool; newsletter*

1. INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies and their tools are increasingly being used, whether for private, business, or public purposes. Their importance is also noticeable in the fact that information and communication technology (ICT) topics are being included to a higher extent in various strategies and plans, together with an increase of financial resources planned for investment in these areas (EC Europe EU n.d., Georgescu and Teiu 2020). Constant progress and development enable the use of specially designed tools for various purposes, including marketing purposes.

“One of the most challenging aspects for almost every organisation in the digital age is marketing of goods and services.” (Shafack 2021 p.83). It is for this reason that ICT and its use for marketing purposes play a major role. Also, “With the development of modern technologies and the simplification of communication channels, completely new forms of sales have emerged” (Stofkova, Laitkep, and Stofkova 2022).

“Digital marketing has become a company’s most advanced and important strategy for promoting, advertising and communicating with many online customers.” (Oyakhire 2021 [Rotich and Mukhongo 2015]). In addition, digital marketing is gaining importance, without showing signs of slowing down or stopping its impact on today’s business (Muhammedrisaevna and Bakhriddinovna and Rasulovna 2021). Since each (marketing) strategy has its strengths and weaknesses (Arnold 2011), this paper aims to examine the self-sufficiency and effectiveness of e-mail as a marketing tool. The question is whether e-mails, such as newsletters or standard e-mails, have a purpose: do they influence the decision to buy a product or choose a service, and if they do, is the impact positive or negative? It also raises the question of self-efficacy, i.e. self-sufficiency of e-mail as a marketing tool: Is e-mail sufficient in itself as a tool or should it be combined with other tools to achieve a purpose and thus contribute to the goal of increasing the purchase or using the services consequently leading to higher earnings and profits? As newsletters are often sent by e-mail, the question whether they would be accepted by recipients, or (potential) consumers/customers, is also raised.

This paper draws on Davis’ Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which is based on Ajzen and Fishbein’s (Alfadda and Mahdi 2021) theory of reasoned action. TAM is a model based on two premises: the perception of usefulness and ease of use of technology by (potential) users. Although the model was designed in the 1980s, it is still used. This is visible in the increasing use of technology for marketing purposes, which paves the way for gaining online trust and loyalty from consumers and enables market growth (Thi Tuyet Mai and Yoshi and Phong Tuan 2013).

According to Spremić (2017), ICT is an “interactive technology, and includes digital technology, i.e. all modern communication devices and concepts that can be used to digitally exchange content” (Špičić 2021 p.9). The use of ICT tools enables electronic business and moving jobs from physical to virtual space; it enables faster business, greater reach, more monitoring and measurement; it opens new markets without higher or additional costs; it encourages simpler relationships and interactions between stakeholders; it increases efficiency and effectiveness (Obeidat 2021).

“Digital Marketing strategies are sets of controllable e-marketing variables that organizations combine to achieve marketing goals and to meet customers’ needs.” (Forghani and Sheikh and Hosseini et al. 2021). The goal of the marketing strategy is, of course, as high profitability and as large sales segment as possible, regardless of the industry in question. Therefore, digital marketing tools are an integral part of a successful marketing strategy and lead to digital business transformation: they enable maximum acceleration of almost everything that is done, connect different devices and people, individualize products and services, anticipate the needs of users/clients/consumers (Spremić 2017).

“Email marketing is being increasingly recognised as a cost-effective marketing tool” (Rettie 2002). The use of e-mail is of great importance for the promotion of the company’s products and services (Robertson 2020), as well as for encouraging customer loyalty through various benefits. E-mail marketing is a form of marketing that can introduce users to new products, discounts and other services through their e-mails, but can also help a company build a relationship with its existing or new audience (Oyakhire 2021). At the same time, it can direct potential customers to the company’s website or web pages and the social media that the company uses in its presentation and advertising.

The advantages of e-mail marketing are numerous: low costs, the possibility of a very fast preparation and organization of the desired content and its placement with the possibility of personalization, the possibility of quick response, consistency, interactivity, access from different places (spatial infinity) (Rettie 2002). On the other hand, e-mail marketing also has its drawbacks: disabled immediacy and persuasion (Rettie 2002), the possibility to ignore e-mails by their recipients, irritating recipients by sending (too many) e-mails, i.e. overload.

In order for e-mail to be as efficient as possible, companies can use other tools and media, connect and interconnect them, which leads to the digital transformation of business (Spremić 2017). In order for communication and e-mail marketing to be effective, the attention needs to be placed on the competence (Muhammedrisaevna and Bakhriddinovna and Rasulovna 2021) – it needs to be known what, how and for whom is being done and why. Sending a newsletter, a prepared material containing information useful to consumers, at least once a month aims to maintain consumers and ensure consumer confidence (Oyakhire 2021).

According to Dobrinić (2020) and relying on the improved model of ad value set by Ducoffe (1996), the value of advertising depends on four factors: entertainment/fun of the content, informativeness, irritability, and credibility. Entertainment refers to the satisfaction and positive emotions of the recipient of the message; informativeness implies the ability to provide effective information, that which the end user, or the audience, really wants or needs; irritability is the arousal of unpleasant and unwanted feelings; and, credibility refers to the perception of accuracy and giving accurate information that can be trusted (Mahatma Vidya and Yasa 2020). While the need for informativeness, entertainment and credibility is required in as large quantity and to as large extent as possible, irritability needs to be kept to a minimum in order for the ad value and the value of advertising to be as high and successful as possible.

2. METHODOLOGY

This paper presents quantitative research conducted through an online survey using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed exclusively for the purpose of conducting research on the self-sufficiency of e-mail as a marketing tool.

The ten questions included in the questionnaire have been divided into two parts: while the first part consists of socio-demographic questions, the second part contains thematic questions about e-mail. The first part of the questionnaire includes questions about age, gender, education level and the county from which the respondent comes. The second part contains closed-ended questions with offered answers where respondents choose how they prefer to do their shopping, how often they buy online, how they keep themselves informed about discounts and promotions, and the extent to which they agree with the statements about the impact that newsletters have on their purchase and the effectiveness of e-mail for marketing purposes. When expressing preference, respondents can choose one of the pre-written answers or express agreement on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the lowest level of agreement with a particular statement, and 5 the highest level of agreement.

The online questionnaire was active from 15 to 27 July 2021 and was completed by 192 respondents. There are differences in gender and age among the respondents, with all respondents being of legal age and over 18 and have voluntarily agreed to share personal information anonymously.

The data was collected electronically using Google forms and analyzed using the SPSS statistical processing tool. The aim was to answer previously asked questions: "Do marketing messages received by e-mail affect the purchase decision?", "If so, do they affect it in a positive or negative way?", "Is e-mail as a marketing tool self-effective/self-sufficient?", and "Are newsletters well received, are they used?". These questions were used to form the following hypotheses as a starting point for the research:

H1: E-mail as a marketing tool positively influences the purchase decision.

H1.1: Newsletter is a positively accepted marketing tool.

H2: Newsletter subscription correlates positively with the impact newsletter has on the purchase.

H3: E-mail mail is not self-effective as a marketing tool.

H4: Age and impact the newsletter has on purchase are positively correlated.

3. RESULTS

The prepared online questionnaire and the answers collected by it make the basis of this research. The results obtained by the answers of the respondents allow the pre-set hypotheses to be confirmed or rejected.

The convenient sample includes a total of 192 respondents, of which 176 were female (91.7%) and 16 male respondents (8.3%). The age of the respondents ranges from 18 to over 50 years of age, with the largest number of respondents from the age group of 24 to 30 years of age (35.9%). It is followed by the age group from 19 to 23 (27.1%) and the age

group from 36 to 40 years of age (16.1%). Other age groups make up less than 10% of the total number of respondents. With regard to education, the largest number of respondents have a high school diploma, which is in line with the largest number of respondents from the age group of 19 to 23 because in that period the majority either still studies or has completed secondary education as the last level of compulsory education in Croatia. In addition, the smallest number of respondents, 2.1% and 1.6%, respectively, have the title of Doctor of Science and Master of Science according to the old, pre-Bologna system. All respondents are from Croatia, predominantly from Koprivnica-Križevci County (37%), followed by the City of Zagreb (14.6%) and Zagreb County (8.9%).

When asked “Do you buy more online or in physical stores?”, 136 respondents (70.8%) stated that they preferred to buy in physical stores, while 56 (29.2%) bought more online.

To the question “How do you find out about discounts and promotions?” 128 respondents (66.7%) answered that they found out about discounts through social networks, while 32 of them found out through the company’s web pages. Only 27 respondents (14.1%) found out about discounts and promotions via newsletter. One respondent stated that they found out about discounts and promotions through advertisements, recommendations, word of mouth, in the store, and through all the above.

Answers to the question about the impact the newsletter has on the purchase decision (“Does the newsletter affect your purchase decision?”) mainly show that the majority (82 respondents, 42.7%) believe that the newsletter does not affect their decision on purchase (at all). Also, to a greater extent (34.4%) the respondents chose 3 as the answer, which suggests that respondents are not sure whether or not the newsletter affects their purchase decision. Just over 20% of respondents (44 respondents in total) believe that the newsletter influences their purchase decision.

In order to obtain specific results that will contribute to the research in this paper, a correlation was made in the SPSS program between the answers to the two questions asked. The first question whose answers are correlated is “Do you subscribe to newsletters?” while the other is “Do newsletters affect your purchase decision?”. The collected responses were correlated and result in the negative correlation, which can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Correlation between the newsletter’s impact on purchase and newsletter subscription

		Correlations	
		IMPACT_NEWSLETTER	SUBSCRIPTION_TO_NEWSLLETTER
IMPACT_NEWSLETTER	Pearson Correlation	1	-.369**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	192	192
SUBSCRIPTION_TO_NEWSLLETTER	Pearson Correlation	-.369**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	192	192

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: authors’ research

According to the respondents' answers to the question "Do you think that e-mail is an effective channel for marketing activities in combination with another marketing tool?" it can be concluded that most respondents believe that e-mail is (fully) effective in combination with other marketing tools - 53.1% or 102 respondents answered the question with the choice of 4 or 5, which (fully) confirms agreement with the statement that e-mail is effective in combination with another marketing tool.

Correlating the respondents' age and their opinion on the impact of the newsletter on the purchase shows that the correlation does not exist and has not been determined by statistical analysis. This is evident in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Correlation between the newsletter's impact on purchase and respondents' age

		Correlations	
		IMPACT_NEWSLETTER	AGE
IMPACT_NEWSLETTER	Pearson Correlation	1	.101
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.163
	N	192	192
AGE	Pearson Correlation	.101	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.163	
	N	192	192

Source: authors' research

The results of the research collected by the means of the questionnaire have aided in determining whether the hypotheses can be accepted or rejected, which leads to answering the research questions.

Therefore, the answers to the question "Does the newsletter affect your purchase decision?" have demonstrated that the majority do not perceive the newsletter as a marketing tool that has an impact during purchase or that it affects the purchase. Consequently, the hypothesis that e-mail as a marketing tool positively influences the purchase decision was rejected, as well as the hypothesis that the newsletter is a positively accepted marketing tool. Additionally, neither H1 nor H1.1 have been confirmed.

In order to confirm or reject Hypothesis 2 stating "Newsletter subscription correlates positively with the impact newsletter has on the purchase." a correlation was made in the SPSS program between the answers to the two questions asked. The answers to the two questions were correlated: "Do you subscribe to newsletters?" and "Do newsletters affect your purchase decision?". Statistical analysis has indicated that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between those who subscribe to the newsletter and those who believe that the newsletter influences their purchase (see Fig.1). Those who are interested in the newsletter and have subscribed to it believe that their decision to buy is not based on the information obtained through the newsletter. In this way, the newsletter is perceived as something that has a negative impact on the purchase and it is not positively accepted by the subscribers. It can be concluded that in this case the newsletter is something that dulls the space of the newsletter recipient and instead of fulfilling its purpose to encourage the recipient to action, or purchase, it actually leads to an unwanted

reaction, a situation where the recipient gives up or does not think of the purchase. In this way, the newsletter, instead of contributing to the increase in sales or use of certain services, it works counterproductively. It is possible to conclude according to the ad value model that the level of irritability of the newsletter is high and contributes to its negative perception, i.e. non-use for the purposes for which it was originally intended. Therefore, H2 stating "Newsletter subscription correlates positively with the impact newsletter has on the purchase." has been rejected.

The hypothesis H3 states that "E-mail mail is not self-effective as a marketing tool." According to the respondents' answers to the question "Do you think that e-mail is an effective channel for marketing activities in combination with another marketing tool?", it can be concluded that the majority of respondents believe that e-mail is (fully) effective in combination with other marketing tools - 53.1%, i.e. 102 respondents answered the question with the choice of 4 or 5, which (fully) confirms agreement with the statement that e-mail is effective in combination with another marketing tool. This confirms hypothesis H3.

The lack of correlation between the question about the age of the respondents and their opinion on the newsletter's impact on the purchase has led to rejecting H4: "Age and impact the newsletter has on purchase are positively correlated."

The results of the survey confirm the applicability of Davis' Technology Acceptance Model. What users find useful – they use, just as they use what is easy and yet effective for them.

4. CONCLUSION

Finding an adequate channel of marketing communication is the focus of interest of marketing science and practice. In doing so, the magnitude of the hidden negative impact is often forgotten in order to increase productivity. The results of the presented research indicate the possibility that this (hidden) negative impact occurs when using e-mail and newsletters. Negative acceptance of messages by the target group, regardless of them being loyal or just potential consumers, is very likely to lead to irritation and provoke resistance rather than lead to the purchase decision. therefore, it will have more impact on reducing sales rather than on increasing them. The diversity of the target group and the amount of exposure to marketing messages in this case did not prove to be sufficient factors according to which e-mail and newsletter could be considered effective marketing channels. The results indicate the need for research on the perception of messages received through various modern marketing channels by (potential) consumers and continuous monitoring of their satisfaction and preferences regarding the way of receiving a marketing message. On the other hand, there is a task to find new solutions and adapt old marketing channels.

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