



Corporate Communication in Social Media in Latvia

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Abstract. Such social media as blogs and micro-blogs, social networks, content communities, forums and wiki are becoming increasingly popular among users in Latvia. It also motivates companies to communicate in this environment. Brands create their profiles in social networks, write blogs and communicate in forums, as well as publish videos. However, crucial issue here is whether companies use social media in their communication pursuant to the specifics of this environment. Upon conducting a survey of 420 Latvian companies and in-depth interviews with social media experts, I was also able to clarify some trends in the communication of Latvian companies, which have target audiences in the social media. These research findings are significant as they show that social media enter a small country, where the communication area is comparatively new. The difficulties are enhanced by the lack of experience among communication specialists in relation to social media, as well as the inability to change their communication strategy from “creating message” to forming a dialogue, which leads to a “trial-and-error” method, when not all possibilities are employed.

Keywords: social media, corporate communication, Latvia

Introduction

European Communication Monitor, which has been created by surveying 2,209 communication experts in 43 countries, indicates that in 2011 in 39.6% respondent companies had guidelines for communication in social media in place

(and 31.8% planned to do it as early as in 2011), 33.3% used instruments for the communication among interested parties in social media (25.9% planned to start it in 2011), whereas 21.3% had introduced training courses about communication in social media (25.7% planned to do it in 2011). As regards the question about the key instruments for addressing interested parties, in 2007 only 11.5% of respondents mentioned social media compared to 40.5% in 2011. These data indicate that the role of social media in the corporate communication in Europe is growing steadily.

The task of this study is, through setting Latvia as an example, to disclose the trends and patterns characteristic of a small country with a short history in the field of communication.

Definitions of Social Media

Bernie Hogan and Anabel Quan-Haase (2010) call social media a moving target as they constantly change similarly to human habits related to their use. The authors point out that it complicates a number of research directions. For instance, in their opinion it is not possible to provide a definite answer to the question what the long-term development of social media will be like, or it is not possible to define the only and ideal way of self-representation in social media. The task of defining social media may also prove to be challenging.

Komito and Bates (2009) define social media as Internet applications, which ensure an enhanced interaction among Internet users through the user-generated content. Such content may differ and includes photos, videos and textual comments.

Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) characterises social media as online applications, platforms and media targeted at making the interaction, cooperation and content exchange easier. The significance of social media is associated with the possibility of interaction between the user and community, and such interaction is characterised by nonsynchronism, directness and low costs. Patti Anklam (2009) defines social media as a set of software tools and Internet applications, which ensure development of human relations and are personalised by identifying individuals by name.

As a synonym to social media, Tim O'Reilly's (2005) *Web 2.0* concept is mentioned: it combines Internet technologies, which envisage the user's participation in content creation and updating. For example, it includes blogs, or the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia. Such resources are also called 'user generated content' resources. For the first time, the concept *Web 2.0* was used in 2004–2005 in order to describe a new generation of Internet services. The discovery of new programming approaches also meant new opportunities, which programmers started to use to be able to offer innovative options. Internet users became

increasingly involved in Internet sites they used – in addition to visiting statistical sites, they could also take an active part in creating the website content.

In the context of social media, there is a significant concept *social networking sites/ social networking platforms*, which are defined as Internet sites that facilitate social interaction through profiled user accounts (Keenan and Shiri, 2009). Social networking platforms (Draugiem.lv in Latvia or Facebook globally) enhance user opportunities to establish connections with two primary characteristics: 1) the ability to organise and demonstrate human interconnections; 2) publishing of content and activity updates (Anklam, 2009). Furthermore, social networking sites are considered to be the major operational environment in *WEB 2.0* communication (Anklam, 2010).

Evidently, the definitions by various authors describe the same resources under such concepts as social media, *WEB 2.0* and social networks. As a synonym, the concept ‘new media’ is also used. In this article, social media is used in a broader sense of this word, which includes *WEB 2.0* resources as user-generated content, as well as social networks, which organise user connections and simplify communication. Within the framework of this article, social media means Internet resources, which are based on user-generated content and enable organising user interaction and communication. This article will focus on such social media as blogs, social networks (e.g., Draugiem.lv, Facebook), micro blogs (Twitter), wikis (*Wikipedia*), forums and content-based communities (YouTube, Flickr).

Research and definition of corporate communication

There is an assumption that corporate communication is more art than science. Its origins stem from ancient Greece and Rome - from rhetoric. Corporate communication is considered to be an interdisciplinary academic field, which includes such sciences as anthropology, communication, language and linguistics, sociology, psychology, management and marketing. In the academic environment this concept is predominantly associated with public relations (Goodman, 1994).

In the course of time approaches to the functions and roles of corporate communication have changed, which manifests itself in different theoreticians' works. Thus, in 1974 Drucker was among the first authors, who pointed out that communication is not a means, but rather a mode of business management therefore communication should not be viewed as a supportive process, but an element of process organization. As a rule, research of marketing communication is practice-driven. In 1995, Buttle analysed 101 marketing communication texts and concluded that more than 70 texts did not quote any theoretical sources, but offered statements in line with Schramm or Shannon's and Weaver's ideas. In turn, Cheney and Christensen maintain that corporate communication has grown out of a predominantly practical context and, at a later stage, has developed a theoretical

machinery to support analysis and legitimization of professional practice. Furthermore, Christensen and Torp believe that corporate communication should focus on developing the involvement in the co-creation of communicated meanings achieving a common understanding and responsibility through communication (Hübner, 2007).

Dolphin (2000/1999) argues that corporate communication has originated from public relations. The aim of public relations is to create, develop and multiply the relations between organisations and their communities. The relations are characterised as a set of expectations shared by all parties with respect to mutual behaviour (Kim and Rader, 2010).

As a result of summarizing the most popular public relations theories of the last two decades, Botan and Taylor conclude that this period has been dominated by James Grunig's *Symmetry/Excellence Theory*, and the latest trend in public relations is a transition from functionalism to a co-creational perspective, when society is believed to be a co-creator, and the significance of establishing long-term relations with the audiences is recognised (Hazleton and Botan, 2006).

In order to understand the nuances of the concept of corporate communication, let us look into the approaches of various authors.

Argenti and Forman define *corporate communication* as a company's voice and image, which the company develops on the world stage consisting of various audiences. This field includes such components as corporate reputation, corporate advertising and advocacy, communication with employees, relations with investors, relations with the government, media relations and crisis communication. The authors call corporate communication a 'function'. In turn, *corporate communications* are defined by Argenti and Forman as communication products: memos, letters, reports, websites, speeches, press releases (Argenti, Forman, 2002).

Paul Argenti writes that corporate communication has become a new and important governmental function thanks to the development of the Internet, an increased speed of information availability, a growing public scepticism with regard to the company's ambitions and an 'attractive packaging' of information, as well as the overall company structure has become more complex. Argenti believes that, in this changing business environment, it is imperative that companies pursue a 'strategic' communication.

The author states that in companies the concept 'corporate communication' is used to describe four different aspects of communication: 1) a function, e.g., marketing, 2) a communication channel, 3) a communication process, 4) an attitude or set of beliefs. Argenti writes that all these aspects keep changing as a result of development of modern technologies. Communication becomes more dynamic, thus companies are forced to react and establish a dialogue with society (Argenti, 2006, 358.). This is the stage where social media may be useful.

Argenti emphasises that, thanks to the development of social media, the possibilities of social communication are widening. However, he points out that due to this the control over corporate communication shifts from the company management to the relevant stakeholders. In this context the author mentions that because of social media corporate communication undergoes changes, which are related not as much with instruments, as with strategies. Social media encourage the shift from the *push* to *pull* strategy, as well as help to turn the stakeholders into *company evangelists* – people who accumulate around themselves people and promote a product, service or idea among them (Argenti and Barnes, 2009).

Cees van Reil (2003) defines corporate communication as the orchestration of all instruments of the organisation's identity (communication, symbols, participants' behaviour) to build and improve the reputation of the organisation from the perspective of those groups, on whom its activity depends. According to Van Reil, the concept 'corporate communication' involves a coordinated approach to developing the organisation's communication. It should be such that communication specialists can use it for rationalising their communication activities within a centralised, coordinated framework (Van Reil and Fombrun, 2007).

As opposed to Argenti, who believes that the focus of corporate communication is the strategic planning process, Van Reil's approach to corporate communication, defined in 1992, is based on three communication platforms: 1) *management communication* – communication implemented by the management and also called the main form of the organisation's communication by the author. In this case management includes all people, who have an impact on both the internal and external stakeholders; 2) *marketing communication* – advertising, direct mail, sponsorship etc; 3) *organizational communication* - public relations, investor relations, job market communication, corporate advertising, environmental communication, internal communication (Van Reil, 1995/1992).

The author also refers to the *Mirror Function*, which requires following the development and predicting the impact on the audience. Although Van Reil's works do not contain references to social media, it is the *Mirror Function*, which becomes a significant component of corporate communication in the environment of social media as monitoring of the audience's statements and comments is an important source of planning corporate communication (Van Reil and Fombrun, 2007).

Manfred Bruhn emphasises that the majority of corporate communication theories advocate an integrated approach to various communication activities. However, he criticises the lack of focus regarding the structure of corporate communication. In 2003, Bruhn defined the integrated corporate communication as a process of organisation and planning targeted at the establishment of a single set of various sources of internal and external communication provided by the organisation. According to the author, it is the only way of ensuring a consistent appearance of the company in society (Hübner, 2007).

Bruhn does not characterise the inclusion of social media in corporate communication as a revolution of communication process emphasising that the company's strategy and profit principle are the basic principles, which still determine corporate communication in the age of social media (Dietrich, 2010).

In 2004, Cornelissen proposed his approach to corporate communication on the basis of the *functional management theory*. He defines corporate communication as a management function, which provides means for coordinating all elements of communication to build and improve a favourable reputation from the perspective of those interested groups, which the organisation depends on. The author's definition contains a new concept – 'stakeholders'. Cornelissen explains that it shows a drive towards a more definite view, when an organisation formulates several groups, which it depends on. The application of the stakeholders' concept in the context of corporate communication means that the interdependence among the company and certain groups is recognised, thus emphasising the importance of the stakeholders' support (Hübner, 2007).

Cornelissen also describes the processes of corporate communication imperative to the context of social media. Thus, if an organisation does not provide its opinion, individual stakeholder groups can quickly achieve domination in a certain communication environment creating a united front against a certain expression of the organisation's activity. Thanks to social media, this process becomes even simpler and with a potential to expand on a global scale.

The stakeholders' theory is criticised for its inability to comply with the dynamics of social relations and for the fact that it lacks important theory building elements, such as a context and causal relations, which would explain the process of creating interest and an audience. It is also pointed out that the stakeholders' theory exaggerates the role of the organisation and oversimplifies the chaotic and complex operation of the corporate environment (Karagianni and Cornelissen, 2006).

Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law's (Latour, 2005) Actor-network theory helps to minimise the shortcomings of the stakeholders' theory and tends to explain complicated networks in complicated circumstances and offers a fresh approach to studying the corporate environment. This theory recognises both the stakeholders' and non-human impact on the organisation's success emphasising that mutual relations, no matter human or non-human, are more important than actors' identity or status. According to the Actor-network theory each activity depends on various factors, such as environment, rules, other people, technologies, etc. The authors of the theory believe that people are not the only ones with the ability to act, but everything has its special role and activity – from cars to all and everyone, which/who can change something in the company.

Within this approach it is the network, not the individual, which is a unit. Furthermore, the emphasis is on the necessity of constant negotiations through the translation process recognising that the inanimate actors are equally important

elements of the corporate environment. It means that the focus is on identifying a problem and not defining an individual person or group as a stakeholder. Luoma-aho and Paloviita point out that due to these reasons the Actor-network theory is particularly valuable for the development of the stakeholders' theory as it does not try to predict consequences, but enables a multi-perspective overview of the network, as well as emphasises the significance of interpretation (Luoma-aho and Paloviita, 2010).

Social media from the perspective of the Actor-network theory allows us to analyse how media platforms (non-human) can build, facilitate and reinforce users' (living beings') communicative power, which is an important factor in the context of corporate communication.

James Grunig uses public relations as a basic concept, which he defines as communication management between an organisation and its publics. In Grunig's view public relations/communication management is a wider concept than communication techniques of particular public relations programmes, e.g., media relations or publicity. The author emphasises that public relations and communication management include planning, implementation and evaluation of the organisation's communication process. These processes refer to external and internal publics - groups, which can influence the organisation's ability to achieve their goals. At the same time the author points out that public relations/communication management is more than communication as it also includes strategic decision-making (Grunig, 1992).

Excellence Theory in Public Relations formulated by Grunig states that public relations facilitate the organisation's efficiency by helping harmonising the organisation's goals with the strategic audiences' expectations. As part of this approach public relations are built as a high-quality, long-term process, where the public relations manager is a decision-maker in the company.

On the basis of the development of public relations paradigms, in 1980s Grunig defined four ideally typical public relations models: 1) *press agency/publicity model* – characterised by a one-way communication and a propagandic style of communication; 2) *two-way asymmetrical model* – studies are used to find out how to convince publics to act in the way the organisation would like them to; 3) *public-information model* – characterised by a one-way communication, when predominantly positive information about the organisation is disseminated; 4) *two-way symmetrical model* – surveys and a dialogue are used to achieve a change in attitudes and behaviour both in the organisation and among its publics (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002).

Grunig believes that social media do not change the public relations theory, but rather facilitate application of the previously formulated principles. In turn, in early 2009 David Phillips proposed his version on how, in the social media age, it is possible to interpret the four typical public relations models defined by Grunig in

1984, where *press agency/publicity* model is called *propaganda*, *two-way asymmetrical* is called *one-way asymmetrical* without justifying these changes either theoretically or empirically and without changing the names of *public-information* and *two-way symmetrical* models (Phillips, 2009).

As a response to Phillips' interpretation, Grunig (2009) emphasises that all public relations models have their own respective social media. Thus, static websites can be used within the framework of the propaganda model, whereas the update-able websites can be used within the framework of the public-information model; blogs without the possibility to leave comments can be used within the framework of the one-way asymmetrical model, whereas open, corporate social media, such as Twitter can be characteristic of the two-way symmetrical model.

The use of Social Media in Latvia

Latvia is a country in Northern Europe with the population of about 2 million inhabitants, 61% of which use the Internet on a regular basis (at least once a week). Social networks, which are among the most visited resources of the Internet, experienced rapid growth in popularity over the last few years.

According to the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, about 60% of Latvia's population are Latvian and 27% Russian by nationality. This divides society into two communities: Russians and Latvians. Participants of these communities choose different media, including social media. For example, social network Draugiem.lv is more popular among Latvians, but social network One.lv/Odnoklassniki.ru is a popular resource for the Russians living in Latvia.

Two language communities are divided also in media space. Henrik Örnebring (2011) emphasizes the ethnic polarisation of the Latvian media landscape: Latvian-language media vs. Russian-language media. There is little overlap between these two in terms of media consumption. This trend is actual for the social media also.

The most popular online social network in Latvia is Draugiem.lv – it is used by 89% of all Internet users, or by more than one million people. The average user of Draugiem.lv visits this network 3.5 times per day. The majority of Draugiem.lv users are aged between 20-24 (14%), 15-19 (12.5%) and 25-29 (11%). On average, one user spent 31:50 minutes per day in this social network. Facebook.com is becoming more popular, but it is still not dominating with 270 00 registered users from Latvia. Twitter.com in Latvia is rather positioned as a communication tool for young adapters, highly advanced Internet and IT users and communication specialists. Slightly more than 40,000 users from Latvia are registered here. The electronic encyclopedia Wikipedia has about 34 thousand articles written in Latvian, which are viewed almost 6 thousand times every hour.

Research methodology and design

The paper employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method includes surveying and the qualitative method – structured and semi-structured interviews. In order to establish the trends of corporate communication in social media in Latvia, the author conducted a qualitative study based on data interpretation. The qualitative method enables the author to obtain a realistic picture of the subject, which cannot be obtained with statistical analysis. This method is characterised by flexible options for obtaining, analysing and interpreting information. However, the qualitative method may not be safe as respondents choose what to tell themselves. In order to reduce this risk, at the very first stage of the study the author defined research questions and respondents were asked additional questions during the interviews. Several semi-structured interviews were held with two audiences: experts in corporate communication in Latvia and people who are active users of social media and/or take an active part in creating their content (write or read blogs on a regular basis, are active participants of social networks etc.). During the interviews the specific nature characteristic of communication in social media was established; the unwritten rules, which govern this environment, were described; it was found out for what purpose various social media are used, as well as what kind of challenges and difficulties interlocutors face.

The advantages of semi-structured interviews stem from the fact that before the interview the researcher has to formulate his aims; he can also respond to all types of situations during the interview with additional questions; similarly to informal conversations, such interviews enable the interviewer to obtain very informal answers. The disadvantages of semi-structured interviews are related to the fact that interviewing may be more time-consuming than in the case of structured interviews and one respondent's answers will not always be comparable to other respondents' answers, which demands from the researcher the use of more complicated methods of analysis and interpretation (Bertand and Hughes, 2005). In order to reduce the impact of the selected methods, the qualitative data were processed using Glaser and Strauss' Grounded theory method, which has a potential of providing a true insight into the process (Daymon and Holloway, 2002).

In order to find out the communication habits of the companies operating in Latvia, company survey was conducted. Prior to extensive surveying, pilot surveying was conducted to establish the weaknesses and introduce the required improvements and corrections.

In this Paper the focus is on companies' communication with external audiences - the existing and potential customers.

The research consists of several stages. Initially, to outline the main trends, which are related to social media and observed in social communication in Latvia, and to obtain data, which are required for surveying, 13 active social media users and

social media experts and company representatives were interviewed. In the corporate environment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the company representatives, who are responsible for or take decisions about communication in social media. In the environment of social media users, active male and female users (who communicate in social media at least once a day) of various age with different income levels and opinions were interviewed. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity thus ensuring their openness and opinion variety.

A significant trait of the defended theory is that it stems from data interaction during the data collection period. Data analysis was started immediately after the first interview. Semi-structured interviews provide rich material for analysis. The selected method of data processing enabled the author to use only the information that is related to the research question. After each new interview a memo was created: it contained the main conclusions obtained during the interview (Charmaz, 2004), and the new data was correlated with the previous information.

After each interview data were processed, which also included coding, categorization and interpretation. Three steps of coding were used: 1) *open coding*, which includes data fragmentation by selecting information related to the research question; 2) *axial coding* – data compilation in a new way creating basic categories; 3) *selective coding* – selection of basic categories and cross-referencing with other categories. Respondents were selected using *theoretical sampling*, which means looking for respondents with opinions that differ from the previous interviews (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). The first round of interviews was accomplished, when respondents' answers did not contain any new information. The summary of the information obtained during the first round helped to establish the latest trends related to corporate communication in social media characteristic of Latvia. Besides, the interviewees of the first round defined 11 typical tasks, which companies face in their communication in social media. These tasks were used in the company.

In order to find out company communication habits in social media, company representatives were surveyed. The data obtained from Latvia's information technology company *Lursoft* indicates that 167,383 subjects were registered in the Company and Commercial Register in 2010. Further calculations showed that with the permissible statistical error of 5% the representative company audience selection is 383. The survey audience consisted of 420 companies, out of which 53% had been established more than 10 years ago, 24% - five to ten years ago, 21% - one to five years ago and 2% - less than one year ago. The size of the surveyed companies differed: 47% were companies with 1-9 employees, 27% - 10-49 employees, 21% - 50-249 employees, 5% - more than 250 employees.

In order to provide a comprehensive picture, the representatives of various industries were involved: car sales and transport (10%), construction and real estate (7%), energy (2%), financial services (15%), information technologies (11%),

science and education (5%), medicine, pharmacology and health (5%), media, PR, printing and publishing, advertising (19%), oil products and fuel (1%), food (5%), telecommunications (3%), trade (11%), other (6%).

To provide representative data, which reflect the actual situation, it was important to survey company representatives, who take decisions about communication processes in their company. It was also emphasised at the beginning of the questionnaire. As a result, 52% of respondents were public relations managers or experts, 18% - marketing managers or experts, 13% - directors or managers and 18% - other staff members (mostly heads of various departments).

Corporate communication in Social Media in Latvia

The interviews and surveys demonstrated that social media attract the attention of Latvia's companies due to a number of reasons: 1) this environment is attracting ever growing audiences, and companies try to be there, where their audiences are; 2) communication in this environment is cheap or comparatively free, however, experts predict that with the enrichment of social media environment with corporate messages new and investment-demanding technological solutions and will be necessary to attract the audience's attention; 3) companies' presence in these media does not always depend on their own efforts – audiences talk about them in this environment even if they do not engage in proactive communication, this it is important for the companies to perform at least social environment monitoring.

Among the surveyed companies 56% communicate in social media. The majority of them have been doing it for less than a year therefore there are no long-standing traditions yet and not enough time has passed for them to be able to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of communication in social media. This could explain why the majority of these companies are satisfied with their communication in social media.

Most frequently companies evaluate their communication success in social media by the communication quality and feedback from other users. Less common is evaluation by the size of the audience reached, which could be explained by the fact that for the present Latvia's social media are not able to ensure big audiences yet.

Despite the fact that social media are in the centre of attention and discussion of Latvia's communication experts, one cannot say that their use has increased. Thus, 8 out of 10 companies, which communicate in social media, do not create podcasts, 7 out of 10 do not write corporate blogs and have never created Wikipedia entries, 6 out of 10 do not use photo sharing sites and the corporate account at Facebook or draugiem.lv, whereas 5 out of 10 never communicate in other users' blogs.

Most often entrepreneurs set a goal of informing users/consumers through social media about the latest events in their field and their product or service. A considerable number of respondents aim at selling their product or services, but approximately half of companies, who communicate in social media, try to provide answers to users' questions and address professional journalists.

Less frequently companies turn to social media to find out users' opinion about themselves or their competitors or to steer the discussion in the desired direction. Even less frequently companies are ready to build a dialogue with users about topics, which are not related to their business, and communicate with their employees in social media, and almost never set a goal of spreading negative information about their competitors.

The style of communication in social media is less formal – shorter, more emotional, reflecting opinions of certain people. In order to provide a positive and natural reflection of a brand, product or service in social media through employees' communication, two important aspects have to be ensured: 1) a coordinated internal communication in the company thanks to which employees are satisfied with and loyal to their workplace; 2) guidelines that clearly indicate which company information may be disclosed and which not. Besides, corporate profiles are expected to offer various benefits and special opportunities to social media users. Thus, 44% of corporate Twitter account followers and 37% of Facebook and MySpace corporate account followers point it out as the main reason of following these accounts (MacManus, 2009).

There are two conditional areas in social media: 'personalised' and 'anonymous'. In the personalised area the user is recognizable – he creates his account with a photo, usually provides a short description about himself, possibly publishes personal photos. The opinion expressed here is directly associated with his personality. This category includes such resources as social networks, blogs. The anonymous area includes resources, where users are unrecognisable, for instance, Wikipedia, comments under blog entries or articles, forums. In the anonymous environment authors feels less responsible for their statements therefore here comments may be extremely negative or very positive because they have been created by representatives of interested companies or organisations or competitors. Falsified comments on companies' behalf in order to improve their image and advertise their products or to tarnish competitors' reputation is a common phenomenon in Latvia today. However, thanks to the personalised social media Internet cannot be considered an anonymous environment anymore. Furthermore, users have a higher trust in opinions published in the personalised area as here authors take responsibility about their comments and statements. For instance, the audience perceives the content published in such a highly personalised social media as blog as the actual reflection of the author's opinion. The following example was provided during the interviews: the author publishes fictional stories,

which readers consider to be the reflection of his life. It implies that audiences expect a certain type of content from a blog like from an 'online diary' – the reflection of real events and opinions. When we watch a movie, we have no doubt it is fiction, but when we read a blog, we believe it to be true revelations. Thus, companies, which would like to communicate in social media, should create the sense of openness by communicating through their official profile or their employees' profiles, not anonymous users' profiles. The fact that companies need a legal channel of addressing their users in social media is becoming increasingly clear and facilitates the establishment of adequate opportunities.

There is an interesting trend related to the selection of social media for achieving various tasks. Here as well there is distribution into the personalised and anonymous area. For such tasks as building relations and enhancing sales – informing consumers about the product or service; informing users about the latest events in the field; finding out users' opinion about the company, its product or services; informing media about the product or services; boosting sales of a product or service; building a dialogue with users about topics interesting to them and not directly related to the company's activities; answering users' questions – the most common choice is a micro blog (e.g. Twitter), which belongs to the personalised area as communication is conducted through clearly identifiable accounts. Similarly, for communication with employees a highly personalised social media – a corporate blog – will be selected. However, if the task is related to competitors or involves a certain risk for the company's image, the choice will be in favour of such channels, which allow anonymous expression of opinions, or the company name may not appear at all as information is disclosed in another user's name: in order to find out users' opinions about a competitor's company, product or service and steer other users' discussions in the desired direction, the most common choice will be an Internet forum, whereas negative information about a competitor is usually spread through other users' blogs.

The respondents also discuss the issue of the battle between the conventional and social media. On the one hand, information spread in social media is fast and efficient, and people can receive it when they want it, and not when a newspaper is released or a news programme broadcast. However, social media experts themselves admit that for the time being conventional media ensure a wider audience than social media. At the same time, in social media authors are not expected to provide an impartial reflection of the situation, which is a golden rule for professional journalists. It cannot be denied that social media take away part of the audience time from conventional media, but it is too early to maintain that the audiences have been taken away altogether. Thus in corporate communication both conventional and social media are equally interesting and topical. In this context it is important to discuss the unique possibilities social media offer to their users.

They are the feedback, a visible spread of information and the possibility to follow its flow.

The perception of information in social media is fragmentary. The user chooses when to use these media, and thanks to the content collectors he can personally select the desirable information. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that there is a constant flow of information in social media consisting of short texts, photos and videos and a deep comprehension of each message is not envisaged. It shows that the audience's habits of perceiving information are changing. This has also been proven by various studies. For instance, the Outsell Inc survey conducted in the United States of America revealed that 44% of Google News users only scan the news headings without clicking on them properly and thus do not reach the particular media websites (Outsell, 2010).

The schematic map of these aspects (see Table 1) leads to a conclusion that the role of the conventional media (press, television, radio) in corporate communication is still considerable therefore it is recommended to include social media in the overall communication strategy using both the conventional and social media in achieving the company's goals.

Table 1. The specific nature of corporate communication in the conventional and social media (author's typology)

Conventional media	vs.	Social media
Reaching a wider audience		Fast and timely dissemination of information for the target audience
Maintaining the topicality of information		Fast ageing of the message
Low/limited interactivity, feedback		High interactivity, feedback
The existence of control mechanisms		The lack of control mechanisms
Habits/rituals of use - determined by media		Ritual determined by the user
Claim to impartiality		Subjective reflection of information
Formal language, institutionalism		Less formal, personal addressing

Corporate communication in the environment of Latvia's social media is characterised by image monitoring and relationship building instead of the selling function because Latvia's media mainly address small audiences.

Due to insufficient experience Latvia's communication experts do not have ready-to-use solutions for efficient corporate communication in social media, and companies are forced to use the method of error and trial. There is also a positive trend – for now the social media environment is not crowded with corporate participants, which provides a playing field for corporate communication. In addition, it has to be kept in mind that social media serve as an extension and not a

substitution of users' social life. Thus, in social media company communication should be built around a joint, integrated communication and business management strategy.

Respondents specified the following most common mistakes made by companies in their communication with social media: ignoring of problems, misleading of audiences, punishing of employees for communication in social media, 'friendship' by force, dissemination of over-commercialised messages. Similarly, anonymous comments targeted at influencing users' opinions are also considered a mistake. Experts' experience shows that they do not work and do not bring the desired benefits.

The companies that do not communicate in social media (44% of respondents) in the majority of cases explain it by the lack of human resources, which proves the statement expressed in the interviews – communication in social media require a considerable investment of time from company representatives, and not every company can include such responsibilities in their employees' job description.

Discussion

This paper analysed the company's communication in social media targeted at their external audiences - the existing and potential customers.

This research is significant as up to now there have not been a lot of studies about the use of social media in corporate communication in Latvia. The research findings could be of interest to researchers and practitioners from other small-sized Post-Soviet States, where the field of communication is comparatively new.

The trends demonstrate that in Latvia the social media environment is still at the stage of attracting their user, which means both the opportunity for companies to reach bigger audiences and an increase in competition among corporate messages in future. At present, social media is a rather free niche for corporate communication, which companies are starting to take an advantage of. This process is slowed down by the lack of educated and experience specialists. In the long run, the need for such specialists will increase. For communication specialists it means that they have to change their communication 'philosophy' – shift from a targeted campaign-based transfer of a message to a constant informal conversation.

Social media in Latvia uphold the function of image monitoring and relationship building, not only with clients, but also with professional journalists, because in Latvia these media mainly address narrow groups. Furthermore, relationship building with audiences takes place simultaneously with the trend of using social media for an anonymous dissemination of information about own or the competitor's company. It is predicted that in the long run more and more companies will communicate in the personalised area, but the anonymous area will not disappear.

There is an interesting trend, which is related to a phenomenon, which I would call ‘citizen PR’ – in social media the functions of communication professionals are also performed by non-specialist employees, whose opinions about the processes in the company could be more interesting for the audience than a text prepared by a public relations professional. It creates the need of including social media in the company’s communication strategy and to boost internal communication enhancing employees’ loyalty, which will motivate them to communicate positive messages about the company in social media.

Latvia’s companies should include a greater variety of social media in their communication tool kit, as well as harmonise the communication in these media with the communication in the conventional media so that different communication channels support each other instead of competing with each other. It is also imperative to develop the best practice standards for corporate communication in social media to ensure the shift from ‘trial and error’ principle to a systematised communication process.

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