

Communication Agencies and Social Media as a Communication Strategy: A Portuguese Case Study

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Abstract: The topic "communication agencies and social media as a communication strategy" arose from the need to understand how digital platforms, namely social media, are used as a communication strategy in the business world. Nowadays, organisations are increasingly aware of the importance of digital platforms and social media in the communication of their products and services, as well as their brand image. The online communication of an organisation has to be coordinated, the different channels and tools have to be in harmony and the message and image have to articulate with each other. Thus, the research question "What is the importance of digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy? The research objectives are: (1) to understand the importance of using digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy for organisations; (2) to analyse the management and production of digital content by a communication agency; (3) to identify what type of company requests a communication strategy; (4) to analyse the change in communication strategies after COVID-19. Methodologically, this case study will describe the communication strategy of a communication agency, using digital platforms and social media, and how it applies it in the communication management of client companies. This analysis will be enriched by an interview with the CEO and Creative Director of the communication agency under study. The results reiterate that companies are increasingly investing in communication through digital platforms, with the aim of reaching the consumer faster and more easily. Through this research it was possible to find out that digital platforms have a great importance in the companies' communication strategy, being fundamental for their dissemination and contact with the potential consumer.

Keywords: Communication Agency, Communication Strategy, Social Media, Digital Platforms, Digital Marketing

1. Introduction

Nowadays, companies are investing in communication through digital platforms and social media, in order to reach the consumer faster and more easily. Digital platforms include email, social networks, websites, online shops, among others. The technological development made the use of digital platforms increase, so there was a need to study their use as a communication strategy. Through this research it was possible to find out that digital platforms have a great importance in the companies' communication strategy, being crucial in their dissemination and contact with the potential consumer.

Regardless of the size of the organisation, communication creates the company's brand image, playing a crucial role in the achievement of objectives. In this way, the communication strategy must be outlined and appropriate according to the company's objectives. It should contain contents that are part of the company's context and that, somehow, make sense to its public. The communication strategy should be related to the main strategy of the organisation, so that it is coherent, consistent and effective.

Currently, organisations in their communication strategies no longer talk about the brand or the qualities of their products/services, but rather about telling a good story, thus establishing a more human and close connection with their target audience. And marketing 5.0 (Kotler, 2021) is a reflection of this, which represents the use of technology and the human factor to create, communicate, deliver and increase the value of the consumer journey. This new era includes artificial intelligence, natural language processing, sensors, robotics, augmented reality, virtual reality, internet of things and the blockchain.

This exploratory study seeks to ascertain what is the importance of digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy?. In this way, this research is based on a case study and will describe the communication strategy of a communication agency, using digital platforms and social media, and how it applies it in the management of the client companies' communication. This analysis will be enriched by an interview with the Executive Director of the communication agency under study.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Communication strategy in organisations

Strategic communication comprises different forms of goal-oriented communication inside and between organizations, their stakeholders and the society (Falkeimer & Heide, 2018). Strategic communication can be seen as a set of processes and actions, which aim to create an effective communication in the various channels and for the various audiences, so that the objectives are achieved. According to Marchiori (2011), communication in organisations is directly linked to the planning and management processes that determine the organisation's strategies (2011, p. 164). Viewed in a strategic way, communication can help the organization to achieve its objectives, being important to select information that are part of the company's context and that make sense to the target audience, to the point of being able to perform an effective exchange of information, generate meaning and share knowledge. Strategic organizational communication, according to Kunsch (2018), is related to the pragmatic view of communication, with a view to effectiveness and results.

Organizations value communication as a strategic management tool, practice it in a professional manner and invest in the development of processes capable of meeting the expectations of their audiences because there is an increasing awareness of the fundamental importance of communication for the existence and performance of all organizations (Falkeimer & Heide, 2018). In fact, nowadays, defining a communication strategy is central to any organisation that wants to achieve its objectives (Cook *et al.*, 2007).

The communication strategy should be related to the main strategy of the organisation, so that it is coherent, consistent and effective. In this sense, Argenti argues that to develop an effective communication strategy it is necessary to go through four phases (Argenti, 2014): the first part of the communication strategy has to do with the organization itself; the second phase is to analyse and identify the main stakeholders; the third phase is to transmit the messages effectively; and the last phase is to evaluate the response by the stakeholders, which should be subsequently evaluated to know the effectiveness of it and if the desired results were achieved.

Nowadays, with the advance of information and communication technologies, organisations have evolved, as have their communication strategies. People are increasingly researching and buying online, and organisations have to keep up with this evolution. Thus, digital platforms such as websites, blogs and social networks on the internet are increasingly important for organizations, being adopted as communication strategies (Bueno & Porem, 2018, p. 113).

Another point that also covers a communication strategy is the storytelling technique, that is, the act of telling stories. According to Baptista (2017), storytelling, seen from the perspective of communication strategy, corresponds to the narratives told through new communication technologies and new forms of social interaction. Baptista (2017) states that the storytelling approach has been used in several contexts, in order to achieve specific objectives, he also adds that in recent years, the concept has gained strength mainly in the areas of marketing and advertising, which use it as a method of announcement and sale of products and services. On the other hand, strategic social media influencer communication has become a major topic in strategic communication. Influencers can act as cooperation partners, integrating commercial content into organic narratives, or as independent critics (Enke & Borchers, 2021). For this, social media influencers are increasingly employed by organizations to amplify their strategic communication efforts (Enke & Borchers, 2021).

2.2 Communication agencies and their roles

In Portugal, the communication agencies arise after the 1974 Revolution, being that due to the dictatorial regime, the freedom of expression and the media were under censorship. According to Gonçalves (2013), organisations began to feel the need to create links with the press which led to the emergence of the first communication agencies.

Communication agencies are indispensable for an organization to relate effectively with the target audience. According to Eduardo (2005), communication agencies are specialised companies which have an impartial and global vision and normally follow all the world trends in the area of communication. As they have customers from several areas, communication agencies have contacts with different editorships of the communication vehicles, as well as with the community, associations and even suppliers (Eduardo, 2005, p. 37).

According to the Portuguese Association of Council Companies in Communication and Public Relations

(APECOM), a communication agency is a company that represents a client or set of clients in its relationship with a wide range of audiences, namely journalists (2017, p. 2).

The communication agencies may specialize in certain areas such as public relations or press office, however Mainieiri (2007, p. 4) argues that the name "Communication Agency" is used by agencies of public relations and press office in general, because they follow the standardization of names given to sectors and departments of companies, in an attempt to expand their area of action, and also to be more easily understood. Of the same opinion, Sebastião *et al.* (2012) refer that these agencies may be under several denominations, ranging from Press Advisory, to Communication Advisory, Communication Agency or Public Relations Agency, among others, all of them follow the same line of services provided. They are specialists in Corporate Communication and have a series of products and services that improve and facilitate the management of the company/organization for which they provide services (Sebastião *et al.* 2012, p. 261).

As communication agencies work in several areas, Baptista (2013) states that communication agency professionals are usually trained in advertising, journalism or public relations. The services that communication agencies provide vary according to their size. They may provide a general service among the various areas, or act only in some of these specific areas assuming a role of specialisation. According to Sebastião *et al.* (2012), the services of communication agencies should be divided into three categories of analysis: organisation and planning; communication; and execution. And in which four subcategories were created: public relations and traditional media; public relations and new media; public relations and politics; and internal or financial communication.

Communication agencies define communication strategies through consultancy in communication and public relations. According to APECOM (2017), this is the way to implement relationship actions with the different audiences, promote the image and reputation of their clients, minimize crisis situations that may affect that same image and measure the return on the work developed.

In conclusion, communication agencies aim to publicise and promote a brand or a company, so that it maintains a good position in the market, as well as providing an improvement in the quality of services and products. They are recognised as advisory service providers, but also as partners in the implementation of all communication in companies.

2.3 Main strategies of digital marketing

Marketing has been evolving in tandem with consumer and business behaviours. Marketing 1.0 was born in the Industrial Revolution, in which the main focus was on the product and its mass sale. According to Kotker *et al.* (2010, p. 3), "the goal was to standardize and scale up to bring about the lowest possible costs of production so that these goods could be priced lower and made more affordable to more buyers".

Marketing 2.0 emerges in the information age, in which consumers were informed and already able to compare several offers of similar products. At this stage the focus was on the consumer and his or her satisfactions, and according to Kotler *et al.* (2010, p. 4), "consumers are better off because their needs and wants are well addressed. They can choose from a wide range of functional characteristics and alternatives. Today's marketers try to touch the consumer's mind and heart."

Meanwhile, marketing 3.0 or the era of human value appeared. Instead of treating people as mere consumers, there was an approach to the more human side. For Kotler *et al.* (2010, p. 4), consumers "search for companies that address their deepest needs for social, economic, and environmental justice in their mission, vision, and values". The focus was on consumer satisfaction, not only on the functional and emotional side, but also on the human relationship side linked to the product.

Marketing 4.0 is a complement to the previous segment, that is, companies must continue to care about human value, but take it to the digital, having a connection between these two points. For Kotler *et al.* (2017, p. 46), marketing 4.0 "is a marketing approach that combines online and offline interaction between companies and customers". In this era, digital interaction and brand flexibility are no longer enough, and authenticity is increasingly valued.

The most recent stage, and the one we live in, is marketing 5.0, which represents the use of technology and the human factor to create, communicate, deliver, and increase the value of the consumer journey. According to Kotler *et al.* (2021, p. 5) marketing 5.0 "materializes against the backdrop of three major challenges: generation gap, prosperity polarization, and the digital divide. It is the first time in history that five generations living

together on Earth have contrasting attitudes, preferences, and behaviors". The main focus of this era is technology for humanity, which includes artificial intelligence, natural language processing, sensors, robotics, augmented reality, virtual reality, the internet of things and the blockchain (cryptocurrency mining service).

Over the years it is possible to perceive the evolution of marketing and all its surroundings. Nowadays it is possible to access a wider range of products, services, prices and faster and more immediate means of purchase. Companies currently have a wide variety of opportunities to offer new services and products, using online communication techniques. Digital marketing is an aspect of marketing that has granted various tools to organizations, so that it is possible, achievable and more practical to put into practice the various communication strategies. Digital marketing and then a set of marketing and advertising strategies, applied to the Internet and the new consumer behaviour when browsing. It is not about one or another action, but a coherent and effective set of actions that create a permanent contact of a company with its customers (Torres, 2018, p. 7).

According to Chaffey (2019), digital marketing has transformed the way organisations communicate with their target audience. Consumers now have access to a much wider choice of entertainment, products, services and prices from different suppliers, and a more convenient way to select and purchase items. Organisations have the opportunity to expand into new markets, offer new services and interact with their target audience through new means.

Digital marketing is seen as the set of activities that an organisation performs online with the aim of attracting new business, improving sales, creating relationships, strengthening and expanding brand identity. Digital marketing is therefore an important tool for the evolution of the company. Smith and Chaffey enumerate the benefits of digital marketing through "5 Ss": Sell (Grow sales); Serve (Add value); Speak (Get closer to customers); Save (Save costs); Sizzle (Extend the brand online) (Smith & Chaffey, 2017, p.24).

Torres (2018) exposes that digital marketing should be composed of seven strategic actions: content marketing; social media marketing; email marketing; viral marketing; online research; online advertising and monitoring. For Torres (2018), it is necessary to take into account that on the internet consumers are always inserted in various environments and contexts, in an interconnected and dynamic way. This means that each strategic action alone can and will interfere in the others and, in many cases, it is difficult to separate exactly one strategic action from another.

In this sense, companies need to ensure an online presence, that is, digital marketing is increasingly seen as something essential, in order to promote and publicize the brand, products and services. It is through the set of actions and strategies that digital marketing encompasses that it is possible to build a strong presence on the internet, find the target audience and build a relationship with them, and even analyse the results in real time and with more precision.

3. Methodology

This exploratory study has as its starting point the following research question: "What is the importance of digital platforms as a communication strategy for LIONSOUT?". Having said this, the objectives of the research are to:

1. understand the importance of using digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy for organisations;
2. analyse the management and production of digital content by a communication agency;
3. identify what type of company requests a communication strategy;
4. analyse the change in communication strategies after COVID-19.

The research, taking into account the objectives previously presented, starts from a case study, since it is focused on the work developed by the communication agency LIONSOUT, based in the north of Portugal, which plans communication strategies for other companies. In order to achieve these objectives, the methodology focuses on a descriptive and deductive analysis and is divided into two parts: first, the description and analysis of LIONSOUT's communication strategy and how it works digital communication strategies; and, second, the realization of a structured interview with the Executive Director of the LIONSOUT agency. The first part concerning the communication strategy of LIONSOUT, it is intended to describe what the clients' needs are, the steps that the agency follows, and what communication techniques/strategies are used.

On the other hand, the structured interview with the Executive Director of the Communication Agency, Dr. Fernando Lima, who does the planning and management of communication strategies oriented by LIONSOUT, was conducted face-to-face on 22 July 2022 from an interview script and lasted about 30 minutes. This interview

has as main objective to understand the importance of digital platforms as a communication strategy of an organization and what the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had in the planning and communication strategies of organizations.

4. Results analysis

4.1 Description of LIONSOUT's Communication Strategy using Digital Platforms (Website, Online Store and Social Networks)

LIONSOUT is an international award-winning marketing and communications agency. Originating in Viana do Castelo since 2013, they opened offices in Porto in April 2019, and in Lisbon in March 2021. They define themselves as "an agency of lions", always on the lookout for the savannah of markets, which puts creativity at the service of new ambush techniques. Strategy is the paradigm of LIONSOUT. Strategic consultancy is present in all services and in the follow-up of each client. They defend primarily an integrated marketing communication approach, at the service of the increase of the value perception of "brands with spirit", their guerrilla war cry.

LIONSOUT when defining a communication strategy has always as a basis that the online communication of a brand must be coordinated, the different channels and tools must be in harmony, in tone, in message and in image and must articulate between themselves in a logic of mutual reinforcement. For the communication strategy to be functional, LIONSOUT needs to understand first of all some points related to the brand, such as:

- Do you need to make the brand more visible in the digital world?
- Do you want to improve the way the brand is perceived (positioning)?
- Do you need to strengthen the relationship with customers and target audience (engagement)?
- Do you want to increase sales?

Bearing in mind that all these objectives are interrelated, it is necessary to interpret the path a potential customer takes from the moment they have a consumption need, or one is generated for them, to the moment of purchase. This process is called the sales funnel. That being said, the two most important questions when devising a communication strategy across digital platforms are:

- How will I drive a visitor to my website or online shop?
- How will I make that visitor interested in the products and services I am communicating, in order to influence a buying decision?

The answer to the first question "How will I lead a visitor to my website or online shop?" leads us to identify two main paths:

- Through search on research engines, among which Google stands out;
- Through the viewing of a sponsored ad on social networks.

Starting with the first topic, for a website to have visibility in search engines, LIONSOUT uses two essential tools, one is Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and the other is Google Ads. SEO corresponds to a set of techniques used in the very development of the website or online shop that influence the search engines algorithms, in order to raise the ranking of a page through a particular keyword searched. While Google Ads is Google's ad service which consists of displaying sponsored ads associated with keyword searches on the Google search engine and its Display Network. The advertisements of Ads are displayed alongside search results on Google as well as on websites, blogs, news pages or Youtube videos.

Currently, it is on Google that consumers search for what to do, where to go and what to buy, which means that the reach of an advertisement is highly targeted on this search engine. By constructing a Google Ads campaign, it is possible to target the ads to a highly segmented audience that enables a certain qualified audience to be reached and that can bring measurable results with an increase in sales.

The answer to the second question "How will I make this visitor interested in the products and services I am communicating?" is Content Marketing. The efficiency of a brand's communication through the website or online shop depends on the quality of the experience that is offered to the visitor and potential customer. Product photography and concept photography, as well as the power of an advertising or explanatory video are powerful tools to help convert a visitor into a buyer.

The communication strategy also involves building an appealing website, involving the visitor with a narrative capable of arousing his interest, either through the relevance of the information, or through the exploration of

the storytelling technique.

As far as social media is concerned, most brands bet on Facebook, the most popular and used social network in Portugal. Facebook content planning and management follows King's (2015) analysis methodology, which defined a set of five metrics that analyse social media performance and trends, namely: activity metrics, audience metrics, interaction metrics, reference metrics and return on investment metrics. LIONSOUT uses mainly three metrics: activity, audience and interaction. Activity metrics are used to analyse the type of content produced for the Facebook page. With audience metrics, it is possible to observe the growth of followers on the social network. And finally, the interaction metric, which allows observing the interaction between users and publications.

Facebook presents some statistical data already predefined as: shares, views, reach, likes, among others. This data is divided into three groups: page data, publication data and video data. That said, and following the methodology defined by Dias and Amante (2018), seven Key Performance Indicators distributed by the three metrics defined previously were selected:

Table 1: Metrics and theirs Key Performance Indicators

| Metrics | Key Performance Indicators |
|-------------|------------------------------|
| Activity | Type of publication |
| | Publication output |
| Audience | Page likes |
| | Page interactions |
| | Organic reach |
| Interaction | Interaction with publication |
| | Video viewing |

(Source: Dias e Amante, 2018, p. 3)

Through monthly analysis of each client company's Facebook page, LIONSOUT obtains feedback and is able to better plan the strategies to be followed in content management in this social network. In fact, by establishing the correlation between activity metrics (type of posts and production of posts) with audience metrics (number of likes, page interactions and reach) and interaction metrics, LIONSOUT can understand the reach and engagement of the target audience and, depending on the results obtained, continue, improve or readapt the communication strategies on social networks.

4.2 Interview analysis

The interview with the Executive Director of the LIONSOUT Communication Agency, Dr. Fernando Lima, aimed to understand the importance of digital platforms as a communication strategy for an organisation. The questions were direct to the main objective. Thus, it was possible to analyse that, in the case of LIONSOUT, the use of digital platforms as a communication strategy is increasingly becoming a reality, especially social networks. For the interviewee, almost all the client companies want to invest in content management for social networks, because they consider that the public is increasingly focused on what is happening on social networks.

Nevertheless, the interviewee highlights that the use of these platforms in the communication strategy always depends on the company's goals. The advantages of a communication strategy through digital platforms are several, because it is possible to follow the consumer's behaviour; it is possible to segment the consumer, from age, profession, interests, geographical area and also to evaluate the strategy applied. While in a communication strategy by traditional methods this is not possible, it is not possible to understand the reach of that ad, the data of the people reached or the return on investment.

On the other hand, the interviewee highlights that both companies and the common citizen are aware that the world is increasingly visual, in which text is being surpassed by images and video, and in which the consumer wants to have information as quickly as possible. Thus, the content produced by LIONSOUT is planned monthly,

always taking into account the positioning of the brand, the objectives of the same, what you want to communicate and with whom you want to communicate. In this planning several factors are always taken into account, such as photography, video, text, illustration and podcasts. Similarly, the interviewee underlined that for there to be a good communication management it is necessary to have a link between strategy and planning. This connection will be reflected in the engagement, i.e. the interaction between the consumer and the brand, which can be easily measured through the social networks.

Another fact presented by the interviewee is that companies with fewer resources also use this type of service, taking into account that there is great flexibility in the budget for digital communication, making it often cheaper than communication through traditional media. In fact, communication through traditional media, such as radio and television, ends up being very expensive for companies with fewer resources.

Finally, regarding the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on companies' communication strategies, the interviewee highlighted that the pandemic only added even more importance to digital marketing and communication through digital platforms and social media. Due to the pandemic, people stayed at home longer, exploring digital platforms more and more. Therefore, if the internet was a strategic means of communication, after the pandemic, digital platforms, especially social media, as a resource and communication strategy grew exponentially. For the interviewee, more and more brands are paying attention to what is going on in the digital world and increasingly want to win the trust of the consumer especially through social media.

5. Discussion

LIONSOUT as a communication agency has been receiving more and more companies from the most diverse sectors of activity and size that want to grow their online presence. Consumer behaviours have changed, and consequently, the communication by the brands, as well as the strategies by the Communication Agencies had to follow this change. In this sense, there was an acceleration and reinforcement in the communication of organizations, which are increasingly aware of the importance of digital channels in the communication of their products and services. If consumers were already using digital media to keep up with the news of their favourite brands, with the COVID-19 pandemic, online shopping skyrocketed, with many consumers purchasing essential goods over the internet for the first time.

Many companies use communication agencies to manage digital platforms, such as social networks and the website/online shop, in order to build and implement the communication strategy appropriate to the company's context. And as mentioned by Kunch (2012, p. 217) and by our interviewee, Dr. Fernando Lima, the communication strategy should be defined according to the characteristics of the brand, products and services, target audience and communication objectives. This strategy will turn into creative, efficient and competitive content.

On the other hand, as through digital platforms it is possible to segment the public by age, profession, interests, education, tastes, companies take advantage of this to communicate with their potential consumers. Another potential advantage, mentioned by Cook et al (2007, p. 8) and by our interview, is the possibility of evaluation metrics, in which it is possible to analyse the reach of the strategy, as well as whether it is having the intended effectiveness. In case it is not going as planned, digital platforms allow making changes and readjustment in the communication strategy in a short period of time.

Overall, a large part of the companies bet on communicating on digital platforms, whether they are small or large. This happens because of the ease of communicating in social networks, which, compared to traditional means, is much simpler, versatile and economical. With the emergence of Covid-19, there was a growth in the bet on the digital world, which led to greater investment by companies in communication on the various digital platforms. At a time when people were more confined, they resorted to digital platforms for their purchases of goods and/or products, they also had the opportunity to make contact and get to know new companies. For LIONSOUT, it is perceptible the concern of organisations for their online presence through digital platforms, as they want to communicate with the consumer in a faster and more versatile way.

Regarding the content published on social networks, this is also part of the communication strategy and it is important to be related to the brand positioning, the objectives, what is intended to communicate and who is the audience in question. In the case of LIONSOUT there is always a previous monthly planning of the content, with several tools to consider, such as photography, video, text, illustration, podcasts. This planning aims to ensure that there is a strategic logic in coherence with the company's communication, in order to create engagement by the users of the platforms.

Finally, answering the research question "What is the importance of digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy for LIONSOUT?", it can be said that digital platforms and social media are important for the communication strategies adopted by LIONSOUT, to the extent that the consumer is increasingly present in the digital environment than in other media, such as newspaper or radio. As shown by the study of Marktest (2020), Portuguese spend an average of 96 minutes daily on social networks, which leads companies to invest in digital, i.e., to be in the same place as the consumer.

6. Conclusions

This is a case study on the importance of digital platforms as a communication strategy through the study of LIONSOUT Communication Agency. The subject under study is based on the fact that more and more Portuguese companies are investing in communication through digital platforms, in order to reach the consumer faster and easier. The technological development caused the use of digital platforms to increase, and the COVID-19 pandemic triggered the exponential growth of the use of several digital platforms, especially social networks. However, the vast majority of Portuguese companies, especially small and medium enterprises, were not prepared for the new digital demands caused by the pandemic. And so, they turned to communication agencies to respond to the digital market

Through this case study, it was possible to attest in a practical way, through the testimony and analysis of the work of a communication agency and a structured interview with its executive director, that digital platforms have nowadays a great importance in the communication strategy of companies, being crucial for their dissemination and contact with potential consumers. The data analysed demonstrate the growing importance of social media in the communication strategy of Portuguese companies.

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of this study, since it focuses on a case study. Nevertheless, we believe that it is important to sustain the ideas and theoretical postulates on the importance of digital platforms and social media as a communication strategy from the analysis of the work carried out by communication companies and professionals in the field. Therefore, this case study is presented as a concrete testimony of what is happening in the Portuguese market of strategic communication, digital marketing and brand image creation.

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