

Communicating Eco-Friendly Products on the Social Network Facebook and Groundswell Management

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Abstract: The paper deals with the marketing communication of eco-friendly products on the social network Facebook. It provides an overview of the specifics of marketing communication of eco-friendly products and also tackles the need to raise awareness of eco-innovation. Based on the literature and analyses review the paper provides an overview of the current state of this issue emphasizing the importance of social networks in promoting and communicating eco-friendly products. The paper focuses on key aspects of marketing communication of eco-innovations and eco-friendly products, as well as the use of social networks in marketing communication. The paper also addresses the phenomenon of the groundswell – a social trend widespread on social media which affects marketing communication. Moreover, the paper presents the views of various authors on this phenomenon and also outlines research on the topic emphasizing its individual aspects, in particular the impact the groundswell has on the eco-friendly products marketing communication and its fundamental attributes.

Keywords: Eco-friendly products. Groundswell. Marketing communication. Social networks.

1. Introduction

Given the environmental degradation, ecological issues and eco-innovation have become the topics of the utmost importance, especially since the 1960s. This gave rise to the concept of social marketing (later a holistic concept) – a branch of marketing which focuses on the environmental aspect of business.

The concept of socially responsible business is currently widespread in various areas of business, including wholesale and retail. Supermarkets with their ever-increasing market share are thus directly involved in the consumption of their goods and thus bear responsibility for the environmental impact of increasing consumption.

As Čábyová and Krajčovič (2020) state, in terms of building a competitive advantage, it is important not only to implement these activities, but also to communicate them in a suitable way to the public.

The increased environmental awareness among customers had been one of the key drivers for the companies to produce green products (Ottman et al., 2006). However, as Rahbar and Wahid (2011) emphasize, sales of green products have not grown as expected, although consumers' awareness has increased over the years.

Marketing communication of eco-innovations and activities of socially responsible behavior has its specifics. According to Grib and Záušková (2017), we can look at the issue from two standpoints. The first standpoint is all about communicating eco-innovations and thus increasing awareness and improving the image of the company. The second standpoint targets ecological solutions and their use in marketing of socially responsible business activities of the company.

The use of social media for marketing eco-friendly products is a significant step towards building awareness of such products, as well as an opportunity to promote their direct sales. As emphasized by Baverstam and Larsson (2009) being 'green' or 'eco' conveys the image of an eco-efficient brand which is very important for any company seeking to build brand equity.

Krajčovič (2021a) claims that in the field of eco-innovation, the use of social media and social networks is equally important. Given the importance of innovation and the need for green solutions, these concepts have proven essential particularly when it comes to raising awareness of eco-friendly products, green services, as well as other green options available to customers.

The use of social media for marketing communication depends on the level of social penetration and the average daily social media usage. In 2021 there were 4.55 billion active social media users, which means 57.6% of the

global population. Annual change in the number of global social media users is + 409 million (Digital Report, 2021).

In Slovakia there were an estimated 4.13 million social networking users in 2021. This figure is projected to increase to 4.41 million social media users in 2026.

2. The groundswell phenomenon and its impact on raising awareness of eco-innovation

The development of information technologies, higher availability of the Internet and the sharp increase in social media users have caused a significant change in consumer as well as media behavior. Several authors (Sutter, 2010; Westerman, Spence, van der Heide, 2014; Krajčovič, 2021b) point to the trend of using social media as the main source of information.

The use of social media to obtain various information instead of using official sources is known as the groundswell phenomenon. Li and Bernoff (2011) define the groundswell as a social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions. In this regard, technologies mean social networks, blogs, applications or other tools that allow us to obtain the necessary information or share it.

The use of social media to obtain and search for information is not a modern phenomenon. More than 10 years ago, Pepitone (2010) said that newer communication technologies have increased the possibilities for how people can send and receive information. Social media are one such technology that has seen increased usage as an information source. According to Westerman et al. (2014), social media is increasingly used as an information source, including information on risks and crises. Sutter (2010) points out that social media are being used to seek information about serious topics, such as circulating up-to-the minute information about cholera outbreaks in Haiti and identifying clean water sources during this outbreak.

The groundswell phenomenon is a natural consequence of the three forces - people, technology and the economy. According to Li and Bernoff (2011), the human desire for communication, new interactive technologies and the online economy have created a new era in which the crowd can actively participate in the development of the company.

3. Aims and methodology

The aim of the paper is to examine the way the three largest food retailers in Slovakia use the social network Facebook and to compare resulting parameters. Moreover, the way the companies in question use Facebook to promote eco-friendly products through marketing communication strategies will also be examined.

The paper analyzed the way the three biggest food retailers in Slovakia communicate on Facebook, in particular KAUF LAND Slovenská republika v.o.s., LIDL Slovenská republika, v.o.s. and TESCO STORES SR, a.s.

As part of the analysis, the official profile pages of these companies on the social network Facebook were examined and compared. The emphasize was placed on the following parameters: number of followers, number of posts, number of interactions, number of comments, number of shares and total number of responses over a period of one year, from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021. Data were obtained using of the CrowdTangle analytical tool and subsequently processed and evaluated by the author of the paper.

As part of the analysis of marketing communication of eco-friendly products, the number of sponsored posts on the social network Facebook over the specified period was also analyzed. The data was obtained directly from the publicly available profile pages of individual companies on the social network Facebook using the Ad Library tool.

4. Discussion

The results showed that the largest number of followers on the social network Facebook was recorded for the company LIDL (515,571), followed by KAUF LAND (287,709) and TESCO (204,293). The number of followers varies considerably, especially for LIDL, which is the leader in the number of followers compared to other hypermarkets. However, in neither case did we record a significant drop in followers. The overview of the number of followers over the specific period is shown in Figure 1.

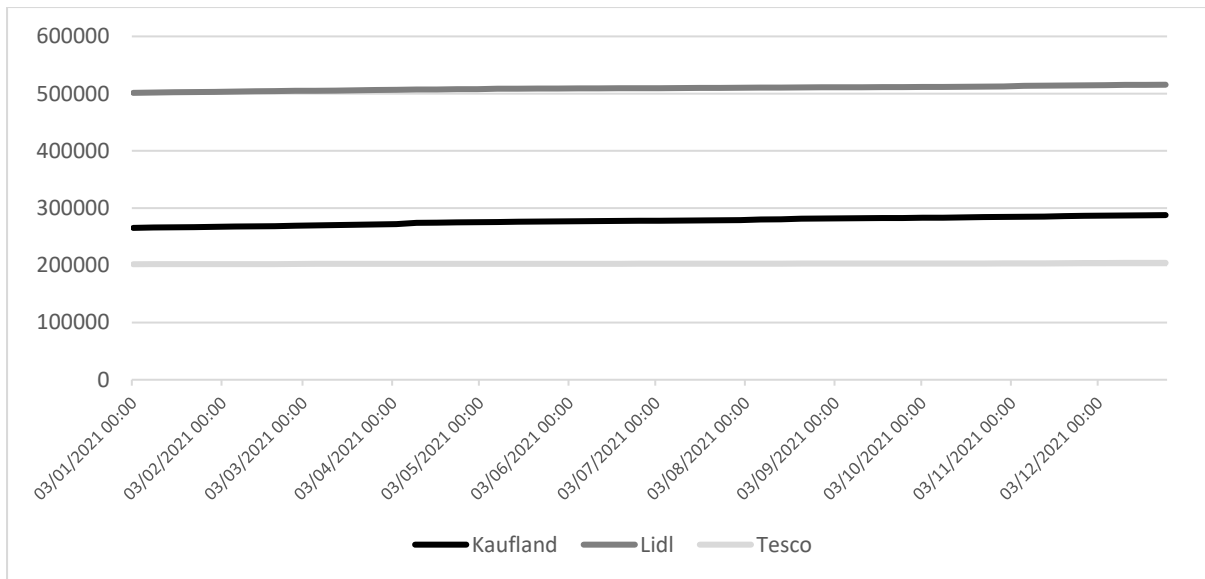


Figure 1: The overview of the number of followers of LIDL, KAUF LAND and TESCO in 2021

Source: personal collection, 2022 (data: CrowdTangle®)

A similar trend could be observed in data for 2020. The number of followers and their growth is directly dependent on the economic results of individual companies. While LIDL achieved a profit of € 126,371,000 (Finstat, 2021) and recorded 500,944 followers in 2020, KAUF LAND achieved a profit of € 64,804,270 (Finstat, 2021) and recorded 264,895 followers in 2020. TESCO achieved a profit of € 49,026,000 in 2020 (Finstat, 2021) and recorded 201,746 followers. It could therefore be assumed that followers on social networks represent the customers and the growth in the number of followers is a manifestation of consumer behavior and their interest in buying the products sold by these companies. This fact is also confirmed by the rate of increase in profit and the growth in followers. The sales of LIDL Slovenská republika, v.o.s. in 2020 increased by 10% (Finstat, 2021), the number of followers increased by 6.26%. The sales of KAUF LAND Slovenská republika v.o.s. in 2020 increased by 8% (Finstat, 2021), the number of followers increased by 12.69%. The sales of TESCO STORES SR, a.s. in 2020 fell by 3% (Finstat, 2021) and although it recorded an increase in the number of followers, this is the lowest increase from among the analyzed companies (by 2.96%).

Although the individual data do not show a direct relationship and the dependence of these variables has not been examined, the data show a certain trend that requires further research.

The next section analyzed the number of posts, comments and shares on individual profiles, as well as the overall interactions. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1.

The results showed that the largest number of posts was published by LIDL, both in 2020 and in 2021. It has also been found that LIDL recorded the highest values in the total number of interactions, comments, shares and reactions. The largest differences between the companies examined were recorded in terms of the total number of interactions and reactions.

The next section examined the structure of the posts, in particular whether the posts contained photos, links, video or text as well as interactions with individual types of posts.

Table 1: Number of posts, comments and shares on each profile, and overall interactions with social network users

post count	2020	2021
KAUFLAND	452	537
LIDL	563	758
TESCO	339	446
total interactions	2020	2021
KAUFLAND	434,656	457,061
LIDL	1,092,640	1,152,195
TESCO	89,596	45,377
comments	2020	2021
KAUFLAND	133,305	169,035
LIDL	306,689	385,836
TESCO	21,424	11,552
shares	2020	2021
KAUFLAND	56,075	42,109
LIDL	126,631	91,514
TESCO	9,934	6,217
total reactions	2020	2021
KAUFLAND	245,276	245,917
LIDL	659,320	674,845
TESCO	58,238	27,608

Source: personal collection, 2022 (data: CrowdTangle®)

The results of the analysis show that photographs is the most frequently shared type of post (also with the highest average interaction rate). Posts that contain photos can thus be considered more successful than posts that do not contain photos. Success in this sense is expressed by the average number of interactions – i.e. likes, emoticons, comments, or shares.

More detailed results are shown in Tables 2a and 2b.

Table 2a: Structure of posts, the number of posts and the generated interaction for the period of 2021 - the analyzed companies

	Photos		Links		Text posts	
	Number	avg. Interaction rate	Number	avg. Interaction rate	Number	avg. Interaction rate
KAUFLAND	305	0.47%	3	0.01%	1	0.01%
LIDL	620	0.33%	13	0.06%	28	0.13%
TESCO	316	0.07%	36	0.01%	0	0

Source: personal collection, 2022 (data: CrowdTangle®)

Table 2b: Structure of posts, the number of posts and the generated interaction for the period of 2021 - the analyzed companies

	FB Video		FB Live		YouTube Video	
	Number	avg. Interaction rate	Number	avg. Interaction rate	Number	avg. Interaction rate
KAUFLAND	209	0.08%	1	0.42%	18	0.17%
LIDL	95	0.18%	0	0	2	0.06%
TESCO	94	0.05%	0	0	0	0

Source: personal collection, 2022 (data: CrowdTangle®)

In the next part, the promotion of eco-friendly products on the social network Facebook was analyzed. The attention was paid to sponsored posts. All three companies declare they are socially responsible business.

In the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, KAUFLAND launched a total of 10 advertising campaigns on the social network Facebook, specifically in April, June, July, September and November. Of the total number of campaigns, 3 campaigns focused on eco-innovation, one of which was directly dedicated to eco-friendly products K-Take.

In the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, LIDL launched a total of 4 advertising campaigns on the social network Facebook, none of which addressed eco-friendly products.

In the period from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021, TESCO launched a total of 18 campaigns on the social network Facebook. The campaigns included a total of 22 posts, all of which focused on socially responsible business activities, in particular food collection, reducing emissions from food waste and supporting CSR projects.

The largest number of sponsored posts regarding social responsibility was posted by TESCO. It should be noted, however, that TESCO uses the social network Facebook the least of the researched companies.

5. Conclusion

The results of the analysis showed that although all companies are actively promoting socially responsible business activities and all are active users of the social network Facebook, none of them have strong targeted marketing communication regarding eco-friendly products. Between 1 January and 31 December 2021, only one company, KAUF LAND, promoted the eco-friendly products via the social network Facebook. Given the overall extent and intensity of the use of this social network, the results of the analysis pointed to a huge potential (the audience) for the communication of eco-friendly products.

The authors' previous research also pointed out that companies are not systematic in their use of social networks and some even do not know how to use these efficiently.

The results of the research conducted on a sample of 300 businesses operating in the Slovak Republic, showed that almost half of companies (49.7%) communicate their socially responsible business activities to the public while active approach to the environmental protection was declared by more than 55% companies. An interesting finding, however, is that almost 65% of business entities that communicate socially responsible business activities to the public communicate about these activities only occasionally. Only 30% of companies communicate such messages regularly while the remaining companies were not able to assess the frequency. The results of the research also showed that businesses are unable to make full use of the potential of individual tools and limit communication almost exclusively to the introduction of new products or their promotion. It has been found that only 35% of companies systematically created and published content regarding their eco-friendly products and eco-innovations. 66% of companies researched stated that they share such content occasionally (Čábyová, Krajčovič, 2020).

The results of the analysis showed that although the companies analyzed use the social network Facebook to communicate with their target audience regularly, they do not communicate or promote eco-friendly products. Given the number of followers, there is a significant potential to reach the audience in this regard.

The positive impact of the promotion of eco-friendly products is also emphasized by Rahim et al. (2012), who argues that the promotion of the green products among youth through the celebrities would have a positive impact and would influence the propensity to use the green product.

Yadav and Pathak (2016) emphasize that consumers' attitude towards eco-friendly products played an important role in intention to purchase the green product. We assume that social networks are a suitable tool for building awareness of eco-friendly products the sale of which still does not reach the desired levels (eco-friendly products are seen as an alternative and not a main option). This is confirmed by another study (Mostafa, 2009) that pointed out that consumers having a positive attitude towards green products would form a positive opinion regarding the purchase of green products.

The importance of the use of social networks also lies in the groundswell, as outlined at the beginning of the paper. More and more people use social networks not only to share photos and communicate with friends, but also to search for information. Therefore, the communication and promotion of eco-friendly products on social networks can significantly help in obtaining information about these products directly from the source, i.e. the companies that offer / produce them. The consumer will thus receive direct information and answers to potential questions. The study by Bedard and Tolmie (2018) on the effect of social media usage and online

interpersonal influence on the intent to purchase the green product revealed a strong influence of social media on green product purchase intentions.

6. Limitations and scope for future research

The paper focused exclusively on the analysis of data regarding communication of selected companies on the social network Facebook. The paper did not examine the views of social network users on communication and eco-friendly products, as these will be subject of further research. The aim of this paper was to point out the potential of the social network Facebook in promoting and communicating eco-friendly products and its current underuse in the communication strategies of the three largest supermarkets in Slovakia.

The selected period (one year) could also be seen as a limitation. Further research could focus on longer period of time and compare data across individual years.

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