



Harnessing Social Media for Business Success. Case Study of Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to establish the impact of harnessing social media on the Zimbabwean businesses with particular reference to Facebook. The researchers looked at literature from other researchers to guide them. The researchers used focus group discussion and questionnaires to elicit information from the subjects. Participants to the questionnaire research were Facebook users that were actively running Facebook profiles mainly those participating on Zimbabwean business promotional campaigns on the social platform at the time of the research. The focus group discussion participants included MSc Information Systems Management students at Midlands State University. Although in Zimbabwe at the present moment social media is still evolving and its potential in business still remains to be seen. Social media creates a real connection between companies and customers that connection creates a trend for purchase intensity. The contribution of this research to the body of knowledge is that Social media is imperative for any business in today's world and therefore every business should embrace it, but in doing so caution must be exercised.

Keywords

Social media, Netzens, Social network, ICTs, techno savvy.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of definitions for social media (<http://econsultancy.com>). This implies that they can be a number of ways that can be used to define social media depending on how one understands it and what it can be used to accomplish. Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) cited in Cox (2012) describe social media as “*a group of Internet- based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content*”. Although the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) the impact is the near uniform. This media which first came into existence in 1997 with the first website SixDegrees.com has since developed to become the media of choice. With a reported 4.2 billion mobile users accessing the social site using their mobiles, it has become imperative for businesses to harness this powerful media for business success.

These writers looked at the impact of harnessing these technologies on the Zimbabwean businesses with particular reference to Facebook. The impact of ICTs on business has both a positive and a negative impact. These technologies have the prospect of racking in revenue for any business that properly uses them in an enabling environment. Although Zimbabwe has a history of playing catch up in the technological regard, it equally has a rich history of hitting the ground running. This may be attributed to the fact that Zimbabwe has a literacy rate compared to none in Africa according to an article by The African Economist published on July 6, 2013. Around the middle of 2013 we witnessed a number of Zimbabwean companies taking their business operations to Facebook.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. What is Social media

Social networking is a subject that divides opinion that is while some people think that it's a remarkable tool, others are equally worried about the impact it has on people's lives. From all walks of life lots of people use social media sites for both work and pleasure. The most visited online social network is Facebook, founded in 2004 and with over 600 million users and presence in over 70 countries (Carlson, 2011; Techtree News Staff, 2008) According to Ofcom's research in 2012, six in ten of all adult Internet users had their own social networking profile. Social media is surely altering the way people engage in conversations and exchange knowledge about the kind of service they get the quality of the products they buy and how they generally want to be treated as consumers, citizens and as employees. Businesses are increasingly recognising the influence social media can have



on their businesses and are aligning their marketing approaches and investing resources accordingly.

Social media implementation within organizations the world over is occurring at a rapid pace (Baker & Green, 2008). Global consulting firm McKinsey, in a research they conducted found out that 65% of companies reported the use of Web 2.0 technologies in their organizations (Bughin & Chui, 2010). Forrester Research forecast that corporate spending on enterprise social media will reach more than \$4.6 billion annually by 2013 (Young et al., 2008 as cited by Treem & Leonardi, 2012). In Zimbabwe firms are scrambling for this media which has seen the current young generation becoming highly techno savvy. Nevertheless regardless of the augmented adoption of social media by firms, the connotations of these new technologies for organizational processes are not so far well understood by the business people. Across the Globe different academics have suggested that social media adoption in organizations is outpacing practical understanding of the use of these technologies.

b. What is Facebook?

Facebook is the world's most popular social networking website. It makes it easy for users to connect and share with family and friends online. It is arguably believed that Facebook has helped the web become not only more open but also social. Facebook social networking site, has reached close to 700 million users (eBIZ MBA, 2011) and looking at the number of users, if Facebook was a country, it would be the third largest (Hardaker, 2011). According to a brochure released by Websense, Facebook has an annual growth rate of 41% and Twitter is growing at 85% year after year (Websense, 2011). Facebook has more than 800 million active users with over 50% of active users logging on every day (Facebook, 2011). This means at least 400 million people log onto their Facebook accounts everyday and this is sweet music to all business people because there is power in numbers. Facebook has captured the number one ranking by time spent in August 2010, accounting for 12.3% of time spent online in the United States (ComScore, 2010). Because the world over and in particular Zimbabwe implications of social media use in organizations are not well understood, in this paper we explored social media and the Zimbabwean business landscape.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In this paper the researchers' objectives were to establish the effects of harnessing these social platforms and give recommendations for the businesses in question and other companies that intend to take their businesses to these social platforms. In order to accomplish the objectives the researchers used the following questions:



- a. What are the benefits that are accrued to a business as a result of harnessing the power of social media?
- b. What can business people do to maximize the benefits of social media?

In the process of answering these questions new practical knowledge for the businesses in question as well other businesses in Zimbabwe and the world at large was available. This information is a boon to all the business people in general and in Zimbabwe to be particular.

3. METHODOLOGY

The researchers used focus group discussion and questionnaires to elicit information from the subjects. Participants to the questionnaire research were Facebook users that are actively running Facebook profiles especially those participating on Zimbabwean business promotional campaigns on this social platform. On the focus group discussion participants were some of the MSc Information Systems Management students at Midlands State University. A questionnaire is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions and other prompts for the purpose of gathering information from respondents (Chaudhuri, Ghosh & Mukhopadhyay, 2010). The primary purpose of a survey is to elicit information which, after evaluation, results in a profile or statistical characterization of the population sampled (Chaudhuri et al, 2010).

In the last quarter of 2013 the Zimbabwean Facebook community was abuzz with the comment and like's competition whereby individuals were asked to answer a question or comment on a business organisation's website and the comment which got the most likes at the cut-off time was announced winner on the organisation's website. Such business organisations were prioritised for consideration in this research. A focus group method was also used in this study because of its long history of use in market research. This was defined by Wimmer and Dominick (1997) as "a research strategy for understanding audience/consumer attitudes and behaviour"(p.97). Calder (1977) suggested that focus group interviews or discussions were a suitable method for explorative studies. Jarvenpaa and Lang (2005) have also demonstrated the feasibility of focus group discussions in studying innovative mobile services. Most researchers prefer a homogeneous group with the common threads being the issues for discussion (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The researchers therefore chose 8 students from the MSc Information Systems Management programme at Midlands State University and requested to look into the issues of Facebook and its impact on business before coming for session.

4. FINDINGS

- a. **Results from stage one: Focus group discussion.**

Every research is conducted to fulfill a particular purpose. For this research the researchers were guided by two questions.

i. What are the benefits that accrue to a business as a result of harnessing the power of social media?

In the focus group discussion there was consensus among participants on the benefits of this platform to business. However it is important to note that one of the participants in the focus group discussion was not using any social network at all. According to participants the benefits of social media are that, it increases website traffic, social netizens will troop to an organisation's website once an organisation takes to the social media. A social media enables company to network with customers in order to build relationships and achieve a better understanding of customer needs Cox (2012: p 18). As a result the organisation becomes more visible on the network landscape. Their sentiments confirm the findings of The Harvard Business review which says that "*the exponential growth of social media, from blogs, Facebook and Twitter to LinkedIn and YouTube offers organisations the chance to join a conversation with millions of customers around the globe everyday*" (2010: p 1)

Participants concurred that within any social network, there is a segment of the population that an organisation wants to see its messages and to be familiar with content when a critical activity occurs, and they want this reciprocated. Hence social networks provide the platform upon which organisations build relationships and provide content to support the goals. To maximize this reach, a business must have a presence where customers are hanging out (Cox 2012). All participants in the focus group discussion agreed that harnessing the social networks have a huge effect on the organisation's marketing budget. It is the reason why there is so much promotional activities going on companies' Facebook pages in Zimbabwe. We believe that any pen saved is a pen gained hence this is very vital for any business.

Six out of the 8 participants agreed that taking to the social platforms enables an organisation to forge new partnerships with other organisations and currently in Zimbabwe we are witnessing Handy Andy, Omo, Netone etc posting messages on each other's Facebook page. This, the participants suggested have an effect of enabling non competing companies to market other companies to its clients. Participants further suggested that this is likely to have an impact on the organisations sales as a result of new clients.

ii. What can Zimbabwean business people do to maximize the benefits of social media?



Since social media is so available to anyone with an internet connection and even more now for everyone with a smart phone, it should be a platform that can be recommended to the business people to increase their brand awareness and facilitate direct feedback from their customers. A business that understands the advantage of social media is well aware that social media is essential in developing new business in the current competitive and online driven marketplace. Business is about clients and therefore where clients hang out becomes apparent. Increasingly, they are hanging out on social networking sites (Halligan, Shah, & Scott, 2009). As the new kid on the technology block, business organisations can take to this platform to reach out to the people accessing these social media platforms regularly.

Business organisations can develop a social media policy to educate and provide better understanding for their employees to keep within certain parameters their social media activities and enlighten them on the implications of their participation on the social space. Keep it as informal as possible - if you want to use social media successfully 'Don't take the 'social' out of social media.' Security- Social media access in corporate environment has many security risks. Social media sites are a fertile ground for attackers because it has huge number of users and information availability. Misapprehension of acquaintance and trust can entice workers to share the sensitive information of organization to outsiders. Participants indicated the need to for every organisation to be aware of these dangers as this has a double effect that is on the business as well as the customers.

Many organizations take a dichotomous decision of consenting to, or forbidding social media across the organization. Organization may have challenges to decide the degree of freedom in social media policy. Therefore there is need for decision making capacity for any organisation on this matter. Legal and Privacy Issues in social networking need to be addressed if any organisation is to realise the maximum benefits of social networks. Participants noted that social networks have a world presence cutting across geographical boundaries and yet there are various laws and regulations related to privacy in different geographical location. One issue is the laws and regulations are not able to catch up the rate at which technology is evolving. There are different expectations and sensitivity levels with respect to privacy in different geographical regions.

b. Stage two: Questionnaire

We in-boxed the questionnaire to 100 Zimbabwean Facebook users who were selected on the bases of their participation on promotional activities of businesses as evidenced by their actions on the promotional Facebook profiles of companies. Out of these 87 responded to our questionnaire and out of these 53 were female while 34 were male. That makes it a ratio of



60.92% females compared to males' 39.08%. This gave us an insight that more women use social media than men in Zimbabwe. This is supported by ComScore's comprehensive 2010 review of digital usage in the United States of America which concluded that women spent more time on these social sites (16.8%) compared to men who spent 12% of their time on social networking sites. On the issue of age the bulk of participants falls in the age group 25 and below with this category accounting for 45 participants which makes it 51.72%. This is supported by a research that was conducted in Australia which stated that 'almost all young Australians are online with 90% of 16 – 29 years olds using the internet daily (Nielson 2010a:139)'. The 25 to 39 Age group constituted 36 participants making it 41.38%. The 40+ age group constituted a paltry 6 participants this accounted for 0.07%. It is also critical to note that in this age group there was no single male respondent. After looking at the demographic data we move now to the subject specific questions.

On how often the respondents usually go online on their social platforms. The first group which we called the social net workaholics were more resident on the network than anywhere else. This group spend on average 6 hours on their Facebook pages and the bulk of these people are those in the <25 age group, 31 respondents that is 35.63% composed this group while the most number of respondents 48 (55.17%) visits the social network at least once a day. The remaining 10 (11.5%) are occasional and irregular Facebook visitors. This was again supported by the same research in Australia which established that the young people spend more time online (an average of 22 hours per week) than any other age group (Nielson 2010a:78).

On whether Facebook is influencing their buying behaviour the respondents 59 (67.82%) respondents indicated that Facebook is highly influencing their buying behaviour. The remaining 29 (33.33) indicated that they were not persuaded by Facebook in their buying decisions and indicated that they are brand loyalists who stick to their brand regardless of the circumstances. More women are highly affected in this regard compared to men. Participants were also requested to state any products that they were not buying at all or buying fewer quantities before, that they are now buying or buying more quantities than before. Two products were prominent that is Omo washing powder and Handy Andy 43 (49.43%) of respondents indicated that they either now buy Omo washing powder or they have increased the quantities they buy, while 31 (35.63%) are now buying Handy Andy or are buying more of it.

5. DISCUSSION



In this paper we found that social media increases website traffic, social network dwellers will troop to an organisation's website once an organisation takes its business to the social media platform. This tally with previous research which implied that social networks enable information dissemination to occur not only between companies and the customer, but also between networks of customers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) this lead to increased visibility on the electronic business landscape, coupled with promotional activities will result in more sales volumes for the business. This corresponds with other Studies of social media in organizations which have noted that the visibility of content is seen as an effective way for employees to get a feel for what is happening in an organization (Brzozowski, 2009; Zhao & Rosson, 2009).

Promotional activities on Facebook have a direct influence on customers buying behaviour in Zimbabwe with a product like Omo powder washing soap now filching other washing powders' clients as a result of social Facebook promotion. It therefore becomes imperative for every business to adopt social networks for business. Our findings also indicates that social media reduces the advertising budget so significantly. This is supported by (Reijonen, 2010). Social media enables firms to engage consumers in a timely and direct manner at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than with more traditional communication tools (Cox, 2012).

It should also be noted that because it has since become a communication media of choice it can cause massive damage to the corporate image of an organisation due to bad publicity. Jeremy Wagstaff, a commentator on technology has shared that the most effective way to get satisfactory service these days is to tweet about how bad it is. We also found out that females are highly influenced by social media in their buying behaviour. The social platforms enable organisations to forge new partnerships with other organisations. There are more women than men on the social platforms in Zimbabwe and it is more of the techno savvy generation. Although there is no much literature to support these results we believe this to be a true representation of the Zimbabwean landscape.

6. LIMITATIONS

This research was conducted at a time when the social networks use in Zimbabwean businesses was in its infancy stage and hence this was an exploratory research for the Zimbabwean case. Hence future research can be conducted when the technology use have matured. In this paper we confined our research to Facebook and we believe in future research can be extended to other social networks. We also believe sector specific research can be conducted for better understanding.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to establish the effects of harnessing social platforms, Facebook in particular in business in Zimbabwe. Although in Zimbabwe at the present moment social media is still evolving and its potential in business still remains to be seen, we established that Social Media creates a real connection between companies and customers; that connection creates a trend for purchase intensity. During the 2010 FIFA football world cup, Nike placed an ad with Facebook, and within few minutes, an average of 8 million viewers had registered with Facebook (kevthefont, 2010). Ongoing connection and relationship with the potential customers will eventually turn them into real customers while at the same time turning them into unofficial network ambassadors. Social media is a cost-effective method for marketing activities (Paridon & Carraher, 2009). Businesses which want to stay ahead of the curve need to invest today in the media that is fast emerging as the future of internet marketing (Aggarwal, 2010). In our research we found out that most of the respondents were the young techno savvy and women on social networks in Zimbabwe and more women were also influenced by social networks in their buying behaviour. The contribution of this to the body of knowledge is that Social media is imperative for any business in today's world and therefore every business should embrace it, but in doing so caution must be exercised.

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