

Top European Retailers and Customer-Centred Web Structuring

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Abstract: The past decade was the decade of ‘e-everything’ and many authors praised the efficiency of web usage for different business purposes. But practice showed that the web as a communication and distribution channel is not as powerful as it was claimed to be. After the dotcom explosion, the process of sobering-up followed and a large number of pure e-companies were shut-down. On the other hand, in the same period traditional companies discovered that the web can be used as an additional communication and distribution channel. This paper explains how the largest brick-and-mortar European retail companies structure their web sites making them useful for their customers.

Keywords: retailing, e-tailing, brick-and-click, top global retailers, the web

JEL Classification: M10, M31, O33

Introduction

The past decade was the decade of dotcom boom and burst. Many authors argued in favour of the efficiency of web usage for business purposes (Ahlert et al, 2000, Frost and Strauss, 1998). Numerous advantages of the web as a distribution channel were stressed out. But, practice showed that the web is not such a powerful channel as it was previously claimed. After the explosion of dotcoms, the process of sobering-up followed and a large number of pure e-companies were shut-down.

Since 1994 (year of publication of the first web browser) till 2000, thanks to the large number of newly established dotcom companies and new project ideas which were based on web technology, the technology heavy NASDAQ composite index

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grew rapidly and in 2001 reached a value that was 5.67 times higher than in 1994. After that, a lot of dotcoms lost their capital without getting any income and in 2003 the mentioned index was at the same level as in 1994. This means that the dotcom bubble burst. Many of these closures were not the result of failure in confidence on the part of investors but were mainly the result of low customer satisfaction with provided service. (Alomaim et al., 2003).

The dotcom companies that managed to survive are doing business on a global level and are growing rapidly. Good examples are Amazon and eBay. Some indicators show that since 2001 large e-tailers, are actually becoming more and more profitable (see: 2005 Global Powers of Retailing' Delloite & Stores.org, 2005.) But, those companies are not 'pure e' anymore. They are combining the best of 'e' and traditional trade models in their business strategies.

On the other hand, at the same time traditional retailers discovered that the web can be used as an additional communication and distribution channel. Traditional retailers recognized numerous advantages of web usage. By using the web as a communication channel, global retailers can improve existing market recognition, improve the brand of a company and strengthen existing relationships with customers and suppliers.

Moreover, the web enables them to improve their competitiveness and maintain their market share or enter new markets on a global level. Apart from that, some customers are converted into online-customers. In those cases retailing is becoming more efficient and profitable because the cost of one e-transaction is claimed to be three times lower than the cost of a traditional transaction.

In this paper we will analyse how the brick-and-mortar global retail companies are presently using the web for their business purposes. The aim of the paper is to examine the structure of web sites of the largest European retailers. The following hypotheses will be tested in this paper:

- Web sites of large European retailers are oriented to local markets.
- Web sites of large European retailers are mostly focussed on presales activities and the least on post-purchase activities.
- Large retailers use web sites to attract customers to come to a physical retail location.
- There is a correlation between web contents and sales and profits or retail companies.

Methodology and Sample Description

Research was conducted on a sample of top 114 global retailers that operate in EU countries. In the rest of this paper we will refer to them as ‘top EU retailers’.

The report ‘2005 Global Powers of Retailing’ (Delloite & Stores.org, 2005) was used as the source of information on top retailers. A ranking was formulated in the report according to retail sales revenues of those companies.

The research was conducted in January 2006. The methodology included: online analysis of web sites’ availability and usability, detailed analysis of web sites’ contents and information presentation, an analysis of the possibility of electronic purchase on those web sites, and finally, a statistic analysis for confirmation of working hypothesis.

Web pages were located by using the following methods:

- by typing the URL address directly into the web browser in the following forms: `www.companyname.com`, or `www.company_name.com`, or `www.company-name.com`.
- by using search engines: `www.google.com`, `www.yahoo.com` and `www.altavista.com`.

Based on the information on e-commerce web contents given in similar research studies (Esrock and Leichty, 2000, Bosilj Vukšić and Pejić Bach, 1998, Perry and Bodkin, 2001, Knežević, 2002) a questionnaire for the web analysis was created. There were 30 questions divided into following categories:

- Information on the company (for instance: can the contact information be found; how the management is presented; is history of the company presented; is there a picture of the company, is there a mission statement)
- Information on products (for instance: is there a picture, price, description, animation of a product; are products shown on the home page, is there information on special promotion activities)
- Information related to the online purchase process (for instance: is there a possibility of on-line ordering; is the shipping information available; is the customer privacy information presented).

All top EU retailers have web sites, and those web sites are easily accessible because they can be reached by directly typing address that consists of ‘www.’ + ‘company name’ + ‘.com’ into the web browser. Only 2 companies couldn’t be reached in such a way, but their webs were found through the search engine. The visibility of sites on search engines is also very high. After conducting search for a

company name, most of the web sites were listed as the first on the result list (see table 2). For instance, when we performed the search for each company, we found out that on Google 82 web sites were first on the result list, 23 sites were found in top 5, and others in top 10.

The companies in the sample are doing business in different EU countries, but also on the global level. The range of their retail sales revenues varies from 256 329 to 2 230 millions US\$. The distribution of retail sales revenues is given in table 2. Researched companies do business in different retail outlet formats shown in Figure 1.

Table 1: Listing of searched web site (after search for: 'company name')

Search engine	1st	in top 5	in top 10	total
Google	82	23	9	114
Yahoo	79	24	11	114
Altavista	78	20	16	114

Table 2: Distribution of retail sales among companies in the sample

Retail sales	no. of companies
more than 40 m US\$	8
20-40 m US\$	11
10-20 m US\$	17
5-10 m US\$	36
3-5 m US\$	24
2-3 m US\$	18
TOTAL	114

Sales revenues in the sample companies were analysed according to following retail formats: specialty store, supermarket, hypermarket, discount, department store, convenience store, superstore, food service, do it yourself market, cash and carry, drug store, commissary, e-commerce, mail order, warehouse, direct selling and tv-shopping. According to the mentioned retail formats, the average sales revenue was calculated, but it has to be stressed out that one company can perform its business activity using different retail formats at the same time.

The largest average revenue was gained by companies with predominant mail order distribution (1359 millions US\$), followed by drug stores (742 millions US\$), do it your self markets (541 millions US\$), food service (536 millions US\$) and

department stores (338 millions US\$). Companies that use other retail formats have less than 300 millions US\$ sales revenues. The group of companies that declared to have e-commerce as a predominant form of retail activity have rather low sales revenues, only 6 millions US\$ (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Number of companies according to retail outlet formats

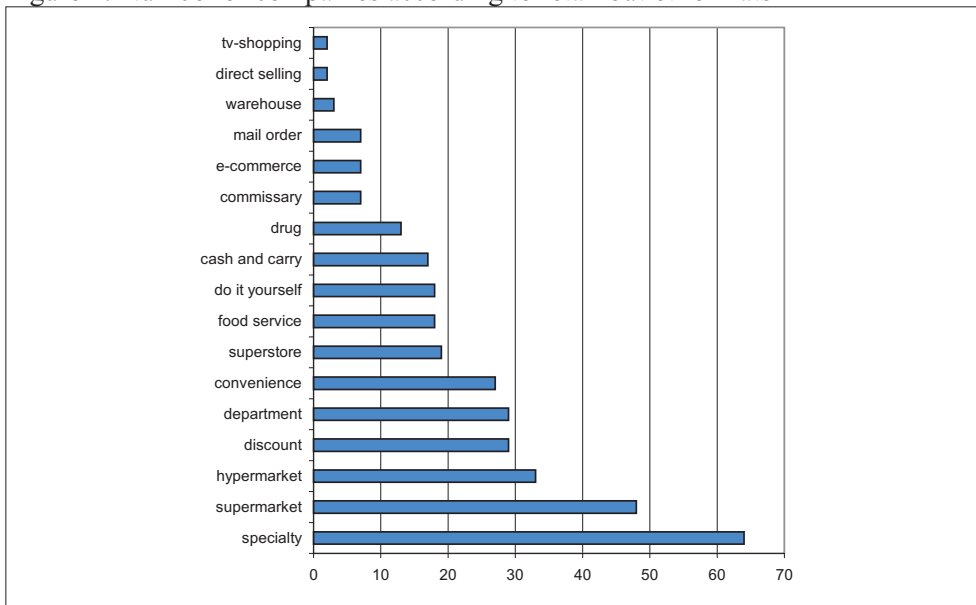
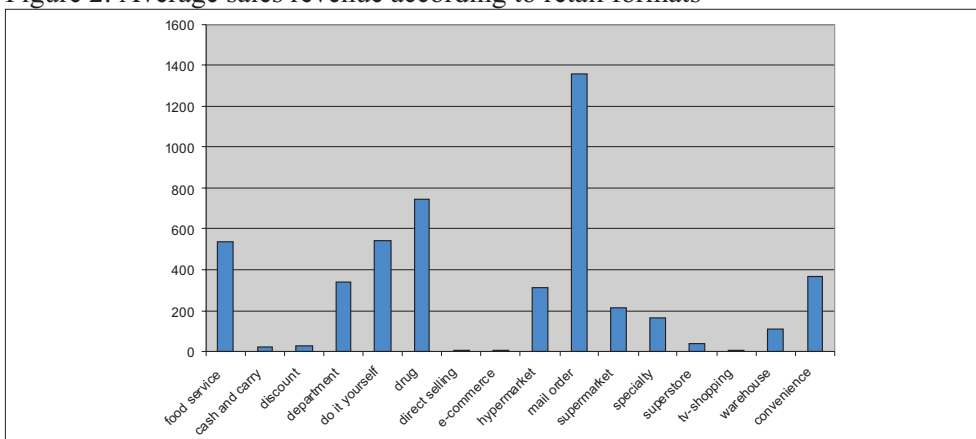
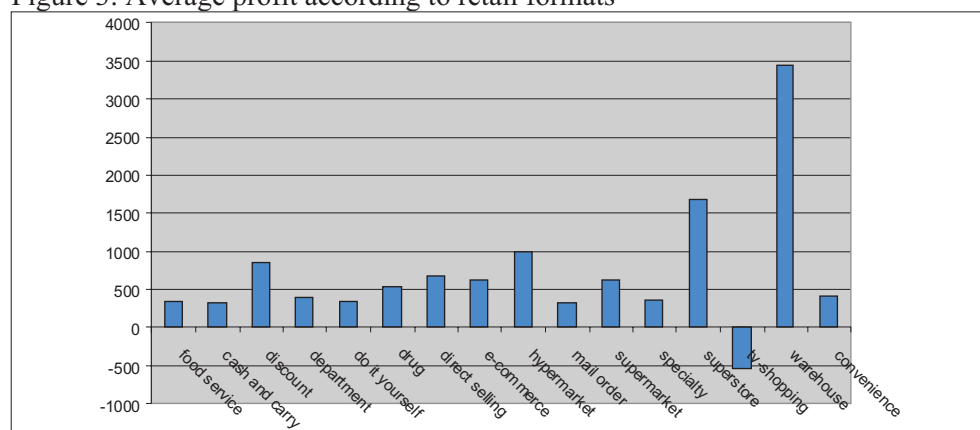


Figure 2: Average sales revenue according to retail formats



The average profit according to retail formats is shown in Figure 3. Companies that have warehouses, superstores, hypermarkets and discounts gained the highest profits. High profits are gained through direct selling, e-commerce and supermarkets. But it is interesting that those groups of companies didn't have high sales revenues (Figure 2). Companies with e-commerce activity have almost the smallest sales revenues, but at the same time they are performing with relatively high profits. The interesting fact is that Pearson's correlation coefficient of sales revenues and profits is 0,001, which means that there is no correlation between these financial measures in large retail companies.

Figure 3: Average profit according to retail formats



Research Results

Customer Communication

In the following analysis we focussed on the information important to customers and investors. Contact and description information is important for the concept generation and for gaining trust both for investors and customers. Therefore, companies publish description of a company starting with the purpose, mission and history. The description information about the company was found in almost 90.00% of the cases, while the picture of the company's physical site was found in less than 70% of the cases (see Figure 4).

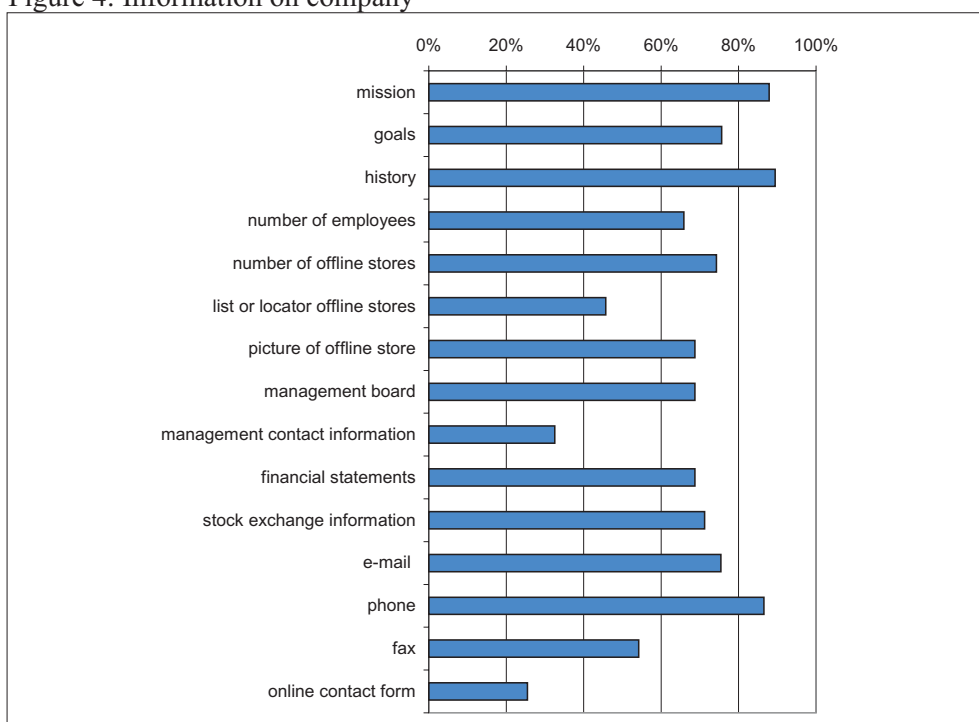
Top EU retailers publish the following contact information (Figure 4): phone number (86.8 %), fax number (54.4%), e-mail address (75.4 %), while 25.4 % have an online contact form that allows visitor to place a question directly.

In addition to customers, top EU retailers have recognized the web as the communication medium for potential investors, because on 68.4% of the web sites we found information about the current management board (mainly, the names of managers, but in only 32.5% of the cases the e-mail address of the manager was found). Also, a large number of companies publish financial statements (68.4%) and stock exchange information (71.1%).

The web offers an opportunity for global market access. Companies that adopt this approach have greater chances for success than companies which do business only on domestic markets. According to the 'Ernst & Young Special Report: Global Online Retailing' (2001), the main reason for online buying was that the product was not available in the domestic country (53% of the cases). Because of that, companies should find products and services that are unique and special, and reach the global marketplace via web sites.

The first step in opening the company to the world is the localization of the web site. Localization of the web site includes publishing and maintaining web pages in different languages. All analysed web sites were published in the English language, but only 30.7% web sites were published in some other language (German, French, Italian and so on).

Figure 4: Information on company



Information on Products and Information Regarding Online Purchasing

Information on products is the basis for making buying decisions, both for offline and online purchases. According to Forrester Research (October 2000), 29% of the online population researched products or services online to buy them offline. Online information improved the decision making process, especially for new products and luxury goods.

General characteristics of consumers' information requirements can be related to the purchasing situation and the frequency of purchasing (Sproule and Archer, 2000). When the buyer makes a decision on purchasing a new product, he looks for the concept forming information, which is unstructured in its nature. If the consumer is buying the same product, he is looking for the branding information. And, thirdly, if the customer makes frequent purchases, he looks for the situational information that is usually highly structured.

The information on products include concept forming information such as a description and the picture of a product, as well as the price and the detailed information regarding the purchasing process. The information on products will be more structured if a company sells products online than if a company only presents its products.

The analysed top EU retailers usually have online shops where customers can get all information on product and the purchasing process. Online shops were found on 80.7% of the web sites, but only in 64.9% of the cases online shops start on the homepage. In 14.9% of the cases there is a link on the homepage to an online shop. Next, we analysed the available online shops.

Firstly, we analysed the breadth and the depth of the online merchandise offered. The breadth is the number of merchandise lines carried by the store. The depth is the number of items in various colours, sizes, styles and price ranges within a merchandise line (Dunne, 2002).

In 75.0% of cases, online shops had narrower breadth and shallower depth of merchandise compared to the merchandise which can be found in real (offline) stores. For 9.6% stores we could not draw conclusions because there was no available information on the merchandise offered in offline stores. Only 14.9% of stores offered a similar merchandise mix.

Secondly, we analysed the prices of products. Price policies vary according to the type of the merchandise offered in an online shop. The most frequent policies are: odd pricing and price lining. Odd pricing means that the price is set just below a rounded selling price and typically ends in 9 because in that case customers have a perception of a lower price and tend to round prices down. On the other hand, price lining means that several price points are defined, and the merchandise is categorized into a one price line (Kent and Omar, 2003). In several online shops we found the

policy of Everyday Low Pricing (EDLP) because several product categories are sold cheaply every day in order to retain customers. In a large number of online shops special actions and promotions are visually stressed out. Also, a significant number of companies offer discounts according to the quantity and the value of the purchase.

Prices on the sites are given in Euros, but only in several cases an online converter is available (only in 5.3% of online shops).

Before the final online buying decision, customers search for information on delivery terms and costs, but also information on privacy and security of transaction. In EU countries the legislative on electronic commerce is very strict regarding those matters, so top EU retailers at their online shops specify conditions of purchase and information on privacy and security.

But, if we analyse terms of delivery, we will see that only in 15.8% cases they deliver goods outside the country of origin. Moreover, some companies are only preparing goods to be picked up by a customer in the chosen offline store (3.5%). This finding confirms the first hypothesis and we can conclude that the Web sites of top EU retailers are oriented to the local market, but this also confirms the third hypothesis which states that Web sites are aimed to attract people onto the physical retail location.

The information on post-purchasing activities such as information on service (54%), warranties (79%), return policy (85%) and user instruction (35%) can usually be found in online shops and they are often linked with the product description.

Information for Creating Favourable Shopping Environment

Consumer expectations of the shopping experience influence the levels of pleasure experienced. Moreover, the impact of 'the store's atmosphere' creates a retail image in the shopper's mind with the atmosphere influencing consumer behaviour by creating attention, through messages and through affective response (McGoldrick, 1998).

Today's consumers desire a comfortable shopping environment. Consumers will choose to shop in a positive and helpful retail environment. An inviting atmosphere not only brings people into the store, but also keeps them there longer and makes them return to the store again. Studies show that the longer shoppers remain in a store, the more money they are likely to spend (Van den Poel and Leunis, 1999, Boyer and Hult, 2006).

In order to create a favourable shopping environment, a retailer has to influence all senses of the customer. Therefore, in offline retail outlets, a shopping atmosphere is created by: original design of the store, effective organization of a retail space,

different levels of lighting, favourable air conditioning, taste and try areas, different colours and music etc. (Kent and Omar, 2003).

In addition to a well formed merchandise mix and a favourable price policy, the shopping atmosphere also plays an important role in online shopping. For creating favourable online shopping environment, companies use different tools and techniques such as: 3D product images, digital gifts (downloadable wallpapers, games and brochures), online games, music, flash animations etc.

Interactivity of the online shop improves customer perception of the company and facilitates buying decision-making process. Therefore, companies find ways to make shops more interactive by building in: search tools, price comparison tools, as well as personalization and recommendation agents (Häubl and Trifts, 2000).

European top retailers use those tools and techniques at different levels. Table 3 shows the frequency of usage of selected online shopping environment creators. The most common features are a search tool and FAQ (frequently asked question). At the same time offer personalization and price comparison tool are found in less than 10% cases.

Table 3: Top EU retailers - Usage of online shopping environment creators

Type	# of companies	% companies
3D product presentation	35	31%
digital gifts	68	60%
FAQ	109	96%
flash animation	72	63%
interesting facts	45	39%
music	47	41%
news	98	86%
offline awards	12	11%
online games	37	32%
personalized offer	9	8%
price comparison tool	2	2%
quizzes	18	16%
search tool	111	97%

Data presented in table 3 show that top EU retailers still have an opportunity to improve their sites in order to create a favourable shopping environment. For instance, online games, flash animations, news, interesting facts and quizzes are good

ways to keep their customers longer on the site and to stimulate them to come back to the site. Since the majority of these improvements require faster Internet connections it is important to notice a growing number of Internet DSL Broadband subscribers in recent years as a developing environment for such services. So it is necessary to point out that among top 20 countries with the highest number of Internet Broadband subscribers in 2004, 11 countries were from Europe (Data source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>, 20.06.2006).

3D product presentations supplement customer's perception of the product to some extent. They are very important features when selling products of great value and design such as: cell phones, furniture, necklaces, toys, sunglasses, apparel, shoes and so on.

A personalized offer is usually based on consumer's previous purchase and it is a potential value adding feature because on a given recommendation, the customer can make a decision on the purchase in a shorter time.

The Analysis of Web Site Content of Top EU Retail Companies

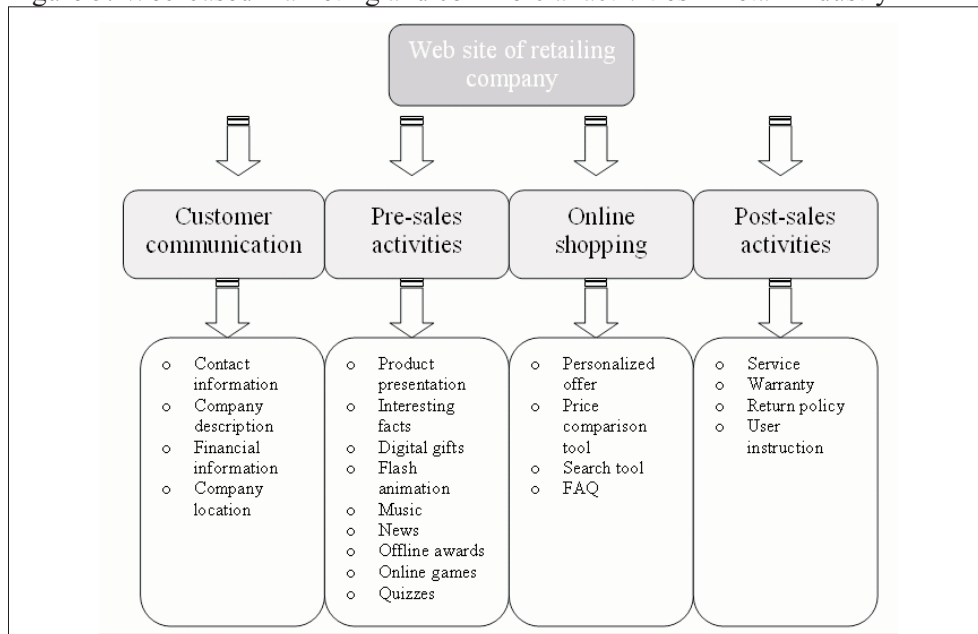
People use the Internet for many different reasons, from entertainment to education and shopping. As the number of Internet users is increasing, more and more people use web sites to get additional information on companies and products. Moreover, the number of online shoppers is also increasing. In 1999, 35% of the citizens of the EU were Internet users, 14% shopped online. (Report: Just numbers, European Commission – Electronic Commerce Team, January 2001).

According to ITU (International Telecommunication Union) at the beginning of 2006 there were 1,018,057,389 Internet users in the world, which means that 15.7 % of the world population is using the Internet. There are 230,097,055 Internet users in the EU which means that every second EU citizen uses the Internet, and in the past 5 years the number of users has grown by 47%. In countries which are EU candidates (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Turkey) the average percentage of the population using the Internet was 17.3%, but in the last 5 years the number of users has grown dramatically and tripled. Currently in some countries it is above 25% (Bulgaria 28.5% and Croatia 29.2%, according to <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, 20.06.2006).

Therefore, the web is potentially a good communication channel to reach targeted audiences because the web offers a great opportunity to develop a one-to-one marketing approach to the target audience and to personalize the message according to the interests of individual customers across the world (Treese and Stewart, 1999). The concept of web usage for business communication purposes includes publishing information on companies and product information.

When a web site is published, potential customers can enter it from any location in the world in three basic ways: typing the URL address of a company into the web browser, following the hyperlink from another web site, or searching the web by using a search engine.

Figure 5: Web-based marketing and commercial activities in retail industry



The purpose of the web site will be fulfilled only if a high accessibility and visibility of the site is enabled. This means that the company has to conduct different offline and online marketing activities in order to improve the accessibility to the web site. Among other approaches, online e-marketing activities include registering the web site onto different search engines.

The multi-channel approach or 'brick-and-click' e-commerce is an ongoing trend in the world. The approach is based on the assumption that traditional companies should combine their competitive advantages, such as their existing brands and logistic models, with the Internet technology to reach a larger, global market share. Because of that, traditional companies develop their web sites to become important communication and distribution channels.

The biggest retail companies form the basis for economic growth and development. Therefore, it is important to see how they accept the web for running their business. At the beginning of the research we assumed that global top retailers

do use the web as a communication and distribution channel. Also, we assumed that web sites make part of overall business strategies in the global retail industry.

In the retail industry, marketing and commercial activities on Web sites can be divided into four basic activities: customer communication, pre-sales activities, online shopping and post-sales activities (Figure 5). Pre-sales marketing activities include: product presentation, contents for customer attraction and retention (interesting facts, digital gifts, flash animation, music, news, offline awards, online games and quizzes). These contents are compatible with the idea that it is not enough to open a Web site and wait for customers to come onto it, but that it is necessary to be proactive in attracting and retaining customers to the site. The most successful concept is build upon four elements: content, transaction, trust and sale. In other words, online-shops attract visitors to come onto the Web site through interesting and attractive contents, then slowly build trust and after several visits visitors start shopping online.

Online shopping activities are: offer personalization, built-in price comparison tool and search tool, but also FAQ. Functions such as: service description, warranty, return policy, and user instruction presentation are post-sales customer support components.

The fourth hypothesis was that the majority of Web site contents of retail companies are connected to customer communication and pre-sales activities, while the minority of contents exists for influencing online shopping and post-sales activities.

Table 4: Average number of elements and standard deviation according to content groups

Content group	Average number of elements	Standard deviation
Customer communication	6,9649	1,5511
Pre-sales activities	4,5877	1,2678
Online shopping	1,2281	,4984
Post-sales activities	2,0789	1,3771

Table 4 shows the data on a number of elements within different content groups. On average, Web sites have 6 elements connected with customer communication. It is necessary to point out that within this group there is a low standard deviation. The number of elements for pre-sales activities is also high (7), but there is a high standard deviation within this group. That means that some companies have strong marketing activities on their web sites before sales, while some others have extremely weak

pre-sales activities. On the other hand, the number of elements concerning online shopping and post-sales activities is low.

Table 5: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) for average number of elements according to content group

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value
Between Groups	2301,096	3	767,032	498,243	,000
Within Groups	695,842	452	1,539		
Total	2996,939	455			

In order to examine the significance of the deviation we made an analysis of variance (ANOVA). ANOVA showed that the average number of elements is significantly statistically different within the content group at the level of significance of 1%. Values of ANOVA are shown in Table 5.

Our fourth hypothesis was that there is a correlation between contents of the web site and business success measured by company profits. In Table 6 we show Pearson's correlation coefficients between profit, revenue and number of elements according to different content groups.

The sales revenue has a correlation coefficient near to zero for customer communication which means that there is no correlation between the level of revenue and the number of content elements on the web site of a company. The correlation coefficient for pre-sales marketing activities and the sales revenue is low which means that there is weak positive correlation between pre-sales activities contents and sales revenues. But, it is interesting that online shopping and post-sales content elements are in negative correlation with the sales revenue, which means that the larger the company is (according to sales revenue), the lower is the probability that it will have a lot of content within this content group. A possible explanation is that the largest retail companies still do not recognize online shopping as their strategic distribution channel.

On the other hand, the profit has low but positive correlation coefficients within all content groups. It is particularly interesting that for online shopping and post-sales activities those coefficients are slightly higher. It seems that companies which have recognized online shopping as an additional distribution channel have a chance to gain slightly higher profits.

Table 6: Pearson's correlation coefficients of sales revenue and profits according to the number of elements in the content group

Content group	Sales revenue	Profit
Customer communication	0,004	0,067
Pre-sales activities	0,098	0,078
Online shopping	-0,044	0,118
Post-sales activities	-0,071	0,127

Conclusions

This paper has given the results of the research on usage of the web in large EU companies. Contents and structure of web sites of top EU retail companies were analysed and the following hypotheses were tested:

The web sites of top EU retailers are oriented to the local market. The hypothesis is confirmed through the following finding. On the majority of the web sites surveyed, the physical location is described together with instructions or even a map for easy access. Moreover, the offline shop locator on some sites is programmed giving the customers a possibility to search for the nearest physical retail location. Also, a significant number of companies deliver goods within the country of operation, while 16% of them deliver in a narrow geographic area (in the area of 30 km from the physical location). In extreme cases (3.5 %) companies even force customers to come to the physical location to get their ordered goods (pick up delivery).

Web sites of top EU retailers are mostly oriented to customer communication and pre-sales marketing activities, and not on post-sales activities. The ANOVA analysis was conducted and it showed that most contents on the web sites are related to the above mentioned activities.

Web sites are oriented to attracting customers to the physical location, which can be concluded on the basis of an offline retail locator. Customers are invited to come to the physical location in order to get the goods or some kind of online earned awards.

There is a correlation between contents of the web site, the sales revenue and profits of a company. This hypothesis is partially confirmed. Profits are positively correlated with all content groups (customer communication, pre-sales activities, online shopping, post-sales activities). The strongest correlation is between profits and post-sales activities which imply that good customer relations after sales are the key for gaining higher profits. Nevertheless, sales revenue is in positive correlation

only with pre-sales activities, while there is a weak negative correlation between sales revenue and online shopping and post-sales activities.

On the basis of given research results, we can conclude that in the forthcoming period e-commerce will develop both on the global and the local level because its development is the way to reach higher company profitability. Developments will be achieved in two different areas: in communication with customers and the development of e-tailers, but also in communication with businesses i.e. development of the B2B models. Traditional retailers should adopt the ongoing global trend of building brick-and-click models of business and include e-commerce into existing business policies. In this research we have investigated the usage of the web among top EU retailers.

All top EU retailers have web sites and they have included the web into their business strategies. For top EU retailers the web as a communication channel is mainly oriented to customers and investors. Information on the company is structured according to information requirements of those groups of users. For instance, the information on management, financial plans and stock exchange information are very important for investors, so a large number of top EU retailers give them on their web sites.

The web is used as a direct distribution channel mainly for the domestic market. Deliveries can be made only in a narrow geographic area. Only several retailers offer the possibility of delivering goods to different countries. And only 30% of the sites are published in two or more languages.

Upon the fact that merchandise in online shops is usually different than merchandise in offline stores, we can conclude that top EU retailers treat the web as a separate component of their business strategy. Companies probably have special e-commerce departments responsible for the structure and the accuracy of web merchandise and their price policy, but that claim should be further researched.

As the biggest retailers are accelerators of economic growth, it is important to continue monitoring their ways of accepting and using information technology for running their businesses. Retail companies should develop models in which they will add value to the transaction in order to become high quality intermediaries. During the research process, we found that the minority of companies personalize the content of web sites for different user interest groups. To conclude, for the top EU retailers, personalization of web contents and of web offer could be a potential added value for their customers.

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