

# Characteristics of Marketing Communication Strategy of a Small Enterprise

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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this paper is the analysis of the characteristics of the market communication strategy used by small businesses, with special focus on Serbia and Western Balkan region. The aim of the paper is to highlight the importance of modern information technology in market communication, that is, to emphasize its role in creating effective solutions for promotional activity of small organizations. The study assumes that, due to certain resource constraints, small businesses are forced to create unique approaches to communicating with the market and, in the process, rely primarily on the resources they have in abundance - creativity and innovation. Desk-research method was used in the paper, primarily analyzing papers and publications from scientific journals and other professional literature in the field of marketing, as well as official data, databases and reports of relevant institutions. Pointing to the basic advantages achieved by applying modern forms of market communication, the paper could contribute to the improvement of the market communication practice of smaller business systems.

**Key words:** *marketing, market communication, small business, information technology, internet*

**JEL Classification:** M31, M37

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## INTRODUCTION

Market communication can most easily be described as the process of exchanging information, ideas, opinions and experiences between businesses and the environment. Considering the goals which should be achieved, as well as the approach to the analysis, market communication should not be equated with promotion. Unlike promotion, which mainly has the task of informing, persuading, reminding and connecting the company with the target audience, the goal of market communication is to establish and maintain quality relationships, not only with consumers, but with all key stakeholders. Observed from the consumer's perspective, marketing communication can be explained as a “process where a customer perceives an offering, product, service, company or person. It can be deliberated or embedded in context, visible or merely in the head of the customer. It can include experience, processes, activities triggering value-in-use for the customer, and can consist of several simultaneous senders” (Finne, Gronroos, 2017).

Market communication plays an important role in business strategy of any company, especially due to the fact that it contributes to creating and enhancing competitive advantage. Large and globally oriented corporations (Coca-Cola, Nike, Ikea, Google, etc.) have understood

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the role of marketing communication in market positioning and are providing significant funding for promotion. Similar to large systems, small businesses need to promote their products/services, inform the prospective consumers about important events, remind them, listen to their demands and take into consideration their opinions. As open and highly flexible systems, these companies enter into collaborative relationships with the environment, sharing resources/products and information with key stakeholders. However, due to certain resource constraints, small businesses are unable to use all available market communication options, especially if they involve high financial investment. Both small and large businesses have the same goal - to make a profit. They achieve this goal in different ways and by applying different market communication strategies (Levinson, 2009).

Taking into consideration the mentioned limitations of small business, but also the role of promotional activities in modern business conditions, the paper emphasizes the fact that intensive use of modern information technology, as well as the solutions it offers in the domain of communications, can significantly improve the visibility of small businesses in the market.

### **MARKET COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS CONDITIONS**

There is no field in marketing that is more susceptible to change and development than promotion or market communication. It is an extremely flexible marketing mix instrument, whose application and development are determined by many factors.

The most significant changes in this segment of marketing are driven by the development of modern information technology. Influenced by technology, approaches to market communication are constantly changing, modifying and improving. Modern technologies are also introducing new forms, that is, channels of marketing communication, which primarily refers to forms of direct marketing and internet marketing. Thanks to them, communication becomes interactive, targeted at target groups (individuals) and the results of communication are measurable (Domazet, Đokić, Milovanov, 2017).

Modern information technology is a factor that significantly influences the development and implementation of a new concept in market communication - Integrated Marketing Communication (IMK). It is a strategic approach to communication that gained importance in the late twentieth century. The concept involves the integration and coordination of different communication channels to convey a clear, consistent and acceptable message about an organization and its products (Kotler, 2006). "In fact, IMK is a strategic combination of all messages and the media used by an organization to influence the perception of brand value in consumers" (Low, 2000). When it comes to the concept of IMK, integration of forms of promotion is the first association. Another dimension of integration is the coordination of the promotion form with the other elements of the marketing mix and the third stage is creative integration, which involves harmonizing topics, messages and concepts.

In addition to modern technology, the development of the IMK concept has been influenced by certain market factors: intense competition, increased investment in promotional activities, redistribution of the promotional budget at the expense of advertising in favor of other forms of promotional activity and changes in consumer behavior (Domazet, Stošić, Lazić, 2018).

Under the influence of modern technology, consumer behavior is changing as well as its role in the communication process. Modern consumers are extremely well informed and "more cautious when purchasing, while after-sales services are gaining in importance in the competition between different manufacturers" (Stošić, 2014). Consumers become immune to traditional forms of advertising and focus on the Internet and other interactive media. The fact that the number of users of its services globally is constantly increasing confirms that the Internet is becoming an extremely important channel of communication. Various forms of communication are enabled through the Internet such as follows: e-mail, e-presentation (Web

site), launching messages (banners, micro-sites), blogs, forums, communication via social networks, etc. (Domazet, Neogradi, 2018).

**Table 1.** World Internet Usage

World Regions	Internet Users 30 June 2019	Penetration Rate (%Pop.)	Growth 2000-2019
Africa	522,809,480	39.6	11.48%
Asia	2,300,469,859	54.2	1.91%
Europe	727,559,682	87.7	592%
Latin America / Caribbean	453,702,292	68.9	2.41%
Middle East	175,502,589	67.9	5.24%
North America	327,568,628	89.4	203%
Oceania / Australia	28,636,278	68.4	276%
WORLD TOTAL	4,536,248,808	58.8	1.16%

Source: *Internet World Stats, 2019*

Based on the above, it can be concluded that modern market communication is characterized by the transition from mass communication to targeted communication. Business-to-consumer communication becomes interactive and intense. In the communication process, the position of consumers has been significantly improved. The communication role of all marketing mix instruments is emphasized. Modern marketing communication is also characterized by the application of information technology. The new solutions that technology offers make the communication process more efficient and effective (Domazet, 2018).

### CREATING MARKET COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN SMALL ENTERPRISES

The characteristics of small businesses affect every segment of business, and in particular the planning and implementation of marketing activities. Small businesses are characterized by exceptional flexibility, a propensity for entrepreneurial ventures, smaller production volumes, simple organizational structure, and informal internal communication. These are the business systems "that most survive in labor-intensive activities, that is, in activities where development rather than growth is the main determinant of business success" (Milisavljević, 2017). These companies are mainly gaining competitive advantage by applying a strategy of focus - a strategy of focusing on a market segment whose needs can be successfully met (Coulter, 2010). Also, small businesses face many weaknesses: lack of financial and often human resources, inability to exploit the effects of economies of scale, lack of business planning and strategic thinking (Domazet, Stošić, 2013).

The constraints faced by small businesses make it difficult to carry out individual marketing activities and force these businesses to find new, unconventional ways to implement them. Regardless of the limited resources, marketing orientation is necessary for small businesses, especially due to the fact that the relationship between it and profitability is linear (Jobber, 2006). The absence of a marketing orientation in small businesses leads to lower performance and higher risks of business failure (Alpkan, Yilmaz, Kaya, 2007).

Small businesses adapt marketing to their needs and capabilities without relying too much on theory. The business owner plays a key role in planning and implementing marketing activities. Small business owners do not define the marketing mix in terms of product, price, distribution and promotion, but are focused on interactive marketing. They do not conduct formal market research, but collect information through informal methods - based on contact networks (Collinson, Shaw, 2001). "In fact, owners conduct marketing through natural and intrinsic



networking activity, through normal and common communication activity, such as interaction and involvement in social, business and commercial activities” (Butigan, Mahnić, 2011).

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the traditional marketing concept is not an acceptable solution for small businesses (Gilmore, Carson, Grant, 2001). The traditional approach to marketing is more oriented towards large organizations (Levinson, 2009). “A small business is more flexible, closer to customers, and more capable of adapting and implementing creative solutions than traditional marketing frameworks” (Hill, 2001). For smaller companies, the more appropriate solution is the concept of marketing relationships. The concept is explained as the process of identifying and establishing, maintaining and strengthening relationships with customers and other stakeholders regarding profit, so that the goals of all parties involved are met (Gronroos, 2002). In the new approach, the focus is on gaining customer loyalty and retention over the long term, customer value, quality of service provided, as well as care of all employees for clients (Hanić, Domazet, Drašković, 2011).

Small organizations face certain problems that limit their ability in market communications domain. Due to the constant lack of financial resources and a deeply rooted opinion that promotion is a necessary evil, these companies do not have a planned approach in creating a market communication strategy. Similar to large organizations, small businesses can use different forms of promotion: economic propaganda (advertising), sales promotion, events, public relations, personal selling and direct marketing. The choice of form of promotion is determined by the goals that the company wants to achieve, but also by the amount of investment that these forms entail.

Economic propaganda (advertising) is a paid form of mass communication (Hanić, 2007), that is, a way of promotion in which the company sends messages to the market through various means of communication (the media). Approaches to advertising have changed dramatically in recent years. Once wide spread advertising in newspapers and other mass media (radio, television) today is increasingly giving way to digital advertising, that is, advertising via e-mail, websites, social networks. This type of advertising is becoming more and more prevalent in the promotion of small businesses.

Sales promotion techniques are mainly used as a tactical tool to stimulate sales growth in the short term. They vary depending on whether they are aimed at 1) the consumer - samples, coupons, discounts, sweepstakes, free trials, 2) the merchant network - free goods, rebates, advertising and exposure bonuses, higher margins, or 3) sales operations - fairs, conventions, competitions of sales representatives, etc. (Jobber, Lancaster, 2006). Despite some similarities that can be observed between the various sales promotion techniques and economic propaganda, the two forms of promotion differ substantially. The basic difference can be realized in the goal that is to be achieved. “Advertising offers a reason and sales promotion is an incentive to buying” (Kotler, 2006).

In the broadest sense, public relations are defined as any activity aimed at developing a positive attitude in the public about the organization and its activities. The goals of public relations are: 1) creating consumer loyalty; 2) attracting investors or partners for association; 3) attracting quality workers; 4) opening new markets; 5) new product launches (Jobber, Lancaster, 2006). It is a form of market communication that enjoys credibility and public confidence.

Events and experiences are company-sponsored activities and can take many forms, such as sporting events, company visits, parties, festivals, street activities, etc. With this form of promotion, the company seeks to strengthen the image it enjoys in public, based on activities that confirm its commitment to the community and issues of social importance.

Personal selling is a form of market communication that involves establishing personal contact between the company and the customer. “It is based on interpersonal communication where all aspects of communication are emphasized: bidirectionality, symmetry, verbal and

non-verbal speech” (Ognjanov, 2013). It is a communication characterized by flexibility, the ability to receive feedback and sell something in a short period of time. On the other hand, it is also characterized by high costs.

Direct marketing is the communication with key stakeholders based on the use of direct channels (direct mail, telemarketing, catalogs, interactive television, mobile devices, internet, etc.). Three basic features of direct marketing are: interactivity, response and measurability (Hanić, 2007). In today’s business environment, Internet is becoming the most effective means of direct marketing.

In addition to the goal which should be achieved, the choice of the form of promotion is determined by other factors as follows: market characteristics, product type (consumables/production goods), distribution strategy (pull/push strategy). In the business market, the dominant form of market communication is personal selling. In the consumer goods market, marketers generally rely on advertising followed by sales promotion and personal selling. The implementation of push strategy involves focusing on personal selling and sales promotion in order to push the product through distribution channels. On the other hand, the pull strategy relies heavily on advertising, with the idea that the product being advertised will attract consumers’ attention, which will make them look for a particular product in the store (Jobber, Lancaster, 2006). The company generally does not rely on one form of promotional activity but uses a combination of these. Creating a promotional mix is also influenced by available resources, market size, competition intensity and customer needs for information (Jobber, 2006).

It is necessary to carefully and creatively design the process of market communication. The strategic approach involves the following steps: 1) identifying the target audience, 2) defining goals; 3) communication design, 4) channel selection; 5) budgeting; 6) deciding on the media mix; 7) measurement of results; 8) managing integrated marketing communications (Kotler, 2006).

Creating an effective marketing communication strategy begins by identifying the target audience and defining the goals that the promotional activity wants to achieve. This is followed by creating a message and selecting a channel. Even the best promotional activity plan will not work well if wrong media is chosen. Due to the costs involved, some communication channels are inaccessible to small businesses. It primarily refers to television, that is, the media that is considered to be the primary source of information, according to some studies conducted in Serbia and the region - Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro (Ognjanov, Nojković, 2007). On the other hand, modern communication technology offers small businesses more efficient solutions, i.e. options that result in relatively low investment over traditional media, as well as other benefits - two-way communication, interaction, personalization, etc.

**Table 2.** Basic media characteristics

<p><b>Television:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reaches a large number of people</li> <li>- Excellent technical capabilities - combines image and sound</li> <li>- Lower selectivity of the audience</li> <li>- High costs</li> </ul>	<p><b>Radio:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High interactivity and flexibility</li> <li>- Limited creativity</li> <li>- Relatively low cost</li> <li>- Lower level of attention than television</li> <li>- Transient exposure</li> </ul>
<p><b>Newspapers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High flexibility and low interactivity</li> <li>- Short life span</li> <li>- Good local market coverage</li> <li>- Wide acceptance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Magazines:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High level of selectivity</li> <li>- Longevity</li> <li>- Better technical options than newspapers</li> <li>- Information obsolescence</li> </ul>

**Internet:**

- Extremely high flexibility and interactivity
- High selectivity
- Excellent technical capabilities - unlimited creativity
- Long lasting effects - the ability to be exposed to the message repeatedly
- Relatively low cost

*Source: Author review based on Hanić, 2007 and Ognjanov, 2013*

An effective market communication strategy requires certain resources, which must be foreseen and booked in advance. Different methods can be used for budget planning: arbitrary method, percentage of sales method, competition method, as well as goal and task method (Kotler, 2006). In today's business environment, the best solution for any business, regardless of its size, is the goal and task method. "The idea is to break down a budget based on well-defined goals, specific tasks to accomplish these goals and estimate the cost of all activities" (Lončar, 2011).

After the promotional campaign has been conducted, it is necessary to analyze the results, i.e. the profitability of the investment in the promotion. The effects of promotional activity can be analyzed on the basis of different quantitative and qualitative indicators. Most businesses, while neglecting the fact that all promotional activities do not directly influence consumer behavior and produce no effects in the short term, rely on quantitative indicators and evaluate the effects of promotional activity on the basis of sales or profits achieved.

## **MARKET COMMUNICATION - THE PRACTICE OF SMALL ENTERPRISES IN SERBIA**

The analysis of the existing practice in the field of market communication of small businesses in Serbia has not been researched much. Such research was mostly conducted by marketing agencies.

The results of a survey conducted by Smart Plus Research indicate that small businesses in Serbia lack certain elements of marketing orientation. The prevailing view is that marketing is of great importance for business development, but there is also a phenomenon that in small companies there is no organizational unit in charge of marketing activities, neither is there an individual specialized in this field. There is no practice of using the services of marketing agencies. The research also concluded that advertising, that is, printing and distribution of promotional material, is the dominant form of promotional activity. Few businesses use business gatherings and events to promote themselves. Relatively few companies systematically monitor and measure the effects of marketing investments. The results of the research also point to the fact that even advertising on social networks is not sufficiently used. As expected, Facebook is the dominant advertising platform, and an extremely small number of businesses in Serbia advertise on LinkedIn. A positive trend of advertising on social networks is expected in the forthcoming period, since a significant number of respondents plan this form of promotional activity (Smart Plus Research, 2019).

A positive trend in the use of modern technologies for promotional purposes is confirmed by the fact that digital marketing agencies have been achieving intense growth in revenue and net profit in recent years. Revenue growth of digital marketing agencies is a proof that businesses in Serbia are increasingly investing in digital communications (Marketing mreže, 2018).

Similar conclusions were drawn from a survey conducted in 2018 by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. The research aimed to evaluate the use of modern information technology in business operations in Serbia. It was conducted by using a questionnaire on a sample of 1,781 businesses. About 45% of the companies in the sample were small businesses, that is, systems employing 10 to 50 employees. The basic observation in the research is that the largest number of companies in Serbia uses the internet in their business, but that the

opportunities offered by the internet are not used enough. It is commendable that a large number of small businesses have a website to promote their products/services. It is mainly used for product description and pricing. Other aspects of e-business, such as e-commerce, are under-represented. Research also indicates that the use of social networks for the purpose of promotion by small businesses is increasingly intense (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

The market communication strategy of small businesses in Serbia must be adapted to the situation in which these systems operate. It is determined by internal factors, primarily the resource capabilities of the company, but also by a number of factors of an external nature - consumer habits in the use of particular media, as well as competitors' actions. When designing a marketing communication strategy, it should be taken into account that television is still considered by the consumers to be the most important media in Serbia, but also the view that recommendations from friends (word-of-mouth advertising) are considered to be an extremely important source of information. Also, attitudes towards personal selling are more positive than towards advertising (Ognjanov, Nojković, 2007).

Taking into account the results of the aforementioned research as well as the characteristics of small businesses, it is concluded that there are effective solutions for small businesses regarding their promotional activities.

One of the possible solutions is the recommendations of a satisfied client. This form of promotion should be encouraged on the basis of certain incentives for each new consumer or service user. Also, an extremely convenient form of promotion for a small business is business gatherings and the organization of certain events of social importance. This form of market communication demonstrates concern and commitment to the local community, which can have a positive effect on the image of business in public. Small business promotional activities should also target the existing customers. In order to improve relationships and create loyalty with this category of customers, it is necessary to communicate intensively. For this purpose, the following can be used: e-mail notifications or SMS messages, discounts for large quantities of purchased goods, gifts, establishing loyalty programs, etc.

The visibility of small businesses, that is, products and services, can be enhanced by applying certain solutions offered by modern information technology. One of these solutions is internet advertising. Every small business should have a functional website where all the useful information (business description, location, opening hours, contacts) is required. Modern websites are dynamic, provide the ability to download and post content, as well as the opportunity for interactive communication. Unlike traditional ways of advertising (local magazines, informants, brochures), promotion through the internet allows for a high level of selectivity and interactivity. Considering the mentioned advantages, as well as the fact that the number of internet users in Serbia and its surrounding environment is growing consistently, the key recommendation addressed to small business owners / managers is to rely more on the Internet in the process of market communication.

**Table 3.** Internet Stats and Facebook Usage in Serbia and Surrounding Countries

Selected Economies	Population 2019 Est.	Internet Users 30 June 2019	Penetration (% Population)	Facebook 31 Dec. 2018
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3,501,774	2,828,846	80.8 %	1,500,000
Montenegro	629,355	448,541	71.3 %	320,000
North Macedonia	2,086,720	1,592,376	76.3 %	1,000,000
Serbia	8,733,407	6,325,816	72.4 %	3,400,000
Slovenia	2,081,900	1,663,795	79.9 %	910,000
Croatia	4,140,148	3,787,838	91.5 %	1,800,000

Source: *Internet World Stats, 2019*



For small businesses that plan to use social networks for promotional purposes, it may be useful to know that the population in Serbia is most focused on Facebook - 89,66%, then on Pinterest - 3,88%, Instagram - 2,34%, Twitter - 2,28, YouTube - 1,36%, Tumblr - 0,3% (StatCounter Global Stats, 2019).

Finally, it should be pointed out that contemporary marketing theory is increasingly emphasizing the communicative role of not only promotion but also of other marketing mix instruments (product, price, distribution). All elements of the marketing mix send a specific message about the company and its business. The product communicates with its physical characteristics - color, shape, packaging, etc. Price is usually linked to quality. Different messages are transmitted exclusively in relation to intensive distribution.

## CONCLUSION

Due to the persistent lack of financial resources, small organizations are unable to allocate significant funds for promotion. Unlike large organizations, these companies do not plan promotional activities. Due to the costs they may include, certain channels (media) are almost inaccessible to these businesses.

Research conducted by marketing agencies indicated that small businesses in Serbia lack certain elements of market orientation, as well as a planned approach to creating promotional activities. Marketing activities, which promotion is a part of, are the responsibility of owners and employees who generally lack expertise in these areas. The practice of using agency services is not common in small organizations. The benefits of certain forms of market communication which are suitable solutions for small businesses are not used sufficiently. It primarily refers to the organization of business events and the use of the Internet and social networks for promotional purposes. Advertising, as the dominant form of promotional activity, is mainly limited to printing and distribution of promotional material.

Taking into account characteristics of small business, as well as the role of market communication in modern business conditions, a conclusion can be drawn that small businesses, with the use of modern information technology, can eliminate many weaknesses identified in the marketing domain. The Internet and other interactive tools can play a key role in promoting these businesses and making communication with the market more effective and efficient.

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