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**Social media and Social commerce during the  
Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Fresco Natural  
Bar**

Social media e Social commerce ai tempi del Covid-19: il caso  
Fresco Natural bar

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the last years the Web 2.0 evolution and the social media diffusion have changed the communication model by shifting also consumers behaviours.

Social media marketing and its connection to social commerce is the main topic discussed in this thesis with regards to the approach of the agri-food industry. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of a single case study. The author actively participated in the implementation of some online activities for the company Fresco Natural bar, during her curricular internship.

Fresco Natural bar is a small Agri business that, due to the pandemic situation, has decided to focus their marketing efforts on social media and social commerce in order to better manage the relationship with consumers and increase online sales. One of the main barriers in implementing the social media marketing strategy was the scepticism of the owner about social media benefits.

The study of the case is based on information obtained through an interview and on elaborated data coming from Facebook, Instagram and other applications insights regarding a timespan of one year, from January to December 2020.

By paying attention on the implementation of SMM strategies, what emerged it is that the post engagement rate has increased substantially during the period of the analysis. Besides, the author, through a statistical test, found the possible impact

that engagement, together with the post impressions and advertisement might have with the trend of the items sold.

As future implications, it is possible to specify that Agri-food companies, especially the small one may look at the social media marketing management and try to take advantage of it by overcoming their typical deficiencies in order to reach social media marketing objectives and increase the online sales.

## **ABSTRACT in Italiano**

Negli anni l'evoluzione del Web 2.0 e la nascita dei social media, hanno portato allo sviluppo di un nuovo modello di comunicazione tra aziende e consumatori nonché a nuove abitudini e comportamenti d'acquisto.

Il principale argomento di cui tratta il lavoro di tesi è il Social media marketing e il suo collegamento con il Social commerce, analizzando specialmente l'approccio utilizzato dalle imprese del settore agroalimentare

La ricerca è basata su un'analisi qualitativa del caso studio riguardante l'azienda Fresco Natural bar. L'autore ha partecipato attivamente all'implementazione di attività online per l'azienda durante il periodo del suo tirocinio curricolare.

Fresco Natural bar è una piccola azienda agroalimentare la quale, nel periodo iniziale della pandemia, decide di focalizzarsi sui social media e sul social commerce per poter dare priorità alla gestione delle relazioni con i clienti e sperimentare il mondo delle vendite online. Oltre alle altre barriere che impediscono l'effettivo funzionamento delle strategie di social media marketing, il vero limite viene posto dal fatto che il proprietario dell'azienda sia scettico riguardo alcuni concetti base del social media marketing. Lo studio del caso è basato su informazioni ottenute attraverso un'intervista e su dati rielaborati provenienti dagli

insights dei social network pages e altre applicazioni che riguardano il periodo che va da Gennaio a Dicembre 2020.

Ponendo l'attenzione su delle specifiche strategie di social media marketing ciò che emerge dai risultati è che l'engagement è aumentato in alcuni periodi nell'anno preso in considerazione, causando un cambiamento del trend delle vendite. Inoltre, dal test statistico effettuato riguardo l'impatto della variabile engagement, sommata alle impressions ottenute dai post e alle inserzioni pubblicitarie, il numero ordini effettuati online, risulta essere influenzato dal primo e dal terzo elemento.

In conclusione, è possibile affermare che le aziende dell'agri-food, specialmente le PME, dovrebbero occuparsi della gestione del social media and cercare di superare alcune problematiche per poter realizzare gli obiettivi di social media marketing prefissati.

## INTRODUCTION

Now-a-days businesses are facing great challenges in adapting to a ever globalized world. The Internet has had a great impact on the economy by facilitating the worldwide integration of technologies. Therefore, companies of all size - big, medium and the small – can benefit from the great opportunities brought by this technology. The shift of the communication model between consumers and businesses from many-to-many to one-to-one, mobile communication and the birth of social media platforms are only some of these advantages. On the other hand, Internet brought several challenges to firms involving the explosion of data, the proliferation of channels and the changing in consumer behaviours.

In this work, the attention is focused on the development of the Web 2.0 and the introduction of a new way of thinking about the marketing activities in the social media environment: social media marketing. Today it is not possible to survive and overcome the competition without understanding and becoming aware of all the benefits of the social media marketing for companies. Together with the evolution of the web, even e-commerce was born and over the years it has started to relate to social media, giving rise to social commerce.

In particular, this study focuses on the adoption of Social media marketing and social commerce in small, medium and micro enterprises in the Agri-food industry. After describing the role of social media marketing strategy and planning in the agri-food industry, a case of a small agribusiness, Fresco Natural bar is presented.

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of a single case study in which data were collected through an interview and social networks insights and other applications, such as “Inserzioni” and “Woocommerce”. The analysis conducted by the author covers a timespan of one year from the 1<sup>st</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 in which she actively participated in the implementation of some online activities during her curricular internship.

The scepticism of the Fresco Natural bar’s owner about the importance of the social media marketing and of the engagement in SM activities and in sales trend has led to the development of this thesis. Hence, after the investigation about the social media marketing strategy plan of the company, it was estimated the engagement post in both social media Facebook and Instagram together with its impact on the sales obtained from March to December in 2020.

This work is divided into four chapters. The starting point is represented by the evolution of the online environment characterized by the evolution of the Internet and the Web 2.0 and the e-commerce, and the consequences above consumers and business model.

The second chapter explore the role of social media marketing and its components - consumers engagement, SMM strategy and SMM plan- and social commerce in small, medium and micro enterprises.

In the third chapter, together with a description of the Agri industry in general, the author concentrates on the adoption of social media, Facebook and Instagram, by

the Agri-food industry. In particular, some tactics typical of these two social media are described, such as the messages conveyed in order to increase engagement and brand awareness, recommendations and WOM, customer relationships management and influencer marketing strategies and advertisement.

In the last chapter, the case of Fresco Natural bar is analysed. The emerged outcomes, discussions and the final implications are exposed in detail in the conclusions.

## **CHAPTER 1: THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL REVOLUTION ON BUSINESS**

### **1.1 Technological Drivers of Digital Revolution**

Over the years, the numerous technological revolutions, starting with the Industrial Revolution, have always had the aim to increase social and economic wealth, standard of living and the quality of life for the population of the world. Even if the results of them are not immediate and the effective outcomes in terms of financial and socio-economics growth are different among states, the adoption of the new technology have had a great impact on the societies, countries and economic activities. Companies and workers should always learn more about the new technologies and their evolution in order to have productivity and efficiency gains, boost cooperation and also competition, and rise growth rate. In particular, the Digital revolution is the one that has reached the widest number of individuals, so much that no one has remained unaffected by this information technology. The digital revolution is considered a “trail blazing” event in the history of the world that has transformed the industrial age to the “network age”. It has facilitated interpersonal communication, quick easy and cheap access to information and knowledge, and it has led to the growth of the new applications and technologies’ users, since there were not necessarily additional investments in terms of infrastructures and skills and knowledge. Moreover, it has overcome the

asymmetric information that affected the proper function of the market. (Lechman and Marszk, 2019)

Digital Revolution has started from 1950' years and can be considered the most significant event after the invention of the Gutenberg's printing press according to Michael Clarke. It has involved a great dissemination of information, mobile technologies, technological tools that required the audience participation and the network intelligence, different types of business models, various product and services delivered by digital means in order to provide the right people with the right channel and in the right time. While the Industrial revolution exploited the power of the machine to substitute sometimes the manual work, performed by humans, the Digital revolution has been focused on the adoption and proliferation of digital computers to supplement the routine mental task performed by human in order to improve productivity and also reduce prices. Hence, these new devices, the computers which are clever machines that can take decisions quickly by considering different numbers of factors and selected criteria and arriving to the solution based on logic, together with other technologies, has started to help both companies and individuals with this Revolution.. This Digital revolution can be also called Information revolution, since it has involved a process of digitalization, that consist in a shift form an analog to a digital information, hence a conversion according to the binary system. The way in which the information is threatened, stored and printed was different from the past, so much that today texts,

images, sounds are no more physical, but they are transform in a technological format. One of the other biggest changes was also the way in which individuals and businesses communicate. Individuals, businesses and the market in general the opportunities to apply new tactics, practices, methodologies, applications, smartphones, platforms, in order to proactively respond to the needs of the changing digital world and face new challenges, such as the increase of the speed and the volume of the information flow.

The human social relationships started to migrate in online platform, thanks to the creation of social networks that facilitate their social behaviour. This movement resulted in online communities in which people promote dialogue, exchange information, entertain one another, give their personal ideas and can be connected with all individuals across the globe. (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014).

Without the development of different technological drivers, the great revolution could not have been possible. Among them there are the creation of Internet, the World Wide Web, the Mobile revolution, the Big data and the Internet of Things.

The most important invention is obviously the Internet. It has developed in the last 50 years since the Internet system was born in the 1960'and then idea of the global internet culture in 1990 emerged. It can be considered a physical structure that allows the connection of different networks. At the beginning the Us Department of Defence had the idea to build a computer network for military reason, administrative staff and computer scientist in order to communicate. Over the years

the network has expanded rapidly even overseas when also other company-owned networks were created order to provide individuals and companies with the services connected with the Internet network by paying a fee. However, there was a problem regarding the difficulties to access the Internet without the required level of skills. Computers were still not simple to use because technical skills were necessary, but the creation of a mosaic browser and HTTP technology solved the problem. In 1990-1993 the World wide web was created based on the hypertext technology that enabled the navigation on Internet pages through a graphical interface and a system of “point and click”. (Brusca Bertrandias, 2019). The Internet has led to an explosion of information to consumers and give them the potential to source products from the cheapest and the most remote suppliers in the world. As a consequence, to an increase of the standardization of prices across boarders as consumers become aware of different prices based on products and brands and buy the whole range of goods on online platforms.

The World Wide Web is another important technological driver that lead to the digital revolution, since it is fundamental for the development of new communication model, the empowerment of customers and the increasing possibility to access to data and have insights. It is a service that, thanks to the Internet, allows to exchange of information between computers. The invention of Internet and the evolution of WWW are important to consider since they are

becoming more and more part of everyday life. Over the years the number of users has increase a lot.

According to Statista in 2005 there are 1,10 billion users, in 2016 3.45 billions and in October 2020 “We are social” reported that there are 4.66billions of global internet users. Hence. companies today should keep in consideration this data in order to develop effective marketing strategy.

The smartphone is also an important invention that has changes people’s life. The Mobile revolution has been caused by the launch of the Apple I-phone, following by the subsequent development of Google’s android operating system. After this change, smartphones have started to allow individuals to listen to music, watch video, do shopping, play videogames, make a reservation, take a picture, access to online services, news, sport and whether reports. Thanks to different applications, utilization of the internet and search engines it is possible also to search for information, use maps and log in to social networks.

Data about the users of smartphone are also fundamental to take into account for companies considering that the websites, applications and social networks structure for these new devices is different. According to the report of “We are social” 4.28 billion of people access internet through mobile, so 91,8 % of internet users use a mobile device. They spent on average 3 hours and 37 minutes of their day in internet using mobile devices. Nevertheless, and if they don’t deal with these issues, they will be penalized: consumers can skip their pages, the web page can be put under

the other by the browser. In the same time there are other implications regarding this evolution that can be an advantage for firms: it has been possible to use personalized and contextualized messages, to reach people everywhere and every time, even when they need help and to developed different form of proximity marketing.

The Digital revolution has affected increasing prevalence of data producing by new devices. Big Data has become a reality in many organizations. They are represented by everything people do online and offline that leaves a digital trace: the click online, search in the net, e-mails, blog posts, videos and photos upload on social media, social media conversations, reviews, comments, internet traffic of data, data collected through wearable devices, sensors, IOT and so on. According to Makrisdakis, they give the possibility to develop successful algorithm to understand what customers want and therefore make decisions and are available to everyone interested in them and use them for competitive requirement. Big data have different characteristics: velocity, veracity, volume, variety. It is a real challenge for companies today, to get maximum out of the data already available and understand which one are important and useful to look at for them. After that, they should try to collect as fast as possible accurate and clear information in order to achieve their goals in the future in a better way.

Moreover, another technological driver is the IOT, Internet of Things. The Internet of things is a structure of correlated computing devices mechanical and digital

devices that are based on the Internet connection. Different objects, over the years, have become smart such as washing machines, head phones, cell phones, lamp, toothbrush or wearable accessories like swatch.

Today it is also possible to use more devices connected into houses and factories, so as to transform them in smart home and smart factories to help the new generation.

### **1.2 Impact on the business model**

The digital revolution has had a great impact in both costumers and businesses, but in the last one has changed the overall organization. The business model of the companies of the past has been treated by the arrival of the new technological tools and the development of the internet. Business model can be defined as a “well specify system interdependent structures activities and processes that serves as a firm’s organizing logic for value creation and value appropriation”. (Sorescu,et al., 2011). The era of digital, the evolution of the consumers’ behaviour and the increase of their buying power, have required an adaptation of the companies to the new challenges by revisiting the organizational activities which influence the firm’s objectives in terms of profits and marketing issues.

According to the article of Brusca and Bertrandias (2020), four cultural areas after the evolution of the digital technologies can be delineated: collaborative,

traditional, co-creation and prosumption market systems. All of them are characterized by different ways of performing and acting of companies and consumers and two types of management decision structures, that are the decentralized or the centralized one. Based on these different cultural areas, business model and their action plan of firms were changed. At the beginning of the invention of internet inside companies existed a collaborative system in which all employees were considered all peers, and everyone was seen as a potential value creator. Hence, the management decision structure was decentralized. After some years new platforms, networks and companies' websites were created and, in this case, the traditional market system limited the set of actions that visitors can execute. As an opposition of the collaborative systems, the management decision structure in this second era, was centralized since firms dealt with a wide range of practices such as the production process, marketing practices while consumers could only buy products. There was a strict separation of the consumers and the producers where the first one can only visit the online marketplace, and the second one was focused on their action of producing and promoting. With the evolution of the web 2.0, the traditional systems were hampered by the increase of the number of the users and the need of the maximization of the value of individuals. A different way of seeing people was the starting point for the companies to change their business model and based their activities on the preferences of the consumers.

The idea of the existence of communities that have their ideas and can produce value for the companies, like for instance ideation and creation of product advertisement, and the consequent introduction of the new forms of mass contributions, such as user-generated contents and crowdsourcing, are on the basis of a new framework. This system was characterized by decentralized management decision structure in which the productive consumers are part of the supply chain of the company but only the last one takes the management decisions. In the last cultural era, prosumption market systems regard a situation in which the major e-commerce platforms and social media were created. An assimilation work among the cultural areas happened, that change firms and consumers relationships since it was recognized the ability of the consumers to behave like firms, in terms of advertising, production for profit. Moreover, there was a multiplicity of buyers and sellers that have pushed businesses to have a new role of coordination of the productive activities.

Hence, now-a-days a proactive approach has been required in order to acquire as much information as possible from social media platforms, e-commerce platforms, online reviews, comments and conversations in online forum or groups.

As stated by Leeflag et al. (2014), in this new context, the most important challenge is the ability to generate and leverage deep customer insights. It is especially in this case, that big data have a fundamental role for companies. The latter should capture, storage, search, share, transfer, analyses these data, by acquiring

information during the customer journey, from awareness phase, the first contact of an individual with the product of a specific brand, to the last phase, the advocacy one. Even if the big data can have problems such as the size, volatility, the lack of structure and missing data, firms should be able to link all the data to the customers' satisfaction and the increase of sales and profits.

Actually, from different years there are new forms of organizations that reflect the development of internet.

Benghozi and Paris (2020) have identified three types of business model for the printed press, but their characteristics can be also typical of other organizations: “a minima digital”, “exploring leader” and “ pure players”. The first type uses minimally internet in order to preserve their traditional and historical model without focusing on developing online services. On the other hand, there are the second type that are organization with a dominant position in their market and experiment all the new configurations available through internet, in order to expand and protect their leadership. Then the last one, the “pure players” redefine the traditional model and innovate the entire organization, the mode of production, the relationships with the networks and stakeholders in order to acquire a unique and stable position.

By the way, nowadays even new form of firms with a totally revolutionary business model that are not registered as commercial entities exist. They have at their centre customers. In this system the way in which the activities are performed is different thanks to the digitalization since they have not the aim of producing and selling

goods, they can be service providers or basically software that need people to work. This kind of businesses are online platform such as for instance Air BnB, Uber, LInkedin, Facebook, Bla Bla car and so on.

### **1.3 The web evolution and the rise of social media**

WWW can be defined as a huge collection of documents (images, texts and sounds) organized in web pages, filled with hypertext links, or highlighted keywords and images that lead to related information. From 1991, it has had an evolution starting with the creation of the Web 1.0 and the subsequent 2.0 and 3.0 but the most important has been the Web 2.0, also called the Social Media era. World wide web was used to present marketing objectives through page views and advertising to reach large number of people in the short amount of time (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014).

At the beginning of its invention, it served as an advertising tool in order to shape the surfer's behaviours, rather than as a medium that facilitates relationship between buyers and sellers. The first generation of WWW, the Web 1.0, was characterized by web sites where contents were only created by advertisers, organizations and web developers and had the aim to provide information to visitors that can only enjoy them, without interacting. Firms had the possibility to have an internet presence through a web pages in addition to their corporate brochures. Besides, the

pages were static: it could be possible just to click on hypertext to have other text, images or videos.

In the second step of the evolution the Internet gave marketers the opportunity to use interactive media as both a relationship medium and sales channel. The Web 2.0 can be defined as “the technical innovations, both hardware and software, that enables the social phenomena of collective media, facilitates inexpensive contents creation, the interactions, interoperability, and puts lay user content stage in terms of design, collaboration, and community on the world Wide Web” (Berthon et al., 2012). According to Brusca and Bertrandias (2019), this powerful service has served as a data-gathering technology that allows companies to track customers across different websites and provides them with their knowledge, needs, desires in order to have a database for tailoring advertising. Web 2.0 technologies have caused a shift of the power and of the value creation from firms to customers and a shift of focus from individuals to communities, nodes to networks, publishing to participation and intrusion to invitation. The origin of this evolution of web 2.0 is dated from approximately 2004, when companies have started to see the web as the “new Eldorado”, a new place to colonize in the form of applications, such as Blog or social media platform to use in order to engage customers. Actually, thanks to the invention of these applications, they can interact with the firm, comment, share, tag in such a way that firms should receive feedbacks in terms of reviews comments, and creation of promotion contents.

The place in which these actions are performed are the social media. They can be defined as “a group of Internet based applications that build on the technological foundation of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. (Kaplan e Henlein, 2010, p.61)

Based on the different contents, such as text, videos, photos, networks, various highly accessible social media can be distinguished: blog, communities, social tagging, picture sharing websites, video-sharing platforms and networks. Through social media firms can reach consumers with the use different channels. Therefore, the communication model existed in the past, with the web technologies was transformed from media monologues (“one to many”), into social media dialogues (“many to many”). The popularity of the social media has increased rapidly in the world, and with it, also the number of users. As more people, even who is not practical with this kind of technology, have started to use them, companies have realized the importance of utilizing social media as a crucial tool to enhance their marketing effectiveness and improve marketing activities. Social media communication activities connect end-users and product directly, reducing the importance of the intermediaries, especially in B2B marketing. Moreover, it has become a powerful tool to information and feedback gather, supporting internal and external networks to the firms and conducting a worldwide market research. To sum up Internet with the web 2.0 and the strategic approach required, fundamentally affect all aspects of marketing processes.

Today, the world is entering in the third step of the WWW evolution, the web 3.0. The communication model has become one-to-one since companies are able to communicate in a personalized and targeted way. In this new technological context, companies have the aim to communicate with the people with whom they would like to create a relationship through customized messages using for instance, Instant message platforms. The term Semantic web can be used as a synonymous of Web 3.0 since there is the need of more interoperable datasets, that are produced vastly with today's research. According to Rizzotti and Burkhart, (2010) the Semantic web represents an evolution from read-only content, to an interface in which content can be read and written and finally to the "Executable web". The latter is characterized by dynamic relationships based on personalization, intelligence searches and behavioural advertising.

Whilst the first era was based on the self-entertainment and individuals can only download, and the second era was distinguished by self-publishing and it is possible to upload also contents, in the third one there is a real immersion of the user into the web, thanks to the fact that consumers have become able to create contents for the self-consumption. Moreover, With the Web 3.0 and the semantic web computers are allowed to interpret people's requests and process information better than human being by acting as a "personal assistance", considering that browsers could display results based on interests, past behaviors and locations. As stated by Michael Clarke, (2012) semantic technology can enrich content for

specific case uses such as product development, search engine optimization and user personalization. In the future the Artificial intelligence revolution will continue to cause greater improvement in production for the firms and a wider expansion in wealth for people.

#### **1.4. The impact of digital technologies and social media on customer behaviour**

The introduction of the internet, social media, mobile apps and other digital technologies, has had a great impact on people's behaviours. Consequently, consumers have been more and more exposed to digital settings like mobile and obviously social media. The development of the Web 2.0 is the most important step in the "digitalization" process, since it has led to the creation of social media and social networking.

As stated by Stephen (2016), the consequences of this new environment in which the recent consumers are, can be classify as environment-integral and environmental-incidental, since the influences can be internal to those environments, or external, to the one that is unrelated. From an intrinsic perspective, in the social and digital environment consumers could be subjected to other consumers choices and reviews, including strangers and their friends and family. For instance, especially in case of specific social media (e.g. Facebook), individuals that are influenced by their "friends" have a low self-control in choices (Wilkson

and. Stephen, 2016). Nowadays, through the old already existing and new technological channels, such as social media it is possible to empower consumers, who can share their opinions, make their comments and also acquire a higher amount of information about products, services and the brand itself. Moreover, from the consumers' perspective the ICT have been offering other benefits involving efficiency, convenience, a boarder selection of products, competitive pricing cost reduction and the capacity to communicate more proactively (Moriones and Lopez, 2007).

The change in behaviour is also caused by a new digital environment that involves search engine use, online reviews platforms, recommendations and other information not controlled by the firm.

All these new aspects influence the buying journey, becoming the new customer journey, in which all these new tools are used to find information and take decisions in pre-purchase and post-purchase phases. Furthermore, companies have been pushed to develop different tactics in order to use the new channel of communication to grasp the attention of the people and gather more valuable information and feedback as possible, in the way to monitor them. To sum up, information search has started to play an important role in the customers' decision journey, and as a consequence they have the ability today to evaluate product alternative, select the most reliable and significant information through the innumerable touchpoints. According to the empowerment of consumers and all new

abilities and characteristics they have in the recent years, the figure of a new consumer has emerged.

Towards the end of 1980' the number of end-users started to grow exponentially, from thousands to millions and even billions and the new millennium. What emerge from the report of October 2020 of "we are social" is that the today the consumers are new digital information consumers that are interactive, competitive, recreational, social: actually 49% of the world population that have access to Internet are active users and they usually spend 6 hours and 55 minute in using Internet and 2 hours and 22 minutes in using especially social media.

People are aware of the fact that they are becoming active on media and part of a community and that they are able to look for information by themselves, since they are more curious. The digital customer differs from the traditional consumer who was driven by coupons and low prices in making their choices. The new one, instead bases the purchase process on knowledge: getting a list is the first step, then comparing prices, checking feedback and comments made about products and after that searching for coupons and discounts. According to an analysis conducted by Criteo (2010) about a sample of more than 1000 interviewed Italian consumers active online users ae used to search online before acquiring products.

In the case in which they want to buy something they have already selected 33 % of interviewed use a retailer or brand web site, while the other 40% and 20% respectively an online marketplace and a search engine. As stated by David

Nicholas et al. the consumers today, called also “Information player”, have various characteristics.

First of all, they have an enormous commercial, economic, and political power , because of their huge possibility to choice and for firms, they are considered an heterogeneous and wide audience, including teenagers, adults, older, unemployed, workers, mothers and other.. For these reasons there is the need to analyses the reaction of each kind of users.

Promiscuity is another feature of them. People today are considered “bouncers” due to different factors: having very short attention span, running up continuously against home pages, being hostage to a retrieval system like search engine, finding surfing, stimulating leisure activity, being multitasking and perform different task at one time.

Afterwards the consumers are even untrusting and suspicious about the information provided to them by firms. The digital format and the web have the tendency to leave the consumers floating in an uncertain world and as a result they trusted more the people that provide information about their experience, the User-generated contents.

Furthermore, they are impatient. Digital consumers want to obtain immediately what they are looking for or what they need otherwise they pretend to know where or when they can get it.

Moreover, digital consumers are unpredictable since this phenomenon is still a fast emerging one and more connected because of different revolutions like the introduction of mobile phones. In fact, firms could reach people everywhere and anytime thanks to different smart devices.

At the end, a new characteristic gives the also a new name for the consumers: “prosumers”. The word “prosumer” involves two different terms, “consumer” and “producer”. Today consumers are not only buyers of products, but also active people in the design process, in the value creation of the firm, through the creation of comments and reviews and in the development of the marketing strategy. In the presumption market, where buyers produce products for their own consumption and for the others, productive consumers are a component of the value chain of the company but the management decision, in the most of the case, remains in the hands of the companies. There are also some cases in which there is the decentralization of the management decision structure when individuals are able to enact self-branding strategies, thanks to social networks and the popularity they can reach among their “friends and followers”. (Bruscas and Bertrandias, 2020)

### **1.5 New customer journey**

Customer journey is defined as a process or path or sequence through which a customer accesses or use a service or product. (Folstad and Kvale, 2018). There are

also other definitions of the term, such as the one of Kankainen et al. (2012): “the process of experiencing service through different touchpoints from the customer’s point of view” or it is defined as “repeated interactions between a service provider and a customer” by Meroni and Sangiorgi (2011). This “walk in a customers’ shoes” represents the set of stages that consumers have to face from the awareness phase, the consideration (pre-purchase) to the post purchase phase and the advocacy. It is not linear but iterative and dynamic and it involves past experiences derived from past purchase and external factors.

Mapping the customer journey is fundamental for company in order to understand what make people “pulls the trigger” and decide to buy and to examine the customer experience through all stages and touchpoints they follow up. In the past, the traditional buying process was different. The so called “traditional funnel” was described as a process that starts with the awareness phase in which consumers have a great number of potential brands in their minds. In the following steps, familiarity and consideration, people were subjected to marketing and radio and commercial advertising, discounts, promotions in order to make the number of the considered brands lower and to allow only one specific to emerge. As a consequence, in the purchase phase a product of a specific brand was acquired and after that in the post-sale period, there was loyalty phase. In the past, the fidelity of the consumers was measured by the number of repurchase and the likelihood to buy again the same brand. To sum up, the purchase process acted as a sort of funnel: starting from a

pull of brand, the customers arrived at the final choice by reducing the brands of initial phase. Today this concept fails, and traditional path have lost effectiveness because of the reviews, the word of mouth and the creation of communities.

Actually, the concept of the buying process over the years has evolved after the digital revolution, the explosion of the product choices and the digital channels, the development of more and more touch points and the emergence of the well-informing customers. Because of them, the idea of a more sophisticated approach was born. Different models of customer journey have been studied.

As stated by Kotler the stages of the new customer journey are five: awareness, appeal, ask, act and at the end advocate. (2012) The first stage is considered the brand consideration phase in which customers are exposed to a set of brands based on the past experiences, advertising, word of mouth and become attractive for a list of them.

The “wow factor” is fundamental in order to make the brand and the experience memorable for the consumers through for instance, a particular technology in the store. In the case of the new customer journey the third stage is different. In the active evaluation phase, the number of brands that can be attractive may expand rather than narrow, like in the traditional funnel, since in the ask stage curious individuals actively look for information directly from the brand or friends, family and social. Afterwards, there is the moment of the purchase in which they take decision based on their own experiences or the external environment, like the

economic situation. In the end, in the advocate phase, the company needs to provide after-sales services and experience in order to inspire individual to repurchase. Although repeated purchase has always been important, nowadays the concept of loyalty included also other issues. According to McKinsey Quarterly (2009) there are two kind of loyalist, active and passive. The latter are who stay with the brand without being committed with it and even if they are lazy or confused by the high number of brands and the exposure to the messages of the competitors. On the other hand, the active loyalty is represented by individuals that are stuck with the brand and also recommend it. Loyalty in this case means that there is a strong relation between the individual and the brand, trust and also the willingness to advocate it. Another model of the customer journey can be considered the one of Lemon & Verhoef (2016). (Figure 1)

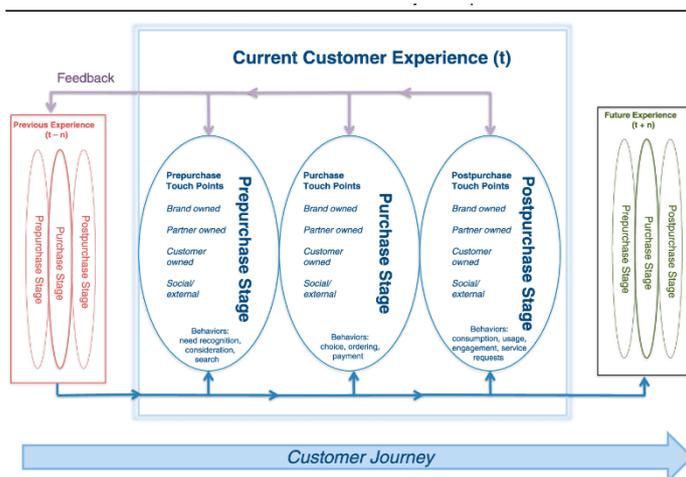


Figure 1, Lemon and Verhoef, Consumer Journey, 2016

It involves 3 stages: pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. (Imagine) The first stage covers all aspects regarding the interactions, the environment before purchase, so the customer experience from the beginning of the need or the impulse recognition to the satisfaction of them. The second one is focus on how marketing activities and internal/external environment influence the final decision. Choices, payments, purchase confidence and decision satisfaction should be considered. In the last phase all aspects of customer experiences after purchase need to be taken into account such as the usage and consumption, the engagement, the need of a specific service and obviously the willingness to repurchase. Lemon and Vehoeer (2016) have distinguished also four kinds of customers' experience touchpoints in each stage. Touchpoints are described as instances of interaction, communication or moment of contact between customers and services providers and can be physical or intangible such as self-service machines, locations or channel, social media and websites (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010, 2011). The importance of them can differ based on the stage in which a customer is. The four touchpoints are: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned and social/external.

The first one is managed by the firm itself and or brand- controlled elements of the marketing mix such as advertising, websites, loyalty programs, or attributes of the products, packaging, service, price, convenience, sales force, while the second group, the partner-owned touchpoints are under the control of both companies and partners. They include marketing agencies, distribution companies, multivendor

loyalty program, and communication channel partners. Due to the fact that today consumers are considered “prosumers”, they are part of the production process since they create value for the product. For this reason, the customer-owned touchpoint like their choice of payment during the purchase phase, or the instructional video on YouTube posted by them after purchase, should be analysed by companies.

Moreover, external and social touch points can also influence the customer experience and are for instance other customers, peer influences, independent information sources, review sites, the environments, devices used for proximity marketing, theatres, concerts, various events, mobile apps, social media and so on.

#### 1.5.1 How to deal with consumers journey

Customer journey perspective should be adopted in order to support the management of the consumer experiences, since it not only represents a series of touchpoints but also emotions and feelings and the cognitive responses to the firms’ stimuli. Hence, it is important to focus on the touchpoint in order to reach consumers in every step of the customers’ journey. Therefore, first of all it is necessary to analyse and map the new customer journey since the increase of its complexity.

Without a realignment of the companies' strategy because of the new purchase path, there could be two risks: wasted money with less effective advertising and the fact that these companies can result out of touch. According to McKinsey, together with an alignment of the marketing activities with the consumer journey, customer facing- activities and also organizational cooperation are necessary at the end to increase the percentage of active loyalist. Several activities are necessary: prioritize objective and spending, tailor messages, invest in consumer driven marketing, be much more specific about touchpoints based on the step of the customer journey in which each consumer is, invest in internet that is an important vehicle leading to the final clients and pay attention to online and offline touchpoints.

Big data can give the possibility to the firms to follow their potential and actual customers during their customer journey, from awareness and orientation on the product to the purchasing and advocacy phase. Social media is the only one that can touch consumers at each stage and influence their behaviours. According to this new form of communication customers can exchange information and compare their purchase experiences with others so as to decide whether to buy from a specific e-commerce site. This process of influencing is called Social influence and it affects all stages of the decision-making process thanks especially to the user generated contents.

According to Lemon and Vehroef by analysing the customer journey firms should be able to design the specific touchpoint, measure the effect of the touchpoint in

each stage, take into account the effects obtain by working on alliances and on internal organization in order to manage the customer experience. (2016). Customer experience is a multidimensional construct that involve the cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial, spiritual, social-identity responses to all interactions with the firm. (K. N. Lemon and P. C. Vehroef, 2016)

Based on the notion that the aim of the firm is to offer a seamless customer experience across channel, so the same one despite the different consumers and the different multichannel presence, determined touchpoints in each stage of the new customer path can influence liking and evaluations. Hence, creating a positive experience during the purchase process will surely result in improvement of the performance in the customer journey of the touchpoints and that will also lead to an improvement of the customer loyalty and word of mouth. For all these reasons the process of evaluation can be critical.

Moreover, there are different models to measure the effects of the different touchpoint in each stage of the journey, but in most of the case the budget allocation related to aggregate sales data other than the clickstream data, the conversion rate, the order size in online store and the customer satisfaction are the metrics than can be considered. If buyers are satisfied, they can become loyal, leave positive comments and it means that touch points have been well designed and customer experiences well created.

Concerning the search of work alliances, the selection of external partners, collaborators and influencers has to be taken into account since they can be part of the service delivery network of the company. Setting strong relationship is fundamental in order to avoid uncertainty and to ensure the arrival of the correct and principal message the company should communicate. Regarding the internal firm perspective, first of all a customer centric focus is important for the firm to create a strong customer service and moreover, several mindsets and analytical capabilities like customers analytics and partner network management, have to be developed through the improvement of new multidisciplinary approaches such as marketing operations and the use of new technologies.

As stated by a S-C. Chen and C.P. Lin companies may also monitor the customers' intention as a measure of whether customers continue to use the service or the good, especially in online contexts like web sites and social media platforms and communities. They distinguished three types of intention: continuance, recommendation and purchase intention. The continuance intention represents the willingness of people to continue to use the community and so continue to follow the same behaviours, while the recommendation one describes the intent of the members to recommend the community itself to the non-member.

The last, the purchase intention, depends on people's objective preference for determining brand or product. However, the intention monitoring is fundamental for companies in order to predict the future behaviours of the consumers.

## **1.6 The evolution of the electronic commerce**

In the last few decades, the introduction of Internet has changed also the way in which people make transactions. The digital revolution has provided significant productivity improvement for the back operation of firms and allowed customers to buy goods and services online without going physically to the store. To sum up, the birth of the web 2.0, the creation of blogs, social network and social media and the smartphone revolution has transformed the way people shop. The relation between buyers and sellers changed thanks to the development of the Electronics commerce. Actually, according to a research conducted by Tiago and Verissimo (2014), the Web has a great potential as a sales channel. Most of interviewed people has considered it as a “tool for the exchange of information”, a means to “establish a direct dialog with the customers”. Moreover, the digital presence offers even today different other numbers of benefits like knowing the consumers’ habits and preferences and detecting and anticipating negative reactions by client and markets. The online shopping has had a rapid expansion through different e-commerce platform such as Amazon, Ebay or e-commerce sites of the single company that decide to use an online channel to reach consumers.

The Electronic commerce, commonly known as e-Commerce, consists of the buying and selling of products or services over electronic system such as internet

and other computer network. The intent of this technology is to offer easier ways to access companies and individuals at very low cost in order to carry out day-to-day business transactions. (D. K. Gangeshwer, 2013).

The birth of the e-commerce came from the 90s, when internet started to be used by masses. In those years, the development of new browsers allowed the online exchange of the personal information like the name, or the credit cards numbers in a safety way through codified messages. This was a fundamental step that pushed companies to create a real online shop in which people can acquire products safely. In the 1995 then, a revolutionist created the first e-commerce platform in the world, Amazon, initially used by the founder Bezos just to sell books. The possibility to acquire all kind of products and to leave reviews about their buying experience increased customer options and consequently their power. In addition, the rise of ease-of-use platforms such as eBay allow all type of individuals to buy and sell products in an easier and quicker way. Afterwards, since 2000s various companies have started to offer their products online, through their web sites and the safety protocol for the exchange of personal information. In the last years, even SMEs have developed new skills and knowledge so as to be part of this new stream of E-commerce.

In this new stream of the e-commerce there are obviously some advantages and disadvantages. Other than making the shopping easier and quicker for individuals and the change in the buyer-seller relation and interactions in both B2B and B2C

sectors, it has had an impact on the business model and offered advantages on cost of travel and in terms of shopping time. Actually, costs in interacting with a wide range of suppliers and trading partners, that involve usually significant overheads, are lower than before. It has facilitated new types of business processes-related information in order to reach and interact with customers, online order taking and online customer service.

Internet has also led to the extension of geographical boundaries in bringing buyers and sellers together. Moreover, it has created an economically efficient marketplace, characterized by “perfect information for all,” or at least, “equal access to information about products, prices and distribution”. (Strauss and Frost ,2001 ). As outcomes of a research conducted by Pires and Aisbetta, (2003) there are also different disadvantages derived from the decision of adopting e-commerce. Moderating environmental and circumstantial constraints include the variable rate of business representation on-line, logistics problems, imperfect information search capabilities and political boundaries. Concerning the market environment, the presence of big companies in online e-commerce platform can create some problems in terms of costs for the shoe-string businesses. Besides, of course it allows the increasement of profits and corporate resources, the creation of possible economies of scales and a better control over the industry supply chains, but the world of internet technologies requires basically specific knowledge and skills, which are not often owned by most of businesses, especially SME. Among the

numerous other limits there are cultural and legal impediments because of the different customers' countries of origin, the unpredictability of their behaviours, the unreliability of the relations. In an online context, the maintenance of a trust relationship with customers is a crucial issue since there is no face-to-face contact and it is not possible to touch, smell or try goods.

So as to face all these problems, especially the one that regards the relationships between buyers and sellers, the social media platforms should be managed in the most effective way. The connection between e-commerce and the social media platform has generated Social commerce. (Pires and Aisbett, 2003).

Social commerce is defined as the use of Web 2.0 and social technologies to support interactions in an online context to support consumers' acquisition of services and products on the internet (Liang and Turban, 2011).

Today web sites and platforms used for the e-commerce, work together with the social media platform in order to inform potential customers about products, promote them and also sell them by connecting to other sites. Social interactions can drive online social support in e-commerce, which in turn creates trust and increased interests for the social commerce usage.

Communities are the starting point of this new process since people need to keep in touch with the brand, the companies that produce specific product and the other people that use them and can tell their experiences. The exchange of information is fundamental and the means, in this case, are platform like social networks, or blogs,

or social media where it is possible to read reviews, ratings, recommendations or sometimes also negative feedbacks.

According to different recent researches, people are pushed today to write a review especially when their experiences are negative and therefore, this particular behaviour can lead to a weakening of the perceived social media activities and the brand experiences. Therefore, this can have a negative impact on the online sales given that the reviews affect the attitudes and choices of customers. Nevertheless, most of the time the positive customers experiences are more likely than the negative one, to turn into favourable ratings and to increase the level of trust of the e-sellers. (Valerio, William, and Noemier, 2019)

For this reason, it is important to understand which are the dimensions that can affect users with a social media account when they are used to look for information and buy products.

Above all, since social commerce today depend on Social media activities, which are strongly related to the performance of a company and its profits, especially the one that use an online channel for the transactions, Social media marketing strategy have to be crucial for brands.

## CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

### 2.1 The rise of social media platforms in consumer behaviour

As a consequence of this numerous changes that involve the digital revolution, the evolution of the consumers and the birth of the e-commerce, the concept of Social media marketing today has become more and more important. The social media has been widely adopted as a marketing medium and for the companies they should be an integrated part of their communication strategies.

The goal of all the companies, interested in having a certain online reputation, even if SME, is to manage in the right way the social media pages and their web sites in order to create relationships with the customers, as much as possible insights from them. Traditionally in the past, companies used costly fully controlled advertising strategies following a one-way interaction model to build and sustain brand reputation, having a strong control over it. Today, trying to engage customers in brand building through social media is one of the most inevitable challenges to face. Moreover, after the introduction of this kind of tools, the roles of the sender and the receiver are mixed. Hence, it involves a multy-way interaction approach, no more one way, where both producer and consumer generate content and receive them.

Social media refers to self-governated authentic conversations between people about a particular subject of mutual interest, built on the thoughts and experiences

of the parties. It regards the Share of a collective vision that is usually always updated since it allows users to add whenever they want any additional kind of information. In the context of marketplace, it involves all the experiences, the reviews about specific brands, products or services. Social media can be considered the centre of the social media marketing strategy both for consumers and firms created thanks to the Web 2.0. These kinds of technologies have allowed the communication among customers, partners potential employees, brands and several stakeholders by allowing the creation of real time collaboration.

According to a report of “ We are social” the worldwide number of active social media users is 3.80 billion. The same report states also that there are different kinds of social media, but the most used is Facebook, followed by YouTube, WhatsApp and then, on the sixth position of the classification there is Instagram.

Actually, the concept of social media refers to “new media technologies facilitating interactivity and cocreation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organizations”. (Filo et al., 2015) As the users increased also the UGC, the user-generated contents, that facilitate the interactions, are progressively higher. Social media platforms, social technologies, social media refer all to online tools or technological systems that facilitate collaboration, interactivity and content co-creation and sharing between consumers and organizations.

Different categories of social media exist based on users, objectives and content posted: social networking sites (Facebook), video and media sharing platforms (Youtube), social and sharing platform, blogging, microblogging, wikis, ratings and reviews sites (Amazon), academic networking sites, professional networking sites (Linkedin), virtual communities, forums, virtual gaming world.

From customers perspective, regarding the private sphere, social media and the creation of online communities are used as a communication tool to generate information and share experiences, discuss communal issues and making inquiries with family, friends and also strangers.

The virtual brand communities are defined by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) as specific communities based on social relationships between brand consumers that share the brand knowledge and brand experiences, learn from the different evaluations and influence each other's ideas and actions. Since it is stated that today buyers are interested not only in purchase product but also in being part of a group of sharing experiences users, companies should identify the way to drive individuals to these communities by creating interactions, impressive experiences and sensory stimulation after studying their needs, and with the awareness that even if they are subjected to the same events or to the same service activities, they can have different feelings and ideas. As a result, taking advantages from social media and communication within these communities by introducing among them topic regarding brand of product and services should be an optimal solution for

companies. (Chen and Lin, 2019) Undoubtedly it includes a weaker control, but it is fundamental to survive in this technological world.

Actually, other than the private discussions, online platforms allow the connection between individuals and businesses, creating two-way interactions. Company users can have two different reasons to post and generate contents: being intrinsically useful or it has something to do with the image-related utility. Most of the time it depends on the number of followers or on the consumers behaviour before mentioned. Above all, selecting the right content and reaching and engaging the right target are the main objectives.

For companies, using social media is fundamental to communicate knowledge and values of the firm itself, facilitate interactions, promote products and services for online shopping, and also to gain information about the consumers. Hence, when customers are interested in taking part in the conversation and interaction about some common interests and valuable information, preferences and value can be interchanged in order to create an informal relationship that will make the product more attractive. Afterwards, data collected are used by them for three principal functions: opinion mining, targeted advertising and consumer relations. In a nutshell it means that they should identify the audience's overall mood about a particular topic, deliver advertising for products or services based on different groups built on preferences, and create relationships between the brand itself and potential consumers. The latter, the consumer- brand relationships, are essential to

be considered in social media, since their existence implies the cognitive, emotional, social, behavioural attachment to the brand overtime.

Social media offers a way to reach a large audience easily and in an effective way with a lower cost than traditional media. Actually, the social media platform has the aim to foster the external communication of the firm with the customers, creating as much insights as possible. Therefore, the adoption of these new tools requires the adaptation of the communication and activities to the dynamic environment inside the companies, too. It is not easy to develop a strategy in using social media for marketing and some companies are also reluctant to use them, someone for the lack of time or knowledge about how to set up a proper action plan or how to use tools.

To sum up, social media is regarded an effective channel to reach people allowing increasingly attention to the importance of social media marketing activities in the brand building process. As matter of fact, social media marketing activities can be defined as measuring of the effects of community members' understanding of activities and the use of social media in order to facilitate communications between consumers and organization and manage their relationships.

In using social media for marketing purpose, there could be also problems about privacy issues. The marketing department within the firm have some ethical responsibilities since they use the data collecting in social media about consumers preferences, opinions, and advertising, but sometimes they fail to respect ethical

issues. According to Jacobson et al. (2020), most people involved in their research are uncomfortable with firms using their available social media data. Therefore, individuals can post less accurate information, and these attitudes may influence their buying behaviours and profits. However, there are also users that perceive a major benefit by using social media then the risks due to the compromising of privacy. Some tactics are suggested by the authors in order to solve these problems, such as empowering users with an higher level of control over information they want to share, with whom and for what purpose and adherence to transparency consumer-oriented privacy policy practices.

In conclusion, despite some dilemmas, as a part of social media marketing strategy, social media should be considered together with the traditional mediums for the communication strategy to reach consumers on myriad platforms and enable a wide sphere of influence.

## **2.2 The concept of Engagement: Antecedents and Consequences**

Social media and all messages that convey, over the years, has changed because of the volume of content produced. At the beginning, the communication between families and friends was the only objective, but then, after the arrival of the numerous contents from third- part publishers, like brands, there was a declining of the organic reach and user engagement.

Furthermore, with a real revolution, the social media platforms' algorithms have started to prioritize the most relevant and engaged contents, the one that created meaningful social interactions, rather than brand contents. As a matter of fact, companies should examine how they can enhance the consumer engagement using some specific content strategy, in order to reach a wider target.

The concept of customer engagement is fundamental to be respected in social media marketing context. The term can be defined as “the psychological state that occurs by virtue of interactive, co-creative, customer experiences with a focal object/agent in focal brand relationships under a specific set of content-dependent conditions, and exists as a dynamic iterative process in which other rational concepts are antecedents and or consequences ”. (Brodie et al, 2011) According to Hollebeck (2014) customer-brand engagement can be conceptualized as consumers' cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses concerned with consumer-brand interactions. The three dimensions of the notion respectively means that individuals are engaged with a specific brand when communicated messages are useful and relevant (people become interested), create a state of belonging, inspirations, evoke emotions (people improve customer experiences), wait for a behavioural manifestation (people perform action such as like or share, or other interactions).

Different levels of engagement exist based on the actions that are made: at the first one there are reactions to contents such as “like”, “love”, “angry”, and then progressively comments, sharing with others, and posting of user-generated

contents. It can be perceived as a valuable predictor of business performance, as well a driver for sales growth. In the process of engagement creation firms should respond proactively to the social media users and stakeholders and their needs to reach the goal. The responsiveness in practical terms is the ability of being fast and right, and it is a challenge companies may face. Contents and messages in social media make the difference in creating interactions, and consequently a sort of commitment with the brand. (P.Panagiotapoulus et al., 2015)

According to Barger et al. (2016) engagement have antecedents and consequences. Six factors are considered “Antecedents” of the engagement between customers and brand: brand factors, product factors, consumers factors, content factors and social media factors.

In particular brand factors is based on different aspects. People are more likely to be engaged with a brand if it is perceived as “warm” brand, it does not set up too much advertising campaigns and whereas the attitude they have towards the brand and the content is positive.

Product-related factors involve other aspects. A hedonic product affects more the engagement rate than an utilitarian one, as well as a new or simply redesigned product or an high-quality good. Even an poor experience product can be significantly harmful for the brand.

Individual propensity to interact with others, entertain, socially influence, and acquire information about promotions and incentives online and the consumer

attachment to social media are also part of the consumers factors, since if users are used to tell their experiences, they are more willing to be engaged with a brand. About contents, pivotal items are also the format, the marketing purpose, and how entertaining, educational or interesting the post is. People are usually more likely to share a content if it is interesting, task oriented, multisensory and interactive and positive feeling evoking.

In addition, even one additional attribute s of social networks may promote engagement: ease of use.

The sense of attachment with a brand may also depend on the culture of the consumer and on the social and symbolic value given to the brand itself and on the perceived risk respect to it.

Other than antecedents, the same authors have analysed possible outcomes due to the consumer engagement. Five are the categories: brand effects, product effects, consumers effects, content effects and market effects, user-generated content may have an great impact brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand awareness or association, since they are considered as more credible and likable.

Moreover, engagement in the form of reviews can lead to an impression of how the public views the product: if reviews are negative impressions will not be good and will influence the most respect to a positive one. Consumers-Regarded- effects can include the creation of potential new purchasers of a particular brand or an increase of the existing clients' power. Fourthly, Content effects depend on the likelihood to

reshare content, the susceptibility to interpersonal differences, on the extent to which it was co-created with professionalism and enthusiasm. High level of affiliation can also lead to a positive review and a recommendation to the others, that consequently can have a strong effect on the retransmission intentions. Market-level effects embrace impacts on sales, higher purchase intention as a result of credible reviews, presence of photos in post and significant implications on conversion rate thanks to a particular language used by UGC.

The relationship between consumer and brand is on the basis of the social media marketing concept. A consumer proactive engagement is necessary in order to build a strong and high-quality relationship that is leading to a sense of trust, attachment, closeness and interdependence. People can be proactively engaged with a brand when they make voluntary resource contributions (knowledge, time, experience,). Two principal pattern behaviours can be distinguished: consumer involve in product development and innovation, when firm can be provided with constructive feedback, ideas or information about the creation of a good, or consumer involvement in WOM behaviour, when interactions have the aim to influence other brand perspectives. However, the more time consumers spend on contents and on social media interactions, the more they can get benefits from the brand, such as for instance, by reducing risk of consumption, the resolution of possible problems. In the same way that brands hope consumers will engage with them, people ask them to be engaged with user-generated content. Firm engagement is described as the

reactions of the firms to the content, with a comment or a sharing, by providing customer support or simply interaction in order to increase brand loyalty. (Barger et al. 2016) An active firm engagement occurs when firm is engaged in all stages of communication from the delivery of the messages to the response and is crucial to obtain an higher engagement intentions of the costumers.

### **2.3 Social media marketing: definition and objectives**

In the literature there are different definition of social media marketing, that can be also named with a shortened version “SMM”. Chan and Guillet (2011) stated that it is “a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and what through a set of Internet-based applications that enable interaction, communication, collaboration of user-generated content and hence, sharing of information such as ideas, thoughts, content and relationships”. According to Pham and Gammoh (2015) and Tuten and Solomon (2016) SMM is described as the company process of creating and promoting online marketing activities on social media technologies, channels and software in order to communicate, deliver and exchange offering that have values for an organization’s stakeholders. Another definition written by Choi et al. (2016) is: “Engaging with customers through Social network services is commonly known as social media marketing and brings several benefits to companies, such as creating word of

mouth, positively affecting customer equity, enhancing customer loyalty to the company, and increasing purchase intention of the company's products and services". In the social era, firms should be able to embrace the new technologies, adopt, utilize and manage social media as one of their strategic marketing tools . Observing the users, creating a relationships with them, engage them, responding proactively to their posts, requests, complains are fundamental in order to monitor the external environment, analyse the insights obtained and adapt the new online activities with a reactive strategy in order to reach the marketing objectives Among the social media marketing objectives there are the financial goals such as increasing sales revenue per customer and profit per customer, so profitability, and reduce marketing costs.

Companies ask social communities for sharing ideas so as to jointly find solutions to problems, by providing them with continuous support and services.

Moreover, they want to educate costumers about what they can offer, products they can promote, and monitor and analyse clients' conversations to understand how their actions, products and services are viewed.

According to Cheung, Pires and. Rosenbergen et al. (2020) SMM is used, at first to build value co-creation and customer-brand engagement, having consequently an impact on consumer behavioural intention. Co-creation refers to a collaborative activity between consumers and brands for creating material and symbolic value for both parties. As mentioned before, brands communicate attributes and information,

as a response, receivers create user-generated contents to provide suggestions to improve the brand, solution for problems in order to increase value. Consequently, the quality of the product enhances.

In the case of co-creation sometimes there can be some problems. Co-creation behaviours cannot always translate into positive experiences: when consumers are active involved on social media most of the time are more likely to make reviews and comments, especially when the experience is negative.

Indeed, specific social media objectives and challenges may depend on different factors as for instance, the industry and the size of the firm.

In addition, a conceptual framework of social media marketing can be identified. It is considered a multidimensional set of brands- initiated activities comprising five dimensions: entertainment, customization, interaction, EWM and trendiness. According to Cheung, Pires and Rosenberger, et al. (2020) Social media marketing strategy may be influenced by all the dimensions, that are distinct and not interchangeable, and consequently the change in one component cannot correspond to a change of another one. The five dimensions can be described as follows. Entertainment refers to the creation of experiences by organizations that consumers may perceive as fun and playful when using social media. The positive association between the entertaining content and the firm itself can change the attitude toward the brand in positive one and can strengthen customer engagement and purchase intention. Customization is linked to the fact that services offered are tailored to

satisfy specific needs in order to maintain a dialogue with actual clients and create remarkable opportunities for the new one. Interaction is the basis of social media marketing activities. Creating a space where people can share and discuss a particular product or brand is the aim so as to develop a two-way communication channel and build positive brand perceptions. Electronic word-of mouth refers to a communication using social media by actual and potential customers that are always perceived as trustworthy and credible. Trendiness alludes to a communication up to date and of trendy information relevant for the brand. Updating social media brand pages including sharing the latest news and offers is necessary to increase consumer motivation. All these dimensions compose the SMM construct and it helps to explain how social media activities and strategy can affect through value creation, the customer engagement, ongoing search behaviour and consumer behaviour intention such as repurchase intention, brand loyalty and positive referrals.

## **2.4 Social media marketing strategy**

### **2.4.1 Definition and drivers**

According to A. S. Ananda et al. (2016) Social media marketing strategy is “an integrated means and set of actions by which a company or organization aspects to achieve its marketing objectives and meet the requirement of its target market

through the use of social media tools and properties”. In another word Social media marketing strategy deals with plans and decisions in social media context as a part of the marketing strategies of companies adopted in order to reach their marketing objectives. As stated by Effing and Spil (2016) the definition of the concept derived from the concept of social media, strategy, digital business strategy and information strategy. Social media has been previously defined as “ a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological creations of web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan & Helein, 2010). Strategy instead is described as a plan driven by predefined decisions, or the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities in order to reach a specific objective, for targeted audience and with required resources. (Porter, 1996, Ng & Wang, 2012 and Dutta, 2010). The concept of strategy should involve detailed programs based on decisions to make in order to reach objectives like how firms will target the market, how the brand will be positioned respect to the competitors, how products and services will have more value thanks to communications and distributions. The digital business strategy is considered organization strategy formulated and executed by leveraging digital resources to create different value while the information strategy is a process of goal directed activity intended to realize a strategy for using information systems in an organization” (Bharadway et al. 2013; Henfridsson and Lind 2014). Given the definition mentioned above Social media marketing strategy is delineated as “a

goal-directed planning process for creating user generated content, driven by a group of Internet applications, to create a unique and valuable competitive position”. ( Effin and Spil, 2015)

Social media strategy is also defined as “corporate plan or policy to provide directions regarding social media practices in order to achieve business opportunities, reduce risks, and deal with unregulated personal use of employees” (Effing, 2013). It is important to understand that there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, but that the strategy depends on the given social technology, the specific nature and goals of the organization and its environment.

Designing strategies prior to their social media campaigns may lead to more positive outcomes since a strategic approach can help to address opportunities and prevent risks that come from using social media. Unless the results will be negative for them and the time spent on social media could be wasteful.

Other drivers have pushed firms to develop SMM strategies such as the necessity to stay competitive and to achieve the success of the campaigns, especially the advertising one. planning a predictable Return on Investment (ROI) is involved in overall strategy and allow to measure the results of different projects and campaigns and, therefore build a contingency plan. In addition. a determined strategy facilitate organizations in using more efficiently their available resources: they should not invest too much in such initiatives since they can also easily fail, if they have not the required resources. (Effing, 2013)

In addition, an important driver is social media growth and popularity. the viral nature of social media pushes organizations to develop a social media strategy and consider them in the marketing plan. as well as other competitors in the same industry can be online present, principally attracted by the limited barriers entry, even new brands social media users may be pleased to exploit this opportunity. Moreover, according to Ananda et al. some outcomes of her conducted research stated that a specific plan for social media marketing can lead to higher benefits in terms of marketing objectives because of the opportunities offered by social media platforms (reach a wider audience, engage with customers, communication tools). Whether Social media marketing strategy is effectively conducted, firms could perceive several benefits such as purposes derived from the social media activities. First of all improvement of brand awareness and familiarity, the strengthening of the customer relationships and the increment of the interaction and engagement are the main one.

Besides, the growth of electronic-Word of mouth and the success of viral promotion campaigns about brands may be viewed as a great triumph since they involve an increasement of feedback received and a return in term of sales revenues. Social media marketing activities should certainly involve relatively low costs and easiness of implementation compared to traditional media and as a matter of fact they allow to save money . moreover, they can also contribute to the generation of leads thanks to the rise of web site traffic and, as a consequence, the development

of loyal fans. Actually, one common obtainable and desirable benefit is without doubt the translation of data and outcomes derived from social media into concrete results such as sales and profits. an online presence should lead also to the growth of business partnership, through promotion and advertising campaigns. social media marketing activities, consequent to the implementation of the strategy can provide and other benefit. It is possible to obtain real time resources regarding market trends and consumers needs in order to modify advertising messages and develop new tactics of action.

All these advantages as well others related to the needs and the purposes of each single firm, can be reached through a clear and organized social media strategy.

#### 2.4.2 The impact of social media marketing strategy on brand equity, brand reputation, brand image

Generally, businesses survive and thrive through their social media brand page engagement by sharing information and communication with the existing and potential customers in hopes of creating a positive impact on brand equity, brand image, brand reputation.

Based on the manner in which consumers perceive a company or a brand t in all actions performed through social media in order to engage users, build relationship and enhance value, they can have a different impact. According to Koay et al. (2019) there is a positive association between perceived social media marketing

activities and consumer-based brand equity. The term Brand equity refers to the perceived worth of a brand by customers that is higher than the less known one. It is based on brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand awareness. In the case in which customer experience with a brand is positive, the brand equity is positive too. Brand equity is defined as a “subjective internal consumer sensorial, affective, intellectual and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of the brand’s design, packaging, communications, and environment” (Bakus et al.,2009). If individual develops a cognitive relationship with a brand and feelings deriving from physical and online interactions are positive, the likelihood to buy its products is higher. In the same way, if the experience derived from the purchase is gratifying, the consumer satisfaction and consequently the brand trust and loyalty will be higher. To sum up, building a strong brand equity is crucial in order to have an high level of brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality toward the brand, and high possibility of translation into purchase.

Social media marketing activities in this context, help also businesses to convert consumers into marketers and advertisers who generate, edit, and share online information.

Therefore, this attachment will lead to a strengthening of the relationships that, when considered valuable, can result in benefits for consumers such as service quality and special treatment, by enhancing the build of a brand loyalty through brand community. In addition, social media nowadays is also used as search engine

to find information about the price of a product and make a comparison among different brands, especially the well-known one. Hence, high brand loyalty should result even in the case in which brand consciousness of users is high. All social media marketing activities with the aim of increasing the brand awareness and brand recognition can make positive the mental orientation of specific brand's product so as to push people to use the brand as a symbol in which they can identify themselves and they can perceive as socially positive. Even if the price of the specific good is high, the more brand consciousness customers have, the more brand loyalty can be enhanced. (Ismail, 2015)

Secondly, the impact that social media marketing activities can have on brand reputation is significant. Since today there is competition among companies, both symbolic and tangible attributes of a products are important. The concept of brand image and brand reputation are linked to intangible aspects, given that the definition of the term are respectively “ a mental mapping of organization , the perception of a company which is an impression in the customers' mind and memory ” and “what consumers think about the brand” respectively. (Fiaz, Ikram, Basma et al., 2019; H. Zhang, Y.Zhang et al., 2019). The online reputation, in the era of social network is fundamental, because of all the amount of the perceptions in the form of interactions circulating on the net, on the web sites, that create undoubtedly the corporate identity and the corporate image. Social media marketing activities should engage people as much as possible: the more people participate to the co-creation, the more

the brand image of the organization is high as well as the brand reputation, the more the number of customers increase.

The brand image can also indirectly affect purchase intention with the mediation of perceived value and the trust. Perceived value refers to consumers' comprehensive assessment of a product or service on the basis of the perception of business information they receive, while trust in marketing is considered the expectation the organization will act in a way that is reliable and morally acceptable and will keep their promise and will satisfy the need of consumers. More positive is the perception of social media marketing activities and the sense of trust, more positive is the brand image and the purchase intention.

Businesses overall should be able to transform visitors into consumers by offering a feeling of identification or belonging to the brand, new and profitable bits of knowledge, providing them with tailored solutions and enjoyable contents. If social media activities are entertaining, interacting, trendy, customizing and engaging, is more likely to generate for the firm an high brand reputation and brand image.

#### 2.4.3 Barriers and effectiveness of social media marketing strategies

The implementation of social media marketing strategy can also have some limits. Sometimes firms can fail in developing the strategy because of the lack of time, budget or trust in this process. According to Berthon et al. (2012) there are some

barriers for success. The attitude of the firm towards consumers and the language of engagement are two of the major, since always with the right tone of voice and the right actions are necessary to interact. Moreover, the use of digital tools and technologies is allowed to the workers for business purposes but in the same time, employees are banned from using social networking tools during work. This constrain can be a problem for organizations, since it is difficult to make employees aware of the fact that they must follow this rule. Bureaucracy is another impediment due to the fact that it can slow down the process and contrast the flexibility.

Employees, lack of communication skills and knowledge about the use of social media sometimes can create fragmentation among workers and difficulties in coordination among departments. Concerning the upper level of hierarchies within firms, the conservative administrators can see social media as wasteful pastime. In order to be affective companies should view their approach to social media as an integrated strategy in order to engage people together with the traditional means. Besides the Social Media marketing strategy should be well organized from the beginning, from the choice of the target group and the communication channels. Unless Social media activities could not always translate into real sales.

Companies are always looking for how to be effective with social media strategy, but each firm has its own strategy, objectives organization and policies and it is difficult to find the specific plan to follow. Some common tips Nevertheless, in order to analyse social media marketing activities and verify if all the elements of

strategy are efficient, it is important to evaluate the holistic framework and the factors that can make social media marketing efficient. This framework involves all market and firm-specific characteristics on which organizations' managers make the situation-specific decision. Marketers into the firm have to become aware of the fact that there has been a continuous evolution of tools, strategies and approaches which can be used for the management, and for this reason they should be able to face always new challenges. In addition, another detail should not be underestimated: the consumer perceptions. The effectiveness of social media marketing depends also on the specific role consumers assign to an organization or brand within the social media sphere.

According to R. Felix et al. (2016) Social media marketing can have a new definition: "an interdisciplinary and cross-functional concept that uses social media (often in combination with other communication channels) to achieve organizational goals by setting values for stakeholders.

On a strategic level it covers an organization's decisions about social media marketing scope (ranging from defenders to explorers), culture (from conservatism to modernism), structure (from hierarchies to networks), and governance (from autocracy to anarchy)".

Concerning the scope of social media marketing, for an effective plan firms should not be "defender", but they could become "explorers". Hence, they have to be more focused on the external environment, by developing a collaboration where different

stakeholders can contribute to the firms' value co-creation processes. On the bases of this process firm internal influencers such as general vision, mission, corporate goals and available resources must be taken into account as well as a guidance on which concerns responsibilities and behaviours. In order to reach a competitive advantage and improve organizational performances, in other words it is necessary to observe users by monitoring their conversations, respond them in a timely and appropriate manner and therefore facilitate the engagement by creating a reach, more suitable consumer environment around the firm's brand. (Choi and Thoeni, 2015).

With reference to culture, it is fundamental the maintenance and the control over the trade-off between an encapsulated social media marketing culture, the conservatism one which provide more supervision of the brand construct and consumer desire to be engage with it that require a reassessment of the marketing messages on platform and so a more progressive and permeable culture (modernism).

Social media marketing structure addresses the organization of the department of the firm. A centralized approach is crucial in order to have a common guided for all people that are responsible for the SMM activities.

In the same way, a networked structure is more effective since each department inside a firm should be responsible for the social media marketing activities given the fact that they want to reach the same objectives. Indeed, a cross department

structure is necessarily followed by a vertical and an horizontal coordination, hence a collaboration among upper hierarchies and peer employees who carry on effectively firm's strategy.

As regard the governance of the organization, in order to increase the success of the firm all employees may be better able to understand the needs of consumers and at the end satisfy them, advocate them and promote the firm online. In the case in which they are not able, the training starts to play an important role. Nevertheless, not just a department, but also all of them and employees are free to communicate by following specific guidelines and rules. Above all, a long-term orientation of the governance is required, as well as a substantial financial resource. Budget allocation based on different digital areas can support the effectiveness of the activities. For instance, different digital investment areas require attention: for the digital presence (social networks, apps, email, digital ads, search engine optimization, digital infrastructures, ads campaign), human resources (people involved in digital marketing) and for the competencies (video and photo content development, website design and maintenance). (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014)

## **2.5 Phases of the Social Media Marketing Strategy**

Every company needs a strategy and a plan to follow to achieve specific objectives. There are some common elements to different marketing plans: allocation of

resources from the top down basis, specific budget allocation based on the possible opportunities, deadlines for actions to perform such as marketing research and advertisement, and the control processes. In the case of the social media marketing strategy there are some elements firms should necessarily consider in the development: goal settings, the situational analysis and of the target audience, social media choice, analysis of resources and policies, the activity plan involving the content strategy and at the end the monitoring and the adaptation. This plan can be splitted in 3 main moments: the first one regarding the strategic decision about the objective and the target market, the second one concerning the tactical and operational part of strategy and the third one regarding the actions implemented and the monitoring. (A. Ananda e al, 2015). Above all, the plan must be strategic, tactical and implementable and may fulfil the corporate marketing activities. Thanks to the Internet and the social media strategic plan it is possible to: redesign sources for competitive advantage, collect, search for and exchange marketing and business information, create an alternative channel for distribution, a device for digital delivery of certain information services, and an opened virtual marketplace for potential and existing consumers.

### 2.5.1 Goal settings

The starting point of whatever strategy plan is the definition of the objectives. social media marketing goals need to fit into business planning as a whole, so should be first of all aligned with the businesses' purposes in order to be of value. Most problems come out especially in the case in which firms don't spend enough time in developing achievable, clear and relevant suitable objectives. Therefore, making them SMART will certainly help companies to have Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-based objectives. They should set more detailed and more specific goals as possible, indicate them with accessible terms in order to make all members into the companies aware of them and provide the employees with enough necessary information. Measurable objectives in terms of quality, quantity, frequency are crucial so as to make the success of the outcomes more easy to be defined. With respect to the human resources and capability of the firms, goals may be reasonable to achieve. It is true that they can be a challenge, nevertheless barriers must be overcome and all required capabilities and resources firms must be provided with. Overestimations are not positive. Focusing on real data and real capacity is necessary for the forecast made by companies. In addition, the strategy has to have an end, otherwise it can not be effective. Goals should be accomplished by following a deadline, which should be represented by a realistic time frame, in order to be motivated and focus on discipline. The SMARTer goals are , the more likely organizations will be able to meet them. Some goals in social media

marketing strategy can be common to different companies and may involve increasing brand awareness, achieving a set higher quantity of sales, improving ROI, driving people to increase in-store sales and growing fan base.

Together with the goal settings, at the beginning, it is critical also the decision on what metrics companies would focus during the application of the strategy, so as to take them under control for the following check.

#### 2.5.2 Situational analysis: track competitors, analyse the environment and understand social media audience.

The situational analysis involves an external and an internal investigation about how people interact in a specific context environment, related to the principal activities of the organization and the performance of the competitors. An external analysis includes tracking competitors, especially how they are using social media platforms and which one of them they use, in order to understand the network or more than one that allows them better to reach their target. Companies definitely need to know also about their social strategy, what they are doing, which is their target. Another reason is the better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. This process should give brands a better understanding of what potential customers expect from businesses in their industry and therefore exploit the gaps deriving from competitors' weak social areas.

Obviously, it is better to observe competitors that have more success and have reached objectives a firm would like to achieve in order to be inspired from them and follow their path of actions. The consideration of the technological trends and the typical consumer behaviours are also useful.

Actually, the exploration of social media platforms is necessary in order to find already existing communities and groups that may help companies to understand what is said about the context in which they are engaged and to select the right target they should reach. After that, brands must be able to segment the priority populations, since if the target is too big, maybe the communication could not be effective. Therefore, based on the characteristics of the people part of communities, companies are able to decide who they want as a social media audience. Understanding which are their behaviour and interests, how they interact in already existence social media pages will push firms to build their typical buyer persona.

#### 2.5.2.1 The definition of Buyer persona

“A buyer persona is a semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers. When creating your buyer persona(s), consider including customer demographics, behaviour patterns, motivations, and goals. The more detailed you are, the better”. (Hubspot)

It can be also described as “an archetype, a composite picture of the real people who buy, or might buy, products like the ones you sell. It’s an avatar you craft from

what you learn in direct interviews with as many customers as possible. And from behaviour observed anywhere else: at industry conferences; in online forums; through social media” (“The buyer personas manifesto”, Revella 2011).

Buyer persona is a detailed and categorized description of target customers that allow companies to have a stronger and more effective cost marketing. The investigation necessary for the creation of buyer persona is involved among the social media marketing activities due to the fact that help companies to develop relevant and targeted content and advertising. The establishment of a profile for each kind of audience firms would like to reach is based on different needs. Information gathering may be possible through direct and indirect interviews, surveys, social media posts and interactions (company page, competitor’s page, online communities, groups), analytics (website, blog and social media), industry and consumers Reports (ThinkwithGoogle, Wearesocial, ecc..), questionnaires on social media or market researches.

According to Lehnert et al, (2019) understanding the values, fears, personal and professional demographics, emotions, intentions, what are their interests, concerns, communication and search style will support marketers in overcoming barriers to acquiring target customers. After that, data can be categorized and profiles of several functional buyers can be created. above mentioned data are the one that are involved in the profiles. With a buyer persona it is more likely to reach sales goals with limited budget in marketing campaigns.

### 2.5.3 Social media channel choice

Some organizations worry about how they are going to find the time and energy to operate accounts on every social network but in most cases, they need just to find the right social networks for their businesses. The important issue is that they should discover the social networks where their potential target audience spend time.

This shouldn't be too difficult, particularly after creating your buyer personas and have interviewed people asking them for their preferred social accounts and where they are active users. Obviously, involving well-known ones and with a large number of users like Facebook, Instagram, Youtube is crucial but not too many others are necessary. The choice of the communication channel regards also the media that companies would like to share, so the format of the content such as photos, or videos, or articles, promotions, state. In the choice of social media it is important taking into consideration the fact that each social media has the aim to share a specific kind of content. For instance, focusing on Facebook and Instagram, they are both visual social media platforms where it is possible to find information in the form of images, text and videos. Nevertheless the difference is that the first platform is a tool used for the creation of online communities around products and companies and the acquisition of information in order to sell, while concerning the

case of Instagram it is more easy to engage with users and discover emerging trends and influencers.

#### 2.5.4 Resources and policies

Valuable Resources in terms of professional expertise should be allocated to be successful in social media. First of all it is crucial to decide who will manage social media marketing activities and then, in the case in which there will be a talent gap, consequently the training or the eternal outsourcing of these activities to the agencies could be solutions. Organization of social media activities expects a division of the responsibilities among employees. Most of the time social media marketing falls under the marketing department and is guided by the marketing manager, even if sometimes the enthusiasm for these items comes from other departments. Actually, the IT employees are more willing to develop social media activities because of their knowledge about the platform, but at the same time they lack experiences about marketing issues. Resources involve financial investments. As regards to the policies they involve guidelines for use, restrictions and ethical considerations, freedom versus loyalty. Basic rules should be set for the organization in order to regulate the corporate organization and the rights of employees. People that deal with social media may follow procedures for the appropriate use of these platforms such as how they can moderate and respond to

negative comments, plans for online ethical conduct, hence procedure to follow in case of the inappropriate use. Setting policies in social media strategy helps companies also to protect workers' rights regarding free speech. Furthermore, policies are necessary so as to not harm the corporate reputation.

#### 2.5.6 Content strategy and Action plan

Considering the objectives, the resources, Buyers persona and social media chosen in order to develop a specific marketing strategy, the creation of valuable content and the consequently plan of action are the next step. The generation of content and strategy to share them and metrics to guide this process should be well organized. The more it is effective, the more it can build the brands' awareness and can communicate the right value. According to Aaker (2018) contents should be authentic, involving, intriguing, interesting and strategic. Hence, they have to be true, engage and address customer needs, grasp attention, tell a story, create a response and be meaningful for the target audience. By implementing the content strategy, a development and understanding of metrics to determine the success of content such as clicks, time, views, and conversations are required.

According to the aim brands want to achieve, the contents and the messages that they convey are different. Content strategy may regard the development of different strategies based on the objectives such as the customer engagement, the increment

of brand awareness, customer relationship management, the advertising, the consideration of influencer marketing and the use of WOM.

Above all, contents should firstly create interest for a specific brand. What is common to all different projects is the way in which firms develop them by focusing on specific issues: the tone of voice, a graphic and verbal identity and a social editorial plan. The process of creating content and frequency of posting and tone of voice call for a brand's attention and are the base of guidelines to follow including in the social media strategy.

Finding the right “tone” is fundamental to create feelings and impressions so as to achieve the aim of creating and maintaining a customer relationship, and not only sell products. The tone of voice depends on values of the brand, the mission, the vision, the objectives of each post and the target you would like to reach.

Regarding the communication level, the identity of a brand plays an active role. The communication involve, not only the messages and word, but also relation level. It means that, in the creation of contents, messages and news companies usually convey and the words that they use should have the same emphasis connected to the brand itself. Giving a command or tips, imposing a relation or pushing people to perform a particular action or telling a story require different approaches but every time using the right word and the verbal identity can be an advantage for companies. Through the humanization of the brand is even possible to satisfy the need of a social connection between contents and users. According to Hudson et al.

(2015) anthropomorphized brands can be defined as a brand perceived by consumers as a human being, able to transmit feelings and emotion. The story of a post can be associated with brands, the values and the emotions that they are likely to communicate. This mental process of humanization of the brand can be a key factor for the facilitation of the formation and maintenance of ongoing consumer relationships. As stated by Coviello et al. (1997) firms should have not only a transactional approach in order to attract consumers, but also a relational one, so as to use information technology tools to target, retain, establish mutual benefits and develop relationships with customers.

In addition, the graphical identity, the attachment with a specific logo, colours, images should vehicle the impact of brand images. Being consistent and brilliant should be necessary to show up in the users mind with a specific impression.

The timing of publishing is also involved in the development of the strategy. An editorial plan allows companies to organize the publishing of contents that depend on social media, and target. The schedule of contents posted based on a specific timeframe, such as a determined day into a week, a moment during the day or for a particular event or celebration, can influence the results obtained from the posts themselves. The content activities plan should include similarly the order of campaigns, projects, and monitoring. It may be practical, easy to understand, and provide organizations with indications of which content is appropriate and authentic. The arguments brands would like to touch are also pivotal in the social

editorial plan. Some issues are important to respect be consistent with the brand identity, use useful content, be repeatable overtime, so use a “fil rouge” to not lose your path, and be sustainable.

#### 2.5.7 Analysis, monitoring and optimization.

In the monitoring phase first of all it is fundamental to verify if firms have achieved the objectives previously decided and the effects of social media marketing, obviously by controlling the progressive ongoing of the metrics. The key performance indicators KPI should be considered related to the tactics and the strategies such as the search traffic on the web and the amount of online sales revenues.

Hence, both financial and non-financial objectives should be considered such as others for example are the ones related to the communication (numbers of comments, or response timeline), building relationships with users (number of followers and likes). It is not easy to monitor the conversation since they happen outside the boundaries of the company, but it is necessary. The management of the word of mouth on social media, especially as regard to negative comments, is helpful in improving the services and achieving higher consumers' satisfaction. Firms, by monitoring the social media activities should always have a contingency plan, in order to solve problems and give fast and efficient feedback to clients.

Another kind of measurement can be performed through software tools that can help to manage different social media, messages, notifications and discussion inside them. Some examples are Business suite, Hootsuite or the tools offered by the social networks themselves, such as Facebook and Instagram insights. Thanks to these analysis tools it will be possible for them to analyse the insights data and review the strategy, whether it was not efficient, and the objectives have not been achieved.

## **2.6. Social media marketing strategy and Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises**

The definition of Small and medium enterprises is different worldwide and depends on different variables in various countries. For instance in the USA there is not one definition of the terms due to the fact that it is also related to the industry structure in which a business is involved, technological change, industry growth trends, history of the activities, competing products from other industries. Whereas, in the case of European Union there is a specific law about the argument. By European union three kinds of SME are distinguished: small, medium and micro.

The first refers to companies with less than 250 employees and a revenue of about 50 millions, the small one with less than 50 employees and a revenue of 10 millions and micro enterprises with less than 10 employees and a revenue of 2 millions. Nevertheless, in general the term MSME usually refers to three different kinds of companies: small, medium and micro. As a consequence of the fact that a lot of

incentives from the government have been offered for the increase of these kinds of companies, over the years numerous small, medium and micro companies were born. Today in some countries over the words they are the responsible for a great part of the economic and social development of each country of the world. The diffusion of the innovations in terms of products, technologies, ideas, applications, as well as the increasement of SME- European union effectively include 99% of the total on firms- have led all kinds of companies to adopt social media for business purposes. According to KPMG International report (2011) approximately 70% of organizations use social media in some type of format. In the same report, it is stated that firms that use social media as part of their business activities are most likely to grow faster than the other ones not using them. Over the years the number of SME using these kinds of platforms has increased. For instance, in the case of the countries of European Union the percentage of both small and medium-sized enterprises users has switched from 25% and 35 % in 2013 to 42% and 54% respectively in 2019. (Statista 2020). As a comparison with the large business, Eurostat (2019) has made an analysis based on different types of social media used by enterprise size. What has emerged is that social media platforms are the most used with a percentage of 75 %, 61% and 48% respectively for large, medium and small size. Then as follows, there are other media such as multimedia content-sharing used by almost half of the large enterprises (47 %) compared to one fifth of the small EU enterprises-businesses (19 %), and blogs.

In the USA the Small Business Administration (2018) established that small businesses are the engine of job creation. Actually, according to the article “Social Media Marketing Statistics and Trends to Know” in 2020 from the web site review 42, in 2017 it was calculated that 90 percent of U.S. businesses were using social media for marketing purposes. The source has projected the rate would increase from 86.2 percent in 2013 to 91 percent in 2019.

According to an article of “the manifest” written by EMILY CLARK (2019) , it has conducted a research about the how small businesses use digital marketing strategies in the USA. What emerged is that Small businesses use digital marketing to promote their services and products across various channels to have benefits, especially in terms of brand awareness and sales. The digital marketing channels in which small businesses invest in are social media (73%), website (73%), email marketing (57%). hence, Social Media Dominates Small Business Digital Marketing Strategies since more than half of the considered organization in the study deal with social media marketing. Facebook is reported to be the most used social media platform: there are over 80 million small businesses using Facebook's free business tools all over the world. (Facebook, 2018)

Much of research suggests that marketers should use social media simultaneously to complete their online marketing strategies. Microblogging sites, web sites, social media platforms are feasible and practical channels for small businesses in order to

implement marketing campaigns, nurturing customer relationships, increasing brand exposure, information sharing and feedback obtaining.

These data should be taken into consideration in the process of selection of the channels for Micro and small businesses. The right channels allow firms to understand why a particular online community or networking are critical because of the investigations of current market trends and issues. Social media maintenance is also fundamental to meet short- and long-term objectives and provide consistency. Presence on social media involves a continuous updating, monitoring of posts, and the determination of the perceptions and rewarding by utilizing them are. (Webb and Roberts, 2016). According to He et al. (2015) some recommendations have been suggested. Firstly, firms should primarily have a customer centric approach: they should study consumers, discover if they are social media users, which kind of platform they use, and as a consequence act principally by building relationships. Second, in the case of the choice of the online presence, the social media adoption plan should respect resources, knowledge, and awareness of the activities they are going to develop. Whether as in the most cases, small and micro businesses have limited constraints, the solution will be the choice of only one channel. Third point regards the active promotion in both online and offline channels of the products and the advertising.

Moreover, it is important that they should understand the value of the brand itself, identifying habits and changing in consumers demand and expectations based on

different periods of time and market trends, understand what quality standards are required and know how to meet them. Several reasons are behind the decision of small and medium size organizations. According to Srinivasan et al. (2016) SME can profit from advantages they have: their small size makes it easier to get close with customers, obtain valuable feedback and maintain active profitable relationships. Numbers of studies conducted by Stokes and Lomax (2002) stated that the most important source of new customer acquisition and retention for small firms is recommendations from existing consumers. The point is that it is necessary to choose the better suited social media platforms for certain marketing strategies and follow a plan to share special messages, so as to reach the purposes. As a result, if the social media participation is high, it means that the customer acquisition and retention strategies are well performed, and this will certainly lead to an increase of the market share and profitability.

Moreover, environmental factors, coming from the climate in which the organization operates, such as the industry structure, suppliers and regulatory systems should be taken under consideration . Competitive intensity, especially for SME can be seen as a pressure in adopting innovations by affecting their industry structure. Since the principal object is obtaining a competitive advantage with respect to the other organization in the same sectors, small businesses can gain from this situation. Actually, leveraging social media acts as acquisition of social capital, and as a consequence have a competitive advantage. (He et al., 2015)

The internal organizational context, as for instance the level of formalization and centralization and staffing and management issues such as networks and relationships among staff, plays an important role. The owner and management support of social media can be considered as a proxy for the full organizational context. The effective support of top management is critical in constructing a supportive environment and providing sufficient resources for the adoption of new technology. Unless, without support, resources, trust, and the basic understanding of the advantages driven by social media activities, opportunities are missed and it will not be possible to obtain benefits. However, sometimes traditional advertising methods like for instance, word of mouth, direct mail, flyers, are perceived as more effective rather than social media activities. Other problems can be related to the lack of communication skills for the promotion of their products or services efficiently, or to gather enough customers to grow and be sustainable in the traditional advertising context. In addition, it can happen that organizations do not have sufficient resources to employ external support for marketing. Nevertheless, effective use of social media may help, because it is an affordable innovation, so less costly that it is proven to help businesses to reach their customers more easily and advertise their products. However, in the same way, in most cases, the lack of time and resources are the issues to overcome, as well as the lack of required technical skills.

What distinguishes SME from the big firms other than the limited resources, trust and time required is also the fact that the former is not able to pay attention to measurement of social media marketing campaigns. They don't deal with automated tools to monitor the web page flow and for this reason, the non-adopters can't figure out if their strategy turns social media fans into real online or physical shop consumers.

In order to achieve success, firms should exploit the possibilities given by social media to overcome limitations of time and resources to reach out to customers cost-efficiently. The fact that they are small is crucial for them since they have flexible structures that facilitate the decision-making processes, enhance the stronger social network among employees, and that will translate to innovation. (Mukherjee and Hollenbahgh, 2019). However, on the other hand, this advantage can be seen as a problem related to the infrastructure weaknesses in terms of physical tools or software useful to develop strategies.

## **2.7 Social Media and Social commerce**

Social commerce for business is a great opportunity in order to track the consumer journey in each step, from awareness to consideration, conversion and measurement. Social media can have an impact on the first case by focusing on user generated content, reviews. Then in the second phase, the consideration one, firms

usually try to build applications in order to conduct consumers from social media to the web site. Two are things to take care about: leads and new ideas generation. The leads help companies to gather information which as a response serve to motivate the one that will become potential customers. In the conversion phase, the moment of purchase, social media usually have a big impact. Different tactics could be offering unique buying propositions through the creation of groups and the exchange of information as a gift. Not only for the process itself, but also for the measurement of the performance the social commerce and results in terms of sales, may be a parameter for the success evaluation. (Pittas et al., 2014). The last step, the one regarding the customer's service, should be considered as fundamental in social media marketing. The user assistance can be performed also through social media platforms and in order to obtain benefits in terms of profits, should be constantly monitored. Moreover, comments and information and services provided should be in line with the needs of the users to not destroy the trust created before with the purchase action.

Some data about e-commerce and social commerce are stated by Casaleggio Report (2019). In a worldwide context, 27 % of active online present people are used to find new brands through advertising on social media, while 75% of consumers stated that they have acquired a particular product after having seen it on social media.

According to a LinkedIn research (2020) Salespeople active on social media report 45% more sales opportunities. In 2020, Millennials and Generation Z are the two generations that together represent the 60% of the population that do shopping online by creating an expense equal to 1.400 billions of dollars. all of them, it is clear that they have familiarity with the technology, such as social media or e-commerce platforms, and prefer online channels for different motivations, such as convenience, lack of time to go to the store, free return process. (Casaleggio Report, 2020) The massive growth of e-commerce together with the popularity of online social networks has been having a profound impact on the global economy. The great expansion of e-commerce has led online commerce to be the most preferred means of purchasing goods.

Electronic commerce has continued to grow as the consumers' confidence in buying goods from abroad has increased. Specifically, a novel type of e-commerce, called "social commerce," has emerged, since consumer shopping behaviors have changed. Social commerce adds e-commerce functionalities to social networks, thus helping people purchase goods and services from places to which they are already connected. By taking advantage of social networking capabilities, social commerce provides features including comments and reviews and other "user-generated content" to encourage customers to share their past personal experiences. As stated by Braojos et al., (2019) Social media and e-commerce platforms are two IT resources. Social media capability is the firm's ability in purposely using and

managing social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter, and corporate blog (s) to execute business activities while E-commerce capability refers to the firm's ability in using and leveraging web technology to promote and sell products Social commerce-IT capabilities (social media capability and e-commerce capability) can individually and jointly facilitate the social and conventional online customer engagement in order to improve firm performance. The customer's individual involvement in social media and in the firm's website is important and requires first the firm's involvement and proficiency in social media. Maintaining a cohesive message on each of different social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,)), is the main purpose to engage the audience. The use of digital technologies (e.g., social media, e-commerce) can improve firm performance in terms of commercial purposes, innovation leadership, operations, and creation of business value.

Social commerce is thus a new concept that involve a shifting of an online shopping environment from one that is business oriented to one users-oriented and is characterized by the interplay of social media and e-commerce platforms influencing customers' participation/engagement and decision-making behaviour (e.g., decision to buy a product/service).

Hence, it is focused on social-centred and consumer-driven online marketplaces where social networking sites encourage their users to shop through social connections with friends.

Due to the change of the consumer's habits, e-vendors not only invest money in advertising on their website, but also in social media channels for the promotions of goods and service and provide personalized messages to encourage current/potential customers to engage with the firm. Just only 24% of marketers use paid advertising to impact direct sales, according to HubSpot, (2020) while the most-used content type across social channels, photo and imagery posts are useful to increase audience engagement and sales.

On the other hand, consumers use Social media to interact with firms and other people, to generate contents, provide product/service reviews, search and share product/service information about prices, product quality and customer services and e-sellers reputation.

Nowadays marketers should adopt a proactive approach to attract consumers and drive purchasing decisions. After creating a need for customers, organizations should spread their value proposition through a marketing strategy and sell products and services according to it. It is in the post-sale stage that enhancing the increase of reputation is crucial together with trust and fidelization.

As stated by Valerio et al. (2019) Shopping behaviour can be influenced by different factors involving purchasing via social media, reviews, factors associated with the brands, reputations, advertisements, promotional offerings, and users' comments. thanks to social media it is more likely to monitor the impact of user generated content on user's satisfaction, trust, loyalty, or perceptions toward company

reputation, level of brand awareness, behaviour toward shopping visits, and intention to purchase and overcome the reluctance to purchase.

Social media marketing activities have achieved wide acceptance in e-commerce. Having a comprehensive approach of perceived social media marketing activities can offer insights and different positive outcomes for the organizations regarding the electronic commerce.

Social commerce activities, that include SMM offer different tools such as reviews or recommendations, ratings referrals, internet forum, online communities, and social shopping group. Hence, social media and all activities and tools connected to them used jointly with e-commerce platforms can facilitate information sharing, supports social interaction, and enables user-generated contents, the spread of WOM, liking, clicking on links and so on. They are all considered potential factors of buying decisions since the aim is giving valuable product information. Whereas organizations are more willing to give personalized shopping and in-depth information on product features, product promotions/discounts, information about contents related to the brand strongly engage online shoppers and persuade them to revisit firms' websites for additional information.

According to a research of Yadav and Rahman, (2017) companies should participate actively in social media activities and e-commerce activities. Since SMMA dimensions provide motivations for the active social media users, it is necessary that organizations take care of these kinds of activities to manage also the

one concerning online purchasing. In addition, the consideration of change of consumers is important. They are impatient, they want to have access to information in few clicks and products must be accessible to purchase quickly, more cost effectively and delivery should only take one day. By looking at how activities are perceived and how consumers react, an adaptation of social media and e-commerce platforms and sites is fundamental in order to increase firms' performance. As a consequence, SMMA will also have a positive impact on purchase intention and increasing brand equity. Hence revenues deriving from social commerce activities would be higher.

Concerning the case of SME, according to a survey conducted by Confartigianato (2019) among the SME interviewed, 12% are active on the website and on online commerce. The others are divided, between 72% that are active online but don't sell products online, and the 16% that are the non-active one. companies that have a presence online are more structured rather than the others and are composed by on average 6.5 employees. Concerning the revenues, 55% of companies that sell products online, has observed an increase of the production, +6% more than the average. In addition, the latter, together with companies that have only an online presence with social media, have recognized the opportunity of online tools to have an improvement in terms of performance and reputation. ("E-COMMERCE IN ITALIA 2019", Casaleggio casati, 2019)

Especially in the case of SMEs and micro firms, social commerce can overcome barriers, because of the limited resource required and cost savings and a wider possibility to have access to numerous means of obtaining payment and organization of delivery. The establishment of the company website for the marketing and sales promotions and a database to check information are fundamental for the success of the e-commerce plan, other than relationship building with a niche market. Multimedia technologies have provided a number of opportunities for interactive shopping and a creation of an online marketplace where SME and micro-organizations can reach the target they want. With the traditional channels of distribution, it was logistically difficult to access niche market far from the local consumers.

## **CHAPTER 3 AGRI FOOD INDUSTRY AND SOCIAL MEDIA: A FOCUS ON INSTAGRAM AND FACEBOOK**

### **3.1 Adoption and use of social media in the agri-food industry**

The increasingly widespread use of digital technology, the development of the World Wide Web (WWW) and the rise of Internet users have had an impact on all kinds of industry, including the food and beverage industry and the agri-food business. Digital systems have changed consumers' purchasing behaviours by providing them with more accurate, real-time information on prices, product availability, variants, delivery methods. The context in which companies in food industries operate has been characterized, in the last decades, by changes, innovations, globalization, internationalization, increase in competitiveness and technology that have inevitably changed the way they operate.

The Food and Beverage sector is the forefront of interactive marketing, and new types of digital marketing and communication techniques. Many organizations have started to have their official pages, blogs, and groups on social media and it helps in getting information and solving the problems. The adoption of social media as a tool of marketing is a challenge nowadays and should lead the corporation to focus on transparency and relay information, reducing the asymmetric information in

order to increase their power, use consumers preferences to develop strategies by exploiting also financial, technological and human resources (Steves et al., 2015). Social media is the new upcoming area and a very useful tool in the Food and Beverage industry, in particular in agricultural marketing that involves equally blogs, microblogs, pages, groups etc. It saves time and cost of the farmers for getting information.

The agri-food sector employs one third of the global available workforce and delivers a product that is essential for human survival. The dynamics of the social media interaction, such as personalization, amplification, polarization and dispersion of information are useful to reinforce the principal characteristics and issues regarding food-related products. In particular in social media online environments the organization's activities are based on transparency, food safety and food production, transformation and promotion and they can be emphasized through user generated contents, videos, photos. This typical dynamic is then reinforced by liking, sharing, commenting and the communities that should be created around the brands (Stevens et al, 2016).

According to Brandwatch data and the article written by Kit Smith (2016), social media report for agriculture brands shows that, among the 200 companies spread across 10 different kinds of industries , agriculture takes only 6%. What emerged, is also that not all the Agri-food industry takes advantage from social media. 35% of agriculture brands have no social presence on Facebook and miss out on the

opportunity while 50% of brands post less than once every 15 days on the same platform. Besides, only 30% of marketers rate their organization's content marketing as effective.

Actually, according to a Farm Futures survey of 1,550 farmers (2016), Facebook is by far the most popular social media used even by U.S. farmers, followed by Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr. In general, younger farmers tended to use social media more than average. About 46% of U.S. farmers use Facebook for personal reasons, according to the survey and of those, 56 % are 35 years old or younger while about 9% use the same for farm business reasons and 21% of those are 35 years old or younger. Just less than 10% use Facebook to advocate for agriculture; that number jumps to 21% for the 35 and under crowd.

About 9% of farmers use Twitter, with half of those using the social tool for business purposes and to advocate consumers for agriculture. Also in this case, 28 % of the Twitter users are 35 years old or younger. About 17% of farmers report using LinkedIn, and among them 6% use it for farm business purposes. The largest age group to use LinkedIn is 36- to 45-year-olds. At the end only 5% of all farmers use Instagram, the online photo and video-sharing network, and the 19% of them are nearly 35 years old or under.

Moreover, farmers are also tapping into social media, especially YouTube, and Facebook for general news and information about products and services that can

help them improve their farming operations to watch news and educational programs.

The aim of the social media marketing communication for agri-food industry are especially the increase of brand awareness and the interest on products they produce, consumer engagement accomplishment, issues management, risks and crisis communication, advertising and promoting, selling data and customer insights gathering, offer highly-requested nutritional information for health-conscious consumers, spike sales by connecting their products to current events or trends and demonstrate corporate social responsibility.

According to a research conducted by Balkrishna and Deshmukh, (2017), most of the respondents use social media for information seeking, problem-solving , information sharing , Agri products selling or buying and increasing market rates. The main benefit of social media in agricultural marketing is ability to gain wealth of knowledge and ideas, to tell their stories of success or failure, opportunity to establish key partnerships, opportunity to reach experts in agricultural fields and a wider range of consumers, customers retention, offers great opportunities for the buying, selling of agricultural commodities. It can be done by sending images, pictures, links, videos etc. This sharing of information facilitates the marketing of farmers' produce and formation of a network. In addition, what emerged from the above-mentioned research is that most of them have also accounts on social media

websites and are used to visiting Social media daily, so they are continuously updated about the news feeds.

Today, in making this, food manufacturers may accept the loss of the element of control as well as the exposure to a loss or gain business value, since social media users have become “prosumers”. Hence, food retailers in the food and beverage industry have increased their power to shape public information on food and agriculture by exploiting all functions on social media platforms. They use data in order to develop new plans to enhance marketing strategies, understand consumers preferences and this has led them to be at the forefront of interactive marketing and tracking techniques. (Stevens et al., 2016)

The role of the internet and social media as sources of learning, teaching, information sharing and food promoting, especially healthy one, has increased. This communication channel can be relevant for both producers and retailers. In the first case, in the situation there is a short supply chain, products go directly from businesses to consumers and it happens exceptionally for SME and micro or with the e-commerce or social commerce platforms. In the latter case indeed, for retailers it can be easier to reach final consumers and develop an effective social media marketing communication plan.

Even Italian agri-food companies have found out social media and social network potentialities, as strategic tools for marketing management. They are becoming aware of the opportunities offered by social networks, involving consumers directly

in active relations. To avoid failure, however, it will be necessary to focus on the right target and build specific contributions, such as promotional events and advertisement initiatives, to involve customers more and integrate the activities of one's own web site. In Italy such phenomenon just started, while in other countries it has already developed, like in the USA, where in 2011 almost 70% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) relied on Facebook.

According to Sturialea and Scuderi, (2013) among agri-food sector' SMEs, about 40% of small companies use Social media, 50% of medium ones have activated at least one channel, while 58% of big ones are active on new media for a while. According to the research "Social Media Ability of Italian enterprises'", carried out by the Communication School IULM in 2012 on a sample of 720 companies of different sectors, including the agri-food one, it came out that such channel is still underused despite the certainty that it may help farms and agri-food companies to reach their targets in a direct and interactive way.

SME and Micro companies in the Food and Beverage sector, should adopt a strategic communication plan in order to enter in the market and maintain their position by increasing sales thanks to the access to social media advertising tools with low costs and ease of use.

However, the real strength for them could be the developing an omnichannel strategy by consolidating the brand awareness and image. The differentiation

strategy is fundamental: especially small companies should focus on the uniqueness of the characteristics of their products and the need that people have.

### **3.2. Social media marketing in agri-food industry: issues and barriers**

According to Mendini et al. (2015) there has been an increase of “foodies” (people strongly interested in the world of food), both offline and online, especially those who are interested in healthy food that leads to well-being. There is a positive relationship between food and the positive psychological and emotional state of people, and if the consumption of food products has resulted in healthy benefits and well-being, the relation will increase.

Through social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, it is also possible to post a photo or video to provide information, pleasurable experiences with the hashtags and attract the more interested people and make them aware of the sensation of gratification, healthiness, well-being. Sharing food both offline and online involves the spread of the sense of community since it is often related to social events, family and conviviality. All feelings, especially in the case of online mindful sharing are induced by enjoyment, colours, shapes of foods to communicate the high quality, the freshness, the healthiness and increase the desire to acquire specific products. In the food industry and the social media marketing activities related to it, concept

of social influence plays a critical role since food is considered the principal element for socialization.

Hence, if a specific good makes the buying and consumption process a pleasure for one individual that shares the experience both online and offline, therefore information will have an impact on the receivers. In this way organizations can engage users and in the case of high quality and natural food and beverage can contribute to happiness, well-being and healthy practices.

Thanks to social media platforms the food safety and nutrition communication has more opportunities than before to enable interactive communications with the public. People have become more aware of the food issues, such as the food safety, eco-friendly organizations, healthy and natural food without sugar or preservatives. Social media can be considered in the same way a challenge or a benefit for the promotion and the spread of information regarding these issues. There can be benefits regarding responsibility to keep personalized messages offered by social media networks by giving food related tips and promoting healthy products through social commerce.

As a matter of fact, since social media today have penetrated among people and firms, organizations, especially farms concerned with healthy and safe food, should monitor what users are looking for. According to research conducted by Nielsen (2017) over the years it has registered a positive trend, +15,3%” about the interest of people regarding premium products. The terms premium products are

represented by the high quality products in terms of ingredients and materials that compound them and the prices, in this specific case at least 20% higher than the market average. Italians are now-a-days more willing to pay a premium price for eco-friendly and natural and organic products. Moreover, what is important is the increase of the demand for healthy food, and the ascent of veganism and organic food trend.

Regarding the brands that produce organic agri-food, social media tools should be exploited totally, unless they could be subjected to a commercial shortfall. The consumer's lack of information about this type of product, the inaccessibility of available supplies, and an excessive price differential between organic products and their conventional equivalents are the reasons why the social media strategy might fail (Jurado et al., 2019). In order to solve these problems, it is necessary to lower the costs beared by consumers not by reducing prices, but by providing useful and relevant information. In this way, customers can recognize a premium price to those brands who help reducing their efforts to get detailed information about food. Moreover, there are other issues related to the Food and Beverage industry in general.

The inability to gather data, understand customer sentiments and make informed decisions are other one. The food industry is volatile and sensitive even to the slightest of changes. The complex environment involving growing data-generation imply challenges in the food and beverage industry.

However, it is clear that data analysis has a significant role to play in the decision-making and production processes. Data analytics have turned out to be useful in keeping track of the latest market trends, giving you an idea about where your brand stands, to optimize inventories and reduce waste. It also helps to track surplus that can help to meet the expectations of the growing demands of the consumers and fill the gap. With the data analytics, the food and beverage industry can handle supply chain disruptions and stay ahead of any competition. In addition, it also helps the firm to understand the consumer's likes and dislikes thus allowing to come up with products and services that completely satisfy consumers.

Based on the insights, food companies use to try to understand the idea behind the customer conversation on social media and what the unfulfilled demands are. Therefore, they build a content strategy to ensure messages are clear, timely, and targeted.

Another important issue concerns the food quality. Companies find it hard to handle it because it is challenging to maintain a consistent food quality in this competitive era where in this new market the demand of food is high and consumers expect a uniform food taste.

According to Balkrishna and Deshmukh, (2017) other problems can arise especially in the agricultural food sector. Social media can be adopted also as a tool of agricultural marketing, but a limit is represented by the fact that there is no training and education about the use of social media in this sector. However, some

organizations don't perceive social media as a suitable channel to handle complaints and share information with confidence, hence they prefer not dealing with these tools.

### 3.2.1 Agri-food industry and CSR

Especially into the agribusiness sector, some problems could be related also to the environment. In 2017, global management consulting firm L.E.K. published a report listing trends transforming the agribusiness industry. The findings defined how food is grown, produced, and sold now and into the foreseeable future by considering also the rising consumer focus on clean-label foods and sustainability. Green issues trends cut right to the heart of the 21st-century reality, therefore more and more industries and individuals, involving agribusinesses, are trying to find ways to reduce their carbon footprint and to actively embrace these values and leverage those initiatives in their marketing campaigns. Actually, as part of effective marketing strategy, agribusiness should demonstrate a pro-sustainability and clean-label approach through the promotion of environmentally friendly products with a low environmental impact and at the end meet consumer expectations. Branding an agri-product as a "clean label" means that marketing campaigns can include the terminology that drives consumer food preferences in

this day and age such as organic, non-GMO, gluten-free, antibiotic-free, no preservatives and colouring, sugar-free.

Besides, Corporate social responsibility is also important for food companies and it concerns actions over and above their legal obligations towards society and the environment. Consequently, a company's responsibility goes towards a three-domain approach (Schwartz and Carroll, 2003, 505pp): economic, legislative, and ethical. Sustainable development towards society and environment, connected to the concept of sustainability. In summary, we can assume that enterprises are responsible for their impact on society (European Commission, 2011). Within the food sector, companies are forced to make all efforts to guarantee resources-saving, energy-optimizing, and low-emission production processes.

They inform transparently about CSR activities and integrate stakeholders into the CSR progress and all related processes. Topics like food security, traceability, origin, animal welfare, and environmental impacts are of growing interest for a number of stakeholders and companies, NGOs and the public administration is obliged to deliver relevant information. Food companies can reduce disparities by implementing an appropriate CSR strategy including appropriate communication. Even in social media marketing the specifics of the food supply chain should be considered: transparency, authenticity, credibility, food security, food production, additives, health, packaging, ecological impacts are of increasing importance. An

open dialogue and integration of stakeholders are other important success factor.(Meixner et al. 2015).

The experts suppose that “modern” agri-food SMEs have already implemented social media into their CSR communication strategy, but most SMEs are not explicitly including social media in their overall communication policy. They are not benefiting from the opportunities of these interactive communication tools and still rely on “mainstream” communication channels (like corporate Website, CSR reports, etc.) enabling only one-sided communication without the possibility to develop real interaction with stakeholders. These tools can be beneficial and helpful in building (brand loyal) communities and transporting messages. It depends on what an enterprise wants to achieve, and which target groups and stakeholders should be reached. However, up to now companies are rather reluctant to open themselves towards a real stakeholder dialogue. Most of the social media tools like Facebook or Twitter are applied because the enterprises want to increase sales or improve the overall image of the company.

### **3.3 Social commerce in agri-food industry**

According to Casaleggio Casati report about the e-commerce in Italy (2019), in the last 4 years the e-commerce revenues of different sectors, including food and beverage, has increase a lot passing from a percentage of improvement of 11%

between 2016 and 2017, to a 18% and 17% between 2017 and 2018 and 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Considering the distribution of the e-commerce revenues in Italy, the food and beverage industry occupies the sixth position (2,8%) after free time, tourism, shopping centres, insurance market and electronics industry. In 2020 it was higher from the 2019 of 19%, thanks to the increase of food delivery due to the pandemic. Even the worldwide e-commerce revenues have increased a lot thanks to increment of the use of social media marketing due to the Covid-19.

According to Statista (2020) the food and personal care industry has passed from 39.452 millions of dollars in 2018, to 57.465 millions of dollars in 2020, and it is expected to rise.

Social commerce provides a new channel for food sales. In this way online food consumers can be connected to each other, share their experiences, create user generated contents, evaluate and review them, influencing others' shopping behaviours by also strengthening their relationships, reducing transaction costs and removing intermediaries. Besides, it can be a great opportunity to share information in order to overcome the asymmetric information and promote the development of this industry, since sometimes people are not aware that agricultural products have particular features such as durability, respect to other kinds of products.

As the other industries, even Food and Beverage businesses, and in the specific the part that regard the agro-food companies, have the same ability to make use of the

advantages the Internet affords, even if various factors, which differ according to the industry or the region in which the business operates can influence the adapting to the Internet.

It is worth noting that marketing and distribution channels used by agri-food products, can be significantly different than those regarding the other kind of goods, simply due to product characteristics such as seasonality, perishability, sensitivity to temperatures, requiring a more complex process of storage and transportation, and thus, online sale may be more complicated.

However, in the specific case of agricultural markets, e-commerce via the Internet offers in the same way an important instrument to help these organizations fulfil some of their main functions, such as promoting, coordinating and developing common economic goals with their partners and strengthening and integrating their economic activity, giving quick solutions, and gaining in agility and responsiveness.

From the point of view of demand, Jin et al. (2017) carried out an investigation into customers' preferences when buying fresh products over the Internet. Results showed that the diversity of product offered, and its certification had significant effects on willingness to pay, especially for products labelled “green” and “organic”.

Organizations websites allow users to obtain information and interact with them, whether for the purpose of e-commerce activities (product sales, tourist visits,

services for partners, etc.) or to ask questions on a secure platform that guarantees compliance with the quality standards of a website. Functionality and accessibility are becoming of critical importance as website's capacity to distribute and sell agri-food products in order to attract consumers. Then what emerged from the research above mentioned, over 50% of the websites analysed had links to social network profiles such as Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn or links to platforms with external images or videos such as Youtube or Flickr and vice versa, from the social network page, it is possible to access directly to the website and the online catalogue.

Regarding the specific field of healthy products and social commerce, some data shows that healthy food sales represent an increasing percentage of overall food sales, fastly and so most of new products have healthy claims (Statista, 2018).

Food manufacturers regarding the promotion of products should consider some reasons that lead healthy food products to be not so much desirable. They are for instance the fact that sometimes the consumers' health-orientation and determinations are challenged at the moment of sale by the more aggressive marketing strategies and eye-catching positioning of less healthy brands, or the platforms in which the promotion is placed, since various social media platforms are continuously growing and competing. (Samoggia et al., 2019).

According to Nielsen, (2015) generation Z, millennials and Generation Y, consumers up to 49 age even have a greater willingness to pay for healthy food.

However younger consumers are the one that are most willing to pay a premium price for health attributes.

Nowadays, the consumption of organic food, high quality and safety has become a new trend. For this reason, it is necessary to explore the drivers that push consumers to buy these products. In the sale process of organic and natural food, it is necessary to take under consideration the characteristics of the products themselves and of the food market. Besides, other than the characteristics of the social commerce platform, health consciousness, uncertainty and the propensity of consumers to natural products, are factors that influence the behaviour intentions.

The perceived value of a specific product plays an important role in the decision making in buying behaviours. Concerning the social commerce and food market the same process happens in the mind of the user: social commerce and determined food characteristics influence the perceived value. According to Lin, et al., (2020) especially in organic and natural food, the social commerce characteristics are considered more important rather than the food characteristics in the moment of buying. The interactivity, recommendations and feedback are aspects that regard the social commerce platform and posts and can have a higher weight in purchase decision than the food features, such as the quality, organic, safety and environmental friendliness. Through social media and social commerce platforms, it is possible to obtain information about the experiences of the other people, and in

the case of friends and family, the information and more sincere and reliable and if they are positive can push users to buy.

Furthermore, Lin, et al., (2020) discovered that the perceived value can be more powerful if the functional dimensions overcome the emotional one. The perceived value can be summarized in two dimensions: functional value, that regards the utilitarian and functional capabilities of the specific food product and the emotional value, concerning the alternative capacity to evoke feelings or emotional states, such as happiness, imagination and enjoyment. Functional and practical benefits will push consumers to have a higher perceived value of the good and at the end, buy the product and consume it for their wellness and health.

Some practical implications for social commerce sellers can involve the improvement of real time communication to raise the interactivity and to provide comfortable communication channels, the highlighting of practicality, functions of social commerce, other than taking advantage from feedback and preferences and habits of people. Moreover, some important characteristics of the food should be emphasized, such as the origin, the quality, the safety and healthiness.

### **3.4 Facebook and Instagram in Agri-food industry**

The digital penetration according to Statista (2019), has increased from 55.1% to 58.8%. Together with it also the number of websites has increased by arriving to

1.72 billions. Concerning social media, even the number of active users has raised a lot. As stated by the report We are social (2020) in 2017 the active users were 1.196 billions, 2.796 in 2018, in 2019 3.484 and in 2020 3.805, with respectively the increment percentage of 14%, 9% and 9.2%.

In Italy, social media active users are on average 35 millions, (58% of the total population), and 98% of them use mobile phones. The average time they spent online is equal to almost 2 hours (6 minutes more than 2018), and it differs from the global average that indeed amounts to 2 hours and 29 minutes (+1.4% from 2019 and 6.0% from 2018 when hours were 2.22). 30% of them are used to find information about products and services to acquire online, while worldwide are the 43 of the active users that perform the same actions. (Casaleggio report, 2019; “We are social report”, 2020). Among the social media world, Social networking is considered the most popular activity in 2020. They are fundamental tools for both organizations and consumers. What emerged from a social media statistic from Small Business Trends, 90% of marketers say that social media has increased their brand exposure since brands usually use social media to share general updates, communicate with consumers, to share marketing messages, sell products and following other organizations. (Hubspot, 2020). Indeed, According to We are social, (2020) consumers active users are people, especially the one from 16 to 25 years old both male and female, that look for brands on social media. Engagement, reach, leads and conversion rate are the most important KPIs to track in social

media. It is necessary to monitor the likes, dislikes, shares, subscribers or comments. The higher is engagement, leads obtained and the reach, the higher is your chances of conversion.

Even if there exist different kinds of social networks, what emerged from different researches and according to different industries, small big and micro one, and users, the most popular one and the most used is Facebook. It is also the 3° website most visited in the world and the Most searched keyword on search engines in 2019. (NickG.,”review 42”2020) .

As stated from “We are social”, while Facebook covers the first position, Instagram stays in the sixth position and is considered the “king of social food”. The development of an important strategy of visual content is fundamental for some industries since visual content, both images and videos, is a staggering 40 times more likely to be shared compared to non-visual content. (Lyfe Marketing, Hotspot, 2020).

#### 3.4.1 Facebook and Instagram: an overview

The Facebook mission is to “Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them" ([about.fb.com/company-info](https://about.fb.com/company-info))

As stated by 2020 Statista, (2020) there are 2.6 billion monthly active Facebook users. Of those active users, 74% of them log into Facebook daily and spend an average of 38 minutes per day on the platform. According to “The Ultimate List of Marketing Statistics for 2020” in Hubspot some statistics regarding Facebook are fundamental to know and indicate how the Facebook company is powerful. More than 180 million businesses use Facebook apps to connect with customers and among them 90 million are small businesses that use Facebook Pages, Groups, and Messenger as free business tools. Facebook has created an online community around brands, companies, products and people, and in the specific case of Italy, about 31 billions active users are used to visit a local business page at least once a week. In the USA Facebook is used by about 51% of teens between the ages of 13-17. (Pew Research Center, 2018). In April 2020, over 98% of Facebook's active user accounts worldwide accessed the social network via any kind of mobile phone. (Statista, 2020)

Nowadays, Facebook is considered even by e-commerce companies the most effective social media, thanks to the marketplace, that is accessible to users of more than 50 countries all over the world and the possibility to add the shop online directly connected with the e-commerce platform of websites. Actually, Facebook is considered the primary content distribution channel for marketers today according to HubSpot (2020). After the creation that goes back to 2004, and the official launch as a social network even as a mobile app, it fortunately had to

overcome some ups and downs, such as the frequent change of algorithms, the decreasing of the organic reach and the rise of advertising. At the beginning the newsfeeds were empty of posts that were visualized in a chronological order. After then there was the creation of algorithms that allowed the see fist the most popular posts and the one published by pages that each individual liked with personal profile. With the increase of the creation of business pages and branded contents, there was a revolution of Facebook. In 2018 users claimed that as the branded content was more than the organic one, the principal aim of the platform could no more be respected. For this reason, Facebook company changed the way of promotion of products by favouring contents that are relevant, meaningful and that facilitate social interactions both in the case in which users were individuals or organizations. Today the algorithm of Facebook promote and make increase the visibility to contents such as images, video, states, shares based on the amount of average time users spend on them, the engagement rate, like, comments, reactions, shares, shares on messages, who, when, and what time post, technology types and content types, completeness of a profile and the new contents. Focus is no more on quantity, but in quality and more importance is given to the creation of communities and groups. The social networks today, has developed even new services for businesses and users such as the possibility to advertise product, track competitors, obtain data about consumers and the ads that they like or the one that they “hyde”, sell product through the social selling processes, and have information from the

Facebook insights, especially if the profile belong to a company. With this platform it is possible to create organic content and advertising. In both cases it is possible to reach the first object of the brand itself: well-developed advertising contents with the analysis of the right target will lead to the desired purpose, such as increasing of engagement, brand awareness or increase of sales as well as the create contents, stories, Facebook direct, creating groups, organizing events, and be always available for consumers. In the last years even, different elements have been introduced, such as the Facebook Live, Stories, and the Shop. According some statistics, more than 1 billions of Facebook Stories are shared every day and these attract 500 million daily viewers. (Source: TechCrunch) and more than 15% of Facebook users shop through the platform (Source: eMarketer).

In the last few years Facebook has suffered the continuing loss of younger users that move to other channels, like for example Instagram. Among the preferred social networks of companies there is Instagram, since it is considered one of the most effective social media. Instagram is the image sharing platform mainly based on images and videos (text is very much in the background) that has the mission to engage the user and discover emerging trends/influencers. It is also a platform where most people discover new products and it is demonstrated by the percentage accounts that follow a business on IG, 90%. Today it is fundamental to learn how to use it (and its particular type of content) effectively, with a well thought out social media marketing strategy in order to reach the best audience.

Instagram has over one billion monthly active users and among them 63% use it every day and spend at least half an hour there. It is considered one of the fastest growing platforms (in terms of users and engagement). Actually, in 2023, Instagram is projected to reach 120.3 million monthly active users in the U.S., up from 107.2 million users in 2019. Instagram boasts one of the youngest audiences since, according to statistics of Hubspot (2020) states that 72% of teens saying they use it. What's more, 64% of users are under 34 (Statista, 2020). Engagement with brands is over 10 times higher than on Facebook. (Source: Statusbrew). In fact, 200 million people visit at least one business profile every day, and 130 million people engage with shopping posts every month. (Source: Sprout Social).

Due to the visual nature of the platform, Instagram is a perfect opportunity for brands and retailers to display their products in a flattering way. Many celebrities and influencers generate a sizable income by posting ads in the form of sponsored posts on Instagram. In 2018, there were approximately 3.7 million sponsored influencer posts on the platform. The most popular content type of Instagram posts by influencers worldwide were photos (Statista, 2019).

Instagram was launched in 2010 as an app and in only one day racked up 25,000 users. From the beginning, the primary focus of the app was to feature photographs, specifically those taken on mobile devices. In 2012 it was acquired by Facebook the company for \$1 billion.

Although Instagram has a variety of features, in general, the app's interface allows individuals who have created a free account to upload media—both photos and videos, edit them with filters and organize them with location information and hashtags, a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign that is used primarily on social media platforms to identify posts about a specific topic. Their aim is tying the conversations of different users into one stream and describing and driving content to the target audience. Hashtag should be chosen carefully in terms of numbers for each post and relevance for contents and users. There are two different types of hashtags: specific and general. The first type is brand-related that is used in the case of a product launch or a contest, promoting events, creating a community, collecting UGC since they are links to your values while the second type allows the company to reach out to a wider audience because they are popular, and a lot of people use them. It is not always convenient to use general hashtag because of the fact that the huge target reachable could not be the desirable one, whereas the specific one can be also created by the brand itself and could certainly lead to the engagement of the specific target and followers.

Users on Instagram can make their profiles public or private; the difference is that with a public profile, a user's photos/videos are viewable by every other Instagram user, whereas with a private profile, users can approve who they want to be able to view their posts. In addition, Instagram allows users to browse other users' photos and videos by searching for locations and hashtags and through them follow a

particular conversation. They can also scroll through an aggregation of content and interact with other user's photos and videos by clicking on buttons that allow them to "like" a post or add a text comment to a post.

Currently, one of the app's most popular features is called Instagram Stories. With this feature, users can post photos and videos to a separate feed of content within the app. In 2019, photo sharing platform Instagram reported 500 million daily active Stories users worldwide, up from 150 million in January 2017 (Statista, 2019) and 400 million global DAU in 2018. Stories is a feature of the app allowing users post photo and video sequences that disappear 24 hours after being posted launched in 2017(Statista 2020). In the years following, Instagram revised its live-video functionality to allow users to add their live broadcast and it started allowing users to respond to Stories content by sending photos and videos, complete with Instagram effects such as filters, stickers, and hashtags.

The Instagram algorithm was designed so that users would see more of the photos by users that they liked. Instagram in the last years also introduced the new "Shop" that allows the consumers to access the product catalogue on Facebook and acquire goods in the specific website or e-commerce platform. Moreover, new possible format content is started to be use such as reels that are short, fun videos and IGTV, an app for long-form, vertical video, that allows users to share live video content between 15 and 16 minutes long. (Instagram, 2020) all of them can be used

by companies to increase the visibility and attract new followers and make them more engaged with the brand itself. (Wikipedia, 2020)

Depending on strategic goals, marketing purpose and industry of which the organization is part, Instagram can be an effective tool. Increasing sales, visibility, or brand awareness are all reachable through the creation of compelling contents, taking care of the profile aesthetics and choosing a variety of contents. In a nutshell, in social media strategy it is necessary to carefully decide the story to tell, the core values, the target, tone of voice, content type and format and the focus on quality in order to be relevant.

#### 3.4.2 Facebook and Instagram tactics for agri-food companies.

Social media are important and fundamental tools for the survival of brands today. Regardless of their dimensions, large, small and micro companies can take advantage from these platforms by using different tactics in order to reach different marketing goals (increasing brand awareness, customer engagement, sales). Concerning the Food and beverage industry, in the specific case of Agro-food companies, a multi channel social media marketing strategy is pivotal for increasing brand recognition and attracting followers to convert into consumers. In order to develop an effective Social media marketing strategy and overcome problems-related sectors, brands may analyse the creation of contents and considered useful

tactics to engage with users, advertise campaigns, ways to improve consumers experiences, electronic WOM and CRM and the collaboration of influencers to increase engagement.

During the last few years, as the information about food, especially the healthy one, has increased the number of health problems connected to food have risen. Hence, the concept of food in social media marketing should be utilized even more in order to change the wrong habits acquired by most people.

According to Chin and Mansori, (2019) three are the model to change the perceptions through food of consumers, since they are dependent from social networks. The first model involves the presentation of all risks the users can face, in terms of problems and diseases, in order to perceive the unhealthy food as not good and increase the motivations to adopt and consume healthy food. Another model regards the social listening approach. Users may change behaviours since they are pushed by other people such as social media influencers or brand ambassadors or other users that are interested in the same argument. The third technique regards the verbal persuasion and the influence of the target audience through the behaviour of people that are similar to others. If some tips or benefits work for certain kinds of people, the ones that are similar to them, will receive the same treatment.

Another strategy regards the impact of agri-food products on consumers. It is obvious that healthier food most of the time is perceived as products with higher

prices than the normal one. Not all consumers are aware of these issues and some research showed that sometimes they prefer to buy products with low prices, even if they are of a lower quality. An effective social media strategy should involve the choice of a target group that fits with the characteristics of the products and can satisfy their needs. As a matter of fact, the choice of target requires also the analysis of the socio-economic status of the geographical area in which the target is located. Moreover, to attract them due to the high price, detailed information about the market, the benefits provided, possible discounts and promotions, can increase the propensity to buy these kinds of products. (Samoggia et al., 2019) The strategy should be based on data gathering, and then modulated in a way as tailored as possible to the target audience. Once all features, advantages and benefits have been identified, the subsequent step is the creation of marketing and sales messages to broadcast with social media. With the promotion it is necessary to be as much specific as possible about where consumers can find information and buy products. Posting about product launches and product promotions on social without forgetting to include when and where they happen to increase product purchases.

Product launches monitoring is a big deal in the food and beverage industry since consumers pay a lot more attention in all aspects of the new product. In this specific process, the launch of a new product line, brands make sure the target is the right audience and spread messages, engage them and understand the possible response which will give you a clear idea of what people liked and what not. Hence,

understanding brand perspectives, identifying consumers' needs are necessary also to therefore, identify any issues and make improvements if necessary. All of these following tactics can be adequate to both the social networks, Instagram and Facebook.

#### 3.4.2.1 Engagement and brand awareness messages

Engagement is fundamental for both Facebook and Instagram. There exist different typologies of contents and messages that brands can convey online, through social media.

As stated by Yang and Kankanhalli (2014) three categories of messages may lead to an increase of the engagement: business branding, call for purchase and reposts of buyer reviews. In the first case messages contain the brand name and with it all intangible value that it involves, relevant information which people are more likely to like or comment on. In the second case, call to action messages have the aim to push users to buy. Consumers can be attracted by product updates and description of goods with characteristics which can satisfy their needs. The repost of the buyers' reviews can deliver information coming from other customers, and for this reason are more trustworthy. The same kind of strategies and messages can impact also in Brand awareness. Hence, consumers can better recognise or recall a brand especially during the decision-making process, thanks to the creation of contents by delivering these messages. According to Tafesse and Wien (2016) and their

research about the branded content several message strategies in combination are more effective in order to increase the engagement. Interactional, informational and transformational messages that work together become more impactful since, especially the last typology, possess emotional, symbolic and experiential values and hedonic brand cue. The informational one is described as messages involving information about benefits, functional attributes and proper applications of products and services while the interactional one allows the cultivation of consumers' interactions by conveying one to one and many to many communications.

Both the messages and the format are important to make consumers engage. Texts, videos, images are the three kinds of format used in social media. Consumers can not only perceive information from photos, but also from the text description. Nevertheless, multimedia content has been evaluated to be the most engaging format post, since it has a direct impact on various senses.

In the specific case of Instagram, engagement rate is a fundamental metric for Instagram and there are different ways to be relevant and increase it. It measures the audience's interest as impressions, brand relevance in terms of credibility of the company and social authority to attract other followers. As follow, some useful methods to enhance the engagement are listed: being consistent, understanding your audience, post regularly, (often but not too much), creating better captions, engaging with your followers and taking advantage from user-generated contents, engaging with similar accounts, creating mixed content in terms of format (videos,

images, reels, stories, igtv, Instagram direct), using call to actions, tracking your statistics, tagging other IG users, geotagging your post by creating a sense of community, keeping up with trending on IG and creating different content such as beautiful, images, behind-the-scenes pictures, quotes from an article to express the brand values, celebrational, motivational, educational and achievement post. (Flori Needle, 2020, “Hubspot blog”; Karin Olafson, 2020, “Hootsuit blog”) Moreover even the use of hashtags, better if specific, can help companies to reach followers in a easier way and attract the like-minded one and to encourage users to discover both photos and each other.

Concerning Facebook platform, that involves a wider audience, it is characterized by other methods to increase organic reach and attract new followers and consumers. Big companies usually have more resources available to invest in advertising and branded contents on social media. Nevertheless, it does not mean that small and micro businesses that are part of each industry, involving the food can not survive in a digital environment. According to Anna Hubbel and her article,(2020) there are different ways that can help companies to increase organic Facebook reach: setting and taking care about the company page with the right editorial activity, posting when your audience is most engaged, setting a call to action bottom, creating a personalized tab, focusing on the storytelling, avoiding engagement baits, creating groups for social learning, buying and selling or general to interact with members, create events, encouraging followers to engage with your

posts, promoting your page on other social networks, share User-Generated Content. As a matter of fact, companies should verify if the organic reach increases by checking the Facebook insights and try to balance organic posts with some ads when possible. Nonetheless, the tactics to increase organic reach should be in line with the brand page goals the company has previously set.

#### 3.4.2.2 CRM and consumer satisfaction

According to Caiazza and Bigliardi, (2020) food industry will need to focus on integrated pillars of web marketing including web analytics, web 2.0, CRM and brand equity to provide the most comprehensive view of the consumers. By taking advantage of the digitization agri-food companies will rely more heavily on consumer data and have an unprecedented understanding of preferences, needs and other information in order to achieve mass customization that adapt and strengthen consumer experiences. Moreover, thanks to CRM technologies they may engage with consumers in new ways to shape their experiences at every opportunity and create intimacy. The main objective in developing this tactic is the rise of brand value (or brand equity), one of the fundamental intangible resources for an agri-food company. Developing effective social media relationships with an high degree of collaboration and the customer retention are two of the most important objectives of SMMS that therefore may lead to the success of an organization

73% of marketers with a CRM system use it for a shared customer view between their service and sales teams. (Salesforce, 2017).

The increment of CRM use in online technologies over years has favoured a new concept of Social CRM. This is an extension of the traditional one for incorporating social functions and it is defined as “a firm’s competency in generating, integrating, and responding to information obtained from customer interactions facilitated by social media technologies” (Trainor et al., 2014). Thanks to databases of personal information about users, in the case of the use of social media it is simpler to gather more detailed data. Several techniques are used to manage data and identify trends and customer characteristics that allow the targeting and categorization on the basis of past profitability. The focus of this tool is the rise of sales, marketing activities, customer services and technical support. Moreover, the other goals are to attract new clients, and retain the existing one. (Rafiee and Sarabdeen, 2013). A proper customer relationship management may push consumers to move from awareness phase to engagement, satisfaction and as a consequence loyalty and advocacy phase.

Customer satisfaction is positively related to purchase intention and participation intention. It is defined as a key factor for business success since it can represent an expression of enjoyment or displeasure resulting from an evaluation between quality awareness and expectations of a product or service. It refers also to a combination of feelings before and after use of product or service. (Aberdeen,

2008). customer satisfaction may be the result of the process of using Web 2.0 and social CRM technologies. If the users are satisfied it means that brands have reached success. Customer satisfaction depends on the performance of products associated with buyers' expectations. Both satisfaction and dissatisfaction derive from technology issues such as privacy, usability, web site functionality, customized information, convenience after sales, confidence in the virtual environment, expectations, lead-time, delivery speed, product or service presentation product worth, and the adaptation of the same to the needs. (Sharma and Baoku, 2012). In addition, issues organizations usually should take care are the perceived ease of use, service quality, trust, interactivity and security. If the product and all issues connected to it matches expectations, consumers will be satisfied. To reach this objective, CRM strategy should start with the view of what is considered as value to consumers by collecting information about what they like or dislike and the consideration of consumer-centric approach by following a constant evaluation plan.

According to Kotler (2003) companies spent dollars in CRM software without being satisfied. Several problems related to it can be associated with software failure, companies' inertia, lack of CRM understandings, poor planning, lack of skills, budget problems, or bad advice and so on. It is obvious that the increase of communication, IT and online purchase and the building of relationships can solve in part some issues. In particular quality consumers are the subjects of these

technologies, so the one that are strategically significant, most valuable and growable. To sum up CRM by creating personalized interactions with customers to foster loyalty may help Social media marketing to make one-one connections and promote placing products in the appropriate media in the right moment to the high-quality consumers.

#### 3.4.2.3 Social media advertising

According to the report of Casaleggio Casati (2019) Social Media Marketing activities cover 11% of investments in terms of advertising, followed by E-mail marketing 9% and other types of sponsorships (7%). Social media marketing has a great potential for advertising, respect to offline marketing. Based on different social media platforms, the conduction of precisely targeted and no more one-way promotional activities to reach and communicate with target consumers are performed. The aim is to provide marketing opportunities for brands to increase their sales by offering to consumers a way to increase positive and pleasurable brand experiences. Moreover, it allows firms to obtain the maximum exposure to the largest possible target audience. Especially small organizations may substantially develop advertising campaigns on social media and find a in adequate trade-off between the organic contents and the advertised one. Besides, agriculture advertising is a vital component for the success of a business. It will lead to the maximum return on marketing investment and to reach a wider audience on a

budget by disseminating information with a lower cost than traditional print advertising and creating an interactive component of online marketing.

Social advertising campaigns should be organized in different social media, both Instagram and Facebook, or in external applications but for the same placement.

The first step for the realization of an advertising is the determination of marketing goals by taking in mind the concept of AIDA. Since the aim of the communication is to persuade consumers to buy products and services they need, the model AIDA can help organizations. It involves different steps that are necessary for the achievement of the success: creation of awareness of the firm's product and reputations, of interest in the products to suit the needs, of desire to purchase after providing information, and making people act in overcoming barriers and buy. In this way it is more likely to maintain some level of control over consumers and the distribution, even online. After that, based on goals, also the placement and the target have to be determined. They can have different characteristics that depend on where usually people are engaged with the company, how their interests are and when it is better to advertise, moment of the day and period of the month. The third level of development regards the creativity brand should use to work on contents. Different kinds of them, such as call to action as well as informational messages can push people to improve their purchase intentions. Reposting also user generated content or use marketing influencers in order to generate a positive word of mouth can also have an impact on sales data. At the end, a report can allow companies to

understand if the campaign has been effective or if it requires some corrective actions.

#### 3.4.2.4 Influencer marketing

Influencer marketing is a notable and current phenomenon that now-a-days involves the 42% of marketers reported that they are planning to use strategies regarding the implementation of social media influencer marketing instead of other tactical campaigns since it is more effective (Linqia, 2019). According to some Statista (2020) the market size of influencer marketing worldwide has reached 148 million in 2019, and since it has increased by 7.95% in one year, it is also expected to exceed 370 millions by 2027. Social media influencers can be defined as individuals or groups of individuals who can shape attitudes and behaviours through online channels” (Freberg et al., 2020). Instagram is the social media in which this tactic is particularly used.

Social media influencers can have an impact on brand awareness and product acquisition as well as on influencing the followers' decisions through the creation of branded contents as an online advertising and direct visitors to firms' social sites. Social media influencers and strategic marketing activities it is related to, is focused on individual rather than target market. Allocating a part of an online marketing budget in this kind of activities is fundamental to determine certain behavioural results by promoting products. According to Ki et al. (2020), there are different kind

on influencers in different context: mega influencers, with more than 1 millions followers, macro-influencers from 100.000 to 1 millions followers, the mid-tier influencers from 50.000 to 100.000 followers and micro influencers with followers that go from 1000 to 50.000 followers. There is a great attachment of these followers to the influencers, due to their persuasive power, capacity to engage and develop a level of trust and their partnerships with brands and their ability to create branded contents such as in-feed, stories, live, IGTV, videos. Different reasons can attract consumers and retain them, specifically the personality traits and the content features. In the first case there are qualities that can distinguish one from the others such as unique personality and ability to satisfy the needs of followers like for instance a feeling of self-determination in choice and action, sense of intimacy, feeling of proficiency, and attractiveness, authenticity, inspiration enjoyability, similarity. The more the influencer transfers positive feelings, the more consumers are attached to them. Moreover, the content characteristics are associated with some key attributes such as the persona-driven quality, visual aesthetics, informativeness and expertise. Since influencers are very active on social media and people trust and try always to take inspiration from them, companies need to be careful in choosing the right people. Three things are necessary to be considered in selecting the one that fits better the value of the business: the number of followers, the relevance and the resonance. Even if there are various types of influencers, there are two principal groups to look at: the celebrity that are widely recognised, and the

niche one, with less number of followers. Focusing on these groups the relevance for your business is fundamental since they should be able to represent the brand's and the target's values. The resonance on the other hand regards the degree of engagement the influencers' contents are able to produce. Benefits for brands regard a major visibility of their profiles, a wider potential target audience and the possibility to use contents created by third individuals, external to the businesses. To sum up, the social media influencer can be considered an extension of a business' social marketing strategy used for increasing sales and the visibility of brands on social media platforms. However, based on the choice of influencer it can have a different impact. The preference for celebrity influencer can increase a lot the target audience and have a great resonance but in the same way it can not be relevant for a specific kind of brand, while the niche influence can reach less individuals but may be more suitable in terms of relevance with the values of businesses and potential consumers.

#### 3.4.2.5 WOM

49% of consumers say they depend on recommendations from social media influencers to help with their purchasing decision. More than 1 in 3 online users say they go to social media when looking for more information about a brand or a product. (Source: Small Business Trends)

According to a research carried on by Nielsen (2014) most interviewed consumers, about 54%, used to consult social media channels before making a purchase decision. Social media can be considered a way of spreading WOM. Especially for micro small and medium enterprises, word of mouth is important for brand recognition, awareness and sales revenues, both online and offline. In the case of the food industry, what emerges is that reviews from real people are considered more trustworthy and credible since the possibility to change also results in a positive buying attitude. Becoming familiar with it allows companies to develop intelligence to facilitate and promote peers to peers' interactions, as well as keeping informed about consumers' value contributions. As stated by Hanny-Thurau et al., (2004) eWoM can be defined as "any form of negative and positive statement made by potential, actual and former consumers about a product or company which is made available through a multiple of people and institutions via the Internet". Hence, there is a distinction between the online and the offline WOM: the former is usually driven by social and functional brand characteristics, whereas the latter by emotional brand features. WOM communication is affected by four factors: character narrative of the communicator, the kind of channel in which it takes place, common norms that influence it such as rule of expressions, and the reception of messages and the promotional characteristics. Both in online and offline these characteristics should be considered. According to Eisingerich et al., (2015)

consumers are less willing to transmit information in social media because of the higher perceived social risk.

However, if people perceive information should be useful for closer ties, they will be more likely to share them through messages. Anyway, according to Alalwan (2017) social media has led to a more intense impact of WoM since they can reach more audiences and can influence the behaviour more than traditional tools. 71% of consumers who have had a positive experience with a brand on social media are likely to recommend the brand to their friends and family (Lyfemarketing,2018).

Clear, a constant check of the electronic word of mouth should be done, in both cases of negative or positive reviews. In the case of the positive one, companies should assess them and analyse in order to be provided with more ideas for the development of products and have a great impact on the brand performance for the online commerce and stores. The positive WOM can also increase the awareness and e-commerce web site reliability. Especially the positive reviews written after the buying process, can influence the purchase decision and purchase intention of the other potential consumers. However, if comments are negative, it is necessary to manage them by providing consumers with empathetic feedback to demonstrate their understanding of various problems. As a consequence, they should support consumers with more services, compensations, and solve the problem as soon as possible to maintain the relationship with them and continue interacting. Usually, the negative reviews have a higher impact on brands' reputations and sales. This

can be an issue to face as well as the possibility to have fake reviews, from consumers that have never purchased products.

Today also real WOM marketing has the same characteristics of guerrilla marketing and viral marketing since it stimulates a lot of the attitudes and buying behaviours of consumers and creates a sort of buzz in the marketplace.

## **CHAPTER 4: SOCIAL MEDIA AND FRESCO NATURAL BAR CASE**

### **4.1 Methodology and Objective of the research**

The analysis focuses on the social media marketing strategy and online activities of Fresco Natural bar company. Particularly, the study covers the social media marketing plan implementation and its relationship with the e-commerce activities. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of a single case study. Data were collected through different methods. First of all, the author actively participated in the implementation of some online activities during her curricular internship. Then additional data was collected through an interview directly filled in by the owner of the company. The interview is built on the basis of needed information about the general news regarding the company itself, the marketing objectives, benefits and barriers faced in social media plan implementation, strategic tactics, resources invested and monitoring approach. In addition, social media and e-commerce insights were collected using different apps such as Facebook, Instagram, “Business management”, “Inserzione”, and “Woocommerce”. The analysis of the social media activity covers a timespan of one year from the 1st January to 31st December 2020 while the online sales data covers from March to the end of the year. By analysing the answers given by the owner, it has been possible to obtain a delineation of the social media marketing strategy splitted in determined phases:

definition of the objectives, analysis of competitors and of the environment, definition of the buyer persona and the choice of social media, the use of resources and policies, the action plan through the editorial plan and the monitoring phase. In addition, it has been studied the single strategy performed during the last year regarding the engagement, the brand awareness, the advertising, the influencer marketing technique, the CRM and the strategy to attract consumers. Moreover, an analysis regarding the engagement trend during the same period has been made, together with a development of a model for the investigation about the sales. Different variables, including impressions, engagement and advertisement, are taken into consideration in order to understand if they have a significant impact on sales. The tools used in the creation of the graphs is Jupyter, a free open-source software with Python as a programming language, while for the creation of the Model, the analysis is made with the programming language R.

#### **4.2 Description of the case company: Fresco Natural Bar.**

Fresco Natural Bar is a Small agricultural company that was founded in 2018 in March with the aim to create a completely natural product, cold-pressed juice generated by local fruits and vegetables. The Vision of the firm is improving and enhancing the health of people through the valorisation of nature and the recognition and appreciation of the organic essential nutrients for the well-being.

Today the seat is in Petritoli, a little town located in the Marche region, into the province of Fermo. The firm infrastructures involve a laboratory of more than 200 m<sup>2</sup> where the juices are produced and about 20 hectares of territory including properties, rented lands and collaborations with other farms.

The main activities of this company are the production of fruits and vegetables, the transformation of them into cold-pressed juice with different combinations and the commercialization through the distribution markets and the promotion and direct selling online. Thanks to the support of consultants and nutritionists, the owner of the company has always dealt directly with the decision about the ingredients and the combinations of them for the creation of juice containing all nutritional elements such as vitamins, minerals, proteins in order to help people that need them. Moreover, they take care about the process to use for the transformation so as to obtain a clean label product, so without water, additives, sugar, dyes and so on. Based on the seasonality and the raw materials available, the staff of Fresco Natural Bar is composed of 4 or 8 workers that handle with the production and transformation process, while regarding the offline commercialization, there are currently 5 agents. Concerning the online environment, the owner together with 3 assistants, work on the promotion on Social media, Instagram and Facebook and the selling through the websites and a specific e-commerce platform, Woocommerce.

Currently the brand is represented by an innovative and handcraft product with a high market value that is not commercialised in the Large-scale distribution, but is focused in one specific distribution market called Ho.Re.Ca and from 2020 also in online shops. In both cases it pays attention to Italian commercial activities such as bar, bakery, ice cream parlor and Italian direct consumers that are interested in healthy lifestyle and natural products.

#### **4.3 Fresco Natural Bar social media marketing planning**

The idea of social media management was born one year after the foundation of the company, in 2019. Since it is a young and small firm and in continuing evolution, at the beginning social media was used as a mean to monitor the competitors, to follow the technological and social trend and to adapt to people's new needs. Only after, in 2020, the principal driver that has led the owner to develop a real strategic plan was the worldwide pandemic. People are forced to remain at home, and for this reason they started to spend the most of their time online, especially on social media. After that, other than the possibility to study the competitors and their strategy, the social networks have allowed Fresco Natural bar to follow and reach the current customers and the potential one, increase the brand awareness, the brand positioning and promote the cold-pressed juice. After the arrival of Covid-19, even the idea of social commerce had been launched. Because of the locking of bar,

bakery and chalet where the products are usually sold, in March the company decided to open an online e-commerce channel in order to distribute the goods directly to the consumer's home.

Above all, the social media marketing strategy, according to the owner of Fresco, aim to reach the following main objectives: “*Attract consumers and create a sort of relationship based on trust with them. Moreover, being active on social media should allow us to investigate which consumers can be more interested in our product and convert them into loyal consumers in order to maintain the relationship over time.*”

Others specific objectives have been necessary added to these general one with a long-term deadline. *Enhancing brand positioning and brand awareness* could help the company to attract more consumers, together with the increasing number of followers on the social media page. In the first year, the most important thing for the company was to create the “wow effect” and enter the minds of the users. In this way they might become loyal consumers. The other crucial objectives were to attract individuals on the web site and increase the number of visitors, and consequently the number of sales.

By following the plan, the second step is the analysis of the external environment. Fresco natural bar has conducted some detailed investigation about the principal competitors and their online and offline activities. Competitors in this specific case are especially Italian organizations that produce cold pressed juice and are already

well positioned in social platforms, with a high number of followers that developed accurate advertising campaigns by obtaining great results. Some outcomes came from for instance, the companies “Depuravita” or “Baba succo”. The owner stated that: *“The analysis conducted about them regards revenues and the financial statement. Only in this way we are aware of the strengths that allow the competition to emerge in the market. By following their strategy, and their way to approach their consumers, we try to reach the same results in terms of visibility and followers and even sales”*. The most important indicator for Fresco company is the ROI and the revenues of these two. Hence follow their strategy on social such as use influencers, take advantage from user-generated content, create informative contents, beautiful picture, and engage people with interactive stories will lead to great return on investment.

The external analysis involved also the examination of the users and the consideration of the needs of people and habits that were changed over time. Now-a-days people are more and more interested in a healthy lifestyle, organic, natural and fresh food and beverage, and keen on social media brand accounts to have information about these kinds of products.

By focusing on this trend, and on the characteristics of the cold-press juice, as the third phase, Fresco Natural bar delineated its target market. The typical consumer for the company, the so-called buyer persona, is a woman that is from 35 to 55 years old. Her interest should be: the sport, wellness and fitness, health and beauty of the

body, healthy products, high-quality products. The woman could be a mother, a businesswoman, that lives in the big cities or the Northern Italy, with a high level of income.

Since Fresco Natural bar is a small agri-food company, it has not invested a lot in research regarding the social media networks. However, the owner considered the most used social media Facebook, as a mean to start to create a community around the brand by sharing images and videos. In addition, in order to adopt an omnichannel approach, another social media has been chosen, Instagram, since it is the one that has a great expansion recently and more used in the case of the food industry and fitness.

The establishment of the resources and the policies regarding Social Media Marketing activities is the following step. Since Fresco Natural bar is a small industry, it did not invest significant resources in this kind of activity. Crucial is the decision about the human resources that should manage the social media. The owner identified a group of four people with different objectives splitted between the two channels of communication. He is part of the group, together with two first-time assistants and a director, that instead is a graphic designer dealing with marketing strategies and brand positioning. The first rule is a common agreement on each image, video or story post on social media. Whereas the other principles to follow are: following always the values and mission of the company, monitoring

the negative comments and pointing out to solve their problem, adopting a consumer's centric approach and engaging with the feedback as soon as possible.

The next phase focused on the content strategy. Tone of voice, graphic and verbal identity are critical to convey the right message for the company. Fresco Natural bar compared on social media with its logo, attached in each cold-pressed juice bottle, its colours in order to reach a specific impression in the mind of consumers. The content should evoke a particular feeling and emotion due to the consumption of the product such as energy, freshness, quiet, enjoyment. Besides, also the tone of voice was established in order to respect the personality of the product and represent the way people perceive the product. Some rules have been defined: being direct with the consumer and approaching them with the second person singular of the imperative, using call to action, being friendly, accurate and precise with the information, using the right and pivotal words in order to create curiosity.

In addition, the company defined an editorial plan on a weekly basis. The communication is divided between Instagram and Facebook. Regarding the first social network, every day it is planned an Instagram story and the program also involves 4 posts for each week on determined days: Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. Each one is dedicated to a specific topic: the sport, mothers and children, food associated with the cold-pressed juice and something connected to a relaxing time, such as snacks or a book. In the case of Facebook, the topics are the same of those posted in Instagram, but the day of posting them are different. Until

the summer on Facebook was not expected to post stories, but then, after September, in order to increase the impressions and interactions, the same published stories on Instagram were planned to appear also on Facebook directly. In both cases, for special events, such as Easter, Saint valentine's Day, Christmas, Mother's Day, International Day against violence against women, the launch of new products or new taste for the cold pressed juice based on the season, a special content is posted in addition. Besides, in particular, in August the editorial plan involves a content published every day regarding the sea, the swimming pool, the sun, the beach, the holiday, something related with the summer. As stated by the owner: *"The specific topics are well designed in order to aim to our buyer persona. Photos, videos should attract consumers on the web site through the link and the description of our special product"*.

The last phase of the SMM plan is the monitoring. The most important key performance indicator for Fresco natural bar is sales trend. The owner of the company has stated that brand awareness, followers, likes, comments and shares generate a "fake" engagement. For this reason, the company should aim at sales and revenues without using a particular tool for the check. Just for the management of the notifications, messages, comments from both platforms, it is used in the application "Business suite".

## 4.4 Instagram and Facebook strategic actions in Fresco Natural Bar

### 4.4.1 Engagement tactics

The more people are engaged with the post and the page on social media, the more brand awareness and sales may be higher. As a matter of fact, Social media have been managed by the author during this year by creating contents, stories, giving information and offering products and with the purpose to involve users, attract new consumers and retain them.

On both social networks' images were created and posted contents in order to present the benefits due to the cold-pressed juice, the risks and diseases that users can suffer from so as to make people have a higher perception of healthy products than the unhealthy. (Figure 2)



Figure 2, Facebook page of Fresco Natural bar, 2020



- Hashtags (#fresconaturalbar, #frescodoitbetter, #healthylifestyle, #naturale, #vegan, #glutenfree).

Specific hashtags were created connected directly to the name of the company so as to be more specific and create a straight link that is unique. Moreover, even a lot of Instagram stories were posted in order to increase the visibility and attract consumers to the page. These are most of the time interactive since they contain questions, surveys, quizzes, other than informative or with call to action, “swipe up”. In the case of Facebook, the page was upgraded by inserting a call to action bottom (Whatsapp), creating a personalized tab with an additional option regarding the Shop catalogue to buy directly through the Facebook page.



Figure 4, Facebook page of Fresco Natural Bar, 2020

The contents created and posted, video and images, are informational, interactional, and in some cases, they convey also “business branded” messages. (Figure 4)

Even in the case of this social network, calls to purchase were used, such as

*“Acquista i nostri estratti nel link al sito ↓*

*fresconaturalbar.it/shop”.*

#### 4.4.2 CRM

Customer relationship management is a tool of which Fresco Natural Bar has taken care about. Different customer services have been developed, such as for instance the free delivery for in the International day against the violence against women, the addition of more bottles of cold pressed juice in the order pack. Above all, the goal is to attract new clients, and retain the existing one by making them satisfied. Actually, it is in the moment of the purchase that Fresco concentrates the services. In the web site, at the moment of the order, consumers fill out some personal data and then Fresco deals with each of them accurately by offering customized solutions. For the target goal, in the last year, a strategy to retain it was developed: with the order pack even a letter of thanks with a discount code is involved in order. This letter has the aim to build customer loyalty and to attract other consumers.

#### 4.4.3 Advertising tactics

In the period that regards the beginning of 2020, Fresco Natural bar has started to develop some advertising campaigns especially through Instagram and another application that is called “Inserzioni”. The generation of this advertising had the aim first of all to increase traffic on the web sites, since the objective of the company is to raise revenues, and the other such as reach a wider audience on social media and increase likes on social pages. The process through the application “Inserzioni”, started with the choice of the images or video to advertise and based on the placement also of the design of the promotion (for instance it was possible to create a little video to enhance the name of the brand in the case of an Instagram stories). The different places usually chosen were marketplace on Facebook, Facebook and Instagram app mobile, web mobile, home page on Facebook, newsfeeds on Instagram, among the stories in both. Then by going on, the following steps were the selection of the target (the most of the advertising have as target objective the women in Italy, women that live in Lombardia, or general in the north) and the period of the launch of the promotion. The most of the advertising took place from March and April, during the period of quarantine, to August, and the end of summer. Finally, the amount of the investment was decided: for each advertisement 5 euro was invested for each day, at the beginning, for 5/ 6 days. The application, during the period of the campaign, offered different insight to monitor the trend such as

the total number of clicks on the promotion, reactions, reach, comments, likes and after analysing these results, the owner decided to go on or to stop the advertising.

#### 4.4.4 Influencers marketing

The use of influencers marketing concerns the social networks Instagram. Some influential individuals have been found during this year of analysis. The criteria used by Fresco is different based on the choice of celebrity influencers and the niche one. In the first case, the owner was focus on individual with about 50.000 followers, that have a placeable, attractive and enjoyable page, with unique personality and individuals who manifest a sense of intimacy, authenticity, transparency, all feeling related to the brand itself. In the other case, the followers of the micro influencer should be also less, about 10000 or 12.000 and the most important feature should be the fact that they are mothers of little children, or sportive people, hence the representatives of the company's buyer persona. The research in both cases started with the analysis of the profile of interested people that send a direct message on Instagram, and then, if someone respects the characteristics required there is an agreement between them and the brand. Usually with this accordance it was planned the exchange of favours: the company sent some bottles of cold pressed juice, and the receivers without requiring a compensation, created some contents to share in their profiles to push their

followers to pursue the brand page. After That, even the company used these contents to share.

#### 4.4.5 WOM

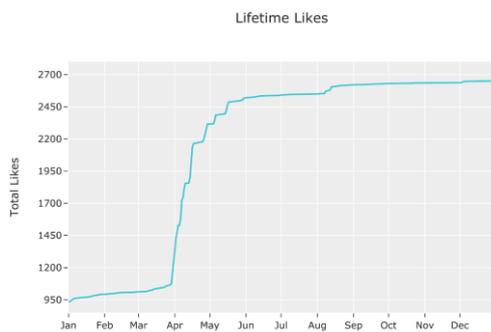
Concerning the spreading of WOM it was not excessively difficult to monitor, since the company is small and the followers are not too much. From the Facebook and Instagram insight it emerged that there were not negative feedback and comments. However, in the period of the experiment, it was feasible to take advantage of the positive comments by highlighting them and share the positive experiences of the followers in the form of stories both on Instagram and Facebook. Actually, the work on the social media pages involved the use of UGC, User generated contents, to show the impressions and the feelings of people and the tag of those who create contents. Some messages have caused some problems, but the situation was solved thanks to a rapid response. In order to avoid negative feedback, for instance, in the case in which a woman has made an order and there was a delay with the delivery, the immediate response with the explanation of the situation was an appreciated service.

#### **4.5 Social media marketing insights: preliminary results**

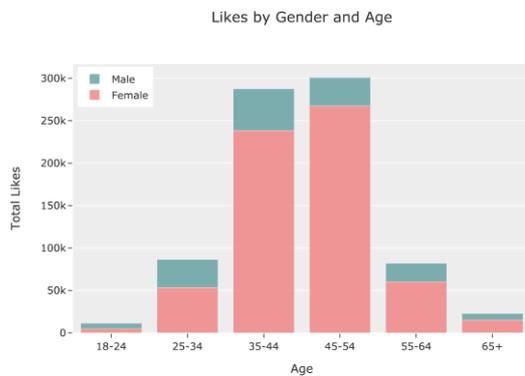
Even though the company is mostly sceptical about engagement and rely more on the number of sales to measure social media activities, some engagement tactics were implemented. As a matter of fact, keeping people engaged with the company is fundamental for the principal social media marketing objective, increasing sales and revenues. The above-mentioned engagement tactics and the other strategic actions developed in the following year, are all part of the analysis conducted in the work of the thesis. The preliminary results of the study of Fresco Natural bar data is divided in two parts: the first regarding the engagement, and the second the relation between the engagement, advertising and impressions, and the sales trend. The targeted messages conveyed, the informative post, the continuous monitoring of the comments and messages by avoiding the negative word of mouth, the focus on the storytelling and emotional contents have led to positive results.

At first, the positive results come from the target reach. All strategies to attract the desired buyer persona have been effective in both platforms. From the Instagram insights it emerged that on average more than 50 % of the audience is composed of women, the most from the range that go from 25 to 54 years old, and the top locations are Rome, Fermo (the company is located there), Milan and Naples. According to Facebook prospective by selecting the right information regarding the total likes, likes by city and by gender and age it was obtainable the following results. The number of total likes are 2651 and most of them derive from women

that are from 35 to 54 years old. As represented in the graph, the different interactions, most of likes received are from the centre of Italy, Lombardia and Campania. (Figure 5,6,7)



**Figure 5, “FB lifetime likes”, Facebook insights, 2020 <sup>1</sup>**



**Figure 6, “FB likes by gender and age”, Facebook insight, 2020 <sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Lifetime Likes: Lifetime of the total likes of the Facebook page over the year 2020 (daily measurements). The trend (the general tendency of the data to increase or decrease during a long period of time) shows positive growth over the year, with an exponential increase from March to May and then follows a more stable growth. The exponential growth coincides with the first lockdown.

<sup>2</sup> Likes by Gender and Age: Total likes of the Facebook page by user gender and age over the year 2020 (sum of daily measurements).

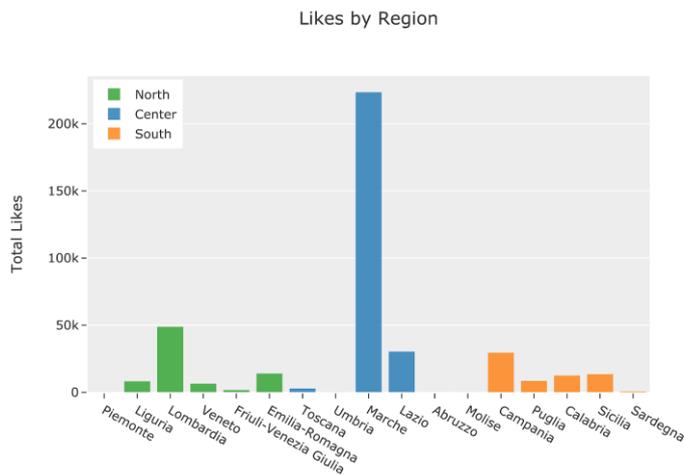


Figure 7, “FB likes by region”, Facebook insights, 2020 <sup>4</sup>

Secondly, the followers of both social networks have risen; in the case of Facebook it passed from 935 in January to 2652 in December, while in the case of Instagram from less than 1250 to 2194. Nevertheless, this result is not dependent on the influencers. Among the influencers selected there was nobody that changed a lot the trend of the post and page engagement, since no posts or stories created by them make likes, comments or shares higher significantly.

Moreover, the results in this study involve the representation of the engagement outcomes. In order to visualize the first important result of this work, the engagement graph is created. The image of the Engagement graph represents the

<sup>4</sup> Likes by Region: Total likes of the Facebook page by user region over the year 2020 (sum of daily measurements). Colours show the division in sub areas: north, centre, south.

trend of the post engagement from January to December comparing the two social networks pages. (Figure 8)

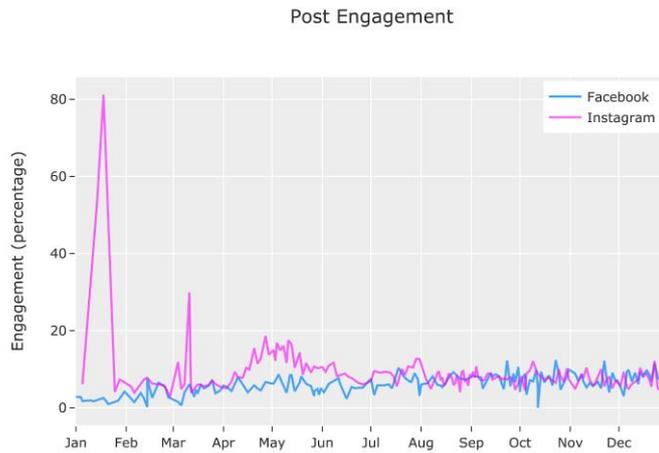


Figure 8, “Post engagement in % of the page in Facebook and Instagram”, IG and FB insights (2020)

In order to find the engagement rate it was necessary to consider:

- *Interactions*<sup>5</sup> *FB and IG* as the sum of reactions, comments and shares of each post;
- *Reach*<sup>6</sup> *FB and IG* of each post.

All data are extracted from Facebook and Instagram insights and then re-elaborated.

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<sup>5</sup>Interaction: is another term to look at by referring to the sum of Likes, Comments and shares and all actions a particular post caused, such as click on the web site, visit profile, e-mail, click on the product.

<sup>6</sup> Reach: is the number of unique users that saw a page post on any given day Organic Reach is the only one kind of reach that is considered in the first part of the research given the fact that the attention is grasped by the number of unique people who saw a piece of content for free, or without any amount of money for advertising spent.

*Interactions FB= reactions + comments + shares (per each post)*

*Interactions IG= likes + comments + shares (per each post)*

In the case of Facebook, the total posts analysed are 160 (12 video, 1 status, 147 photos) and the most of them are with informative captions and involve a call to actions. On average, the data about the interactions for each post are 0.5 comments, 9.5 reactions and 0.7 shares. Instagram page disposes of in total 176 posts (most of the contents are photos, except 3 videos and 1 reels). Most of them are informative posts with call to action even in this case. The interactions considered for each post are on average 28.9 likes, 1.7 comments and 2.3 shares.

In this specific analysis in order to measure the engagement rate the formula is the following:

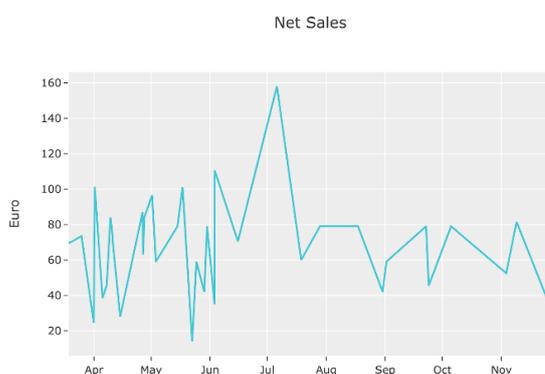
*Engagement = Interactions / Reach x 100 (per each post)*

Engagement is equal to the relation in percentage between the interactions and the reach for each post. Actually, the results represent the percentage of people that follow the page that reacts, like, comments and shares the post. It means that if the engagement for each post is high, the people that interact with the page are a lot. Hence if the people are engaged with the post, it means that the strategies developed are effective. Regarding the platforms, especially Instagram, the engagement rate would be a way to increase a lot the brand awareness, given the fact that the platform favourites the post that has a higher engagement rate, and concerning the other social network, Facebook, the one that has a higher reach.

As showed in the graph the trend of the engagement posts on Facebook is approximately constant, with some positive picks after September. The most significant outcomes can be noted regarding the Instagram trend, when in January there was the maximum value, and in general from the period of the quarantine to August is always higher than the one on Facebook. This implies the fact that the strategic actions implemented on Instagram during the first lockdown has led to some positive results in the period of the little recovery before the summer.

Moreover, the second part of this work has the purpose to examine the data obtained from the engagement and show how this data is important in achieving the principal objective of the company, the increase of sales.

What emerged from the analysis of the Woocommerce data, the total revenues from March to December was about 2500 euro. (Figure 9)



**Figure 9, Net sales trend, Woocommerce, 2020**

As a first experience with e-commerce platforms and social commerce , the result is not so poor, since this means that strategic actions implemented have had some positive outcome. As it is possible to see in the Net sales graph, July is the month in which the sales were higher.

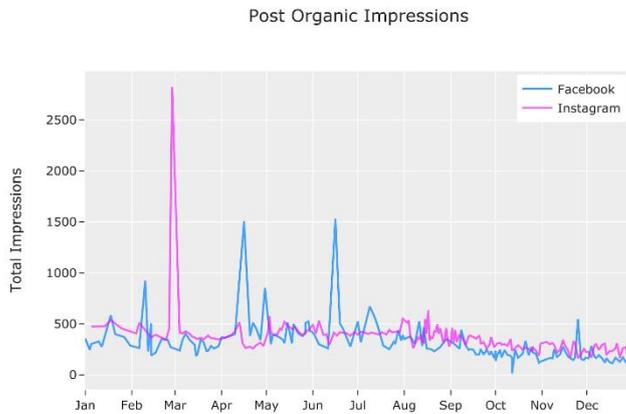
The principal aim of this analysis regarding the sales, is the creation of a model that reveals which variable significantly impacted on orders Fresco natural bar received from March to December. Given the fact that data regarding the sales and the orders are not a lot, two attempts have been necessary to find a substantial results.

The variables chosen are the same: the engagement that considers the interactions related to the reach among the followers of the page, the impressions, the number of times a post is received and the advertisement campaign.

Given the fact that a single post can be seen by more than one time, this one can influence in different ways the behaviours of users. The Impressions<sup>7</sup> graph represents the trend of this organic impressions during the period from January to December in both social media, Facebook and Instagram. (Figure 10)

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<sup>7</sup> Impression is equal to the number of times a post from a page is displayed by users. For example, if someone sees a page update in Facebook newsfeed and then sees that same update when a “friend” shares it, that would count as two impressions but the reach for that post is only one even if it is seen twice by that same person.



**Figure 10, “Post organic impressions in Instagram and Facebook”, FB and IG Insights, 2020**

The path of the impressions, as it is possible to see in the graph, had a great peak in March by arriving to more than 2500 and also other ones smaller in April and June. Besides, the organic reach is not enough to attract consumers, especially in the case of Fresco Bar, which is a young agri-food small company. Advertising plays a crucial role in the social media marketing plan.

In the analysed period, from March to December, the insertions launched was about 29 and drove more than 600 likes to the pages and 20.000 click on the link to the website, where is it possible to make the purchase. As a matter of fact, the first test was made by following multiple linear Regression model and considering the net sales of the company deriving from each order. What emerged is that the amount of revenues is not significantly explained by social activities.

This can be due to the fact that the variable net sales present small variability. The second test is the one that has shown an important result. With the use of another regression analysis, the Poisson regression<sup>8</sup> that consider as dependent variable Y the number of the Items sold, it is obtained the following model:

$$y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * X_1 + \beta_2 * X_2 + \beta_3 * X_3 \text{ — Poisson Model}$$

The values represented are:

- $Y$  = the items sold,
- $X_1$  = mean engagement over the last 10 posts (excluded the most recent one) of Instagram + mean engagement over the last 10 posts (excluded the most recent one) of Facebook
- $X_2$  = mean impressions over the last 10 posts (excluded the most recent one) of Instagram + mean impressions over the last 10 posts (excluded the most recent one) of Facebook
- $X_3$  = sum of the number of advertising campaign that are in progress regarding a specific period of time (1 day)

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<sup>8</sup> In statistics, the Poisson regression is a special case of generalized linear model form of regression analysis used to model count data and contingency tables. Poisson regression assumes the response variable Y has a Poisson distribution, and assumes the logarithm of its expected value can be modeled by a linear combination of unknown parameters. The use of this specific model is due to the fact that the items sold are different from revenues, since they are discrete positive numbers and possibly distributed as Poisson distribution.

The author, in order to make the owner of the company aware of the importance of determined variables in the sales trend, opted for the Poisson Model as the more adequate method to analyse the total number of items.

What emerges from this model is that the intercept, the engagement rate (X1) and the insertions (X3) present a significant p-value, which means they are significant to explain the variable Y. More specifically, the advertisement is the one parameter that has a greater impact on the sales (higher coefficient).

#### **4.6 Discussions and implication of the Fresco Natural case**

What emerges from this research about the social media marketing strategy of the Fresco Natural bar is that it is a typical small agri-business company. It is a company that is part of the 42% of the European small organizations that deal with social media marketing and have at least an account on social media platforms. Fresco natural bar has adopted an omnichannel strategy since it has created an account for each social network, one for Facebook and one for Instagram.

Issues related to social media marketing plan are connected to the fact that the company is young and has low experience in the social media environment.

Actually, at the starting point of the planning phase, a more efficient research about the external environment, involving competitors, pages and communities of consumers even on social media, is required in order to survive in an even more

competitive environment. Fresco is a small business, and it can exploit the social media networks and take advantage of them to expand and reach a wider audience, as the other small businesses, with low resources. In the case specific to the consumer's study, it can help to identify also the demand trend of agri-food products, in this case cold pressed juice. Secondly, the choice of social media has led to great results in terms of objective target. As mentioned in the first preliminary results the target market that the company covers, is in line with the characteristics of the products. Actually, typical consumers are especially women that are interested in healthy, organic, labelled, free of sugar and additives food, and as a consequence are also more willing to pay a higher price with the products that respect these features. The pandemic is the principal “negative” cause of the creation of the e-commerce channel for the company, but at the same time has allowed Fresco Natural to exploit the new propensity of people for safety, organic and healthy food.

Moreover, social media marketing plans require usually specialised social media managers to reach the objective. In Fresco natural bar, not all human resources that deal with social media have enough knowledge to really be effective. The lack of resources in terms of money and time are additional barriers to success in this specific case. As a matter of fact it does not invest in external support for social media marketing activities.

However, the editorial plan that was developed is a powerful tool in order to build a social presence and a brand positioning. The fact that editor of social media follows a specific path in post contents regarding different topics and the use of the same “fil rouge” has led the company to have some positive outcomes in terms of engagement and visibility.

As emerged from the interview, the only kpi that the owner considers is the amount of sales, and this can be restrictive with respect to what really a social media plan enables a company to reach. Moreover, even the fact that the company does not use software and tools to manage the kpi and the results, can be a synonym of inaccurate monitoring process.

Although the scepticism of Fresco natural bar owner about the engagement and its importance in the sales trend, the analysis conducted in this work of thesis, has taken some additional results.

From the research, what emerges is that in only one year, data obtained are not a lot, but some of them are necessary to make the company aware of the importance of some data and insights to consider for the monitoring phase.

during this year of experiment the author collaborated with the company for the social media activities by conveying clear, target and timely messages, overcoming asymmetric information and giving valuable and high quality information, telling the story and spreading the important value of the company, involving the transparency, the high quality, the uniqueness, the safety, and the wellbeing of

people. As resulted in the first preliminary results the engagement post has increased in some period during the year, especially during the first lockdown and after in Summer. After that, another important outcome, shown as the engagement is fundamental for the sales trend.

What emerges is that, in order to reach the principal objective of the company, that is the increase of online sales in this particular situation of the global pandemic, should be taken into consideration not only the engagement but also the advertisement as metrics to check. Since the influencer marketing did not give rise to substantial results, Fresco Natural bar may focus on the other tactics, such as spreading of positive WOM and recommendations, advertising of their post and page on social media and creation of more services for the consumers.

To sum up, fresco natural bar should create a need for people and offer products and services in order to satisfy their needs by also spreading the value proposition to overcome the reluctance to purchase. The perceived value together with the characteristics of social commerce, especially for agri-food products, are essential to drive the purchase habits of consumers. As a matter of fact even if this kind of industry should face difficulty such as the seasonality, the perishability and the difficulty of the storage and transportation process of the goods, in order to increase the sales and attract consumers through the social media marketing management it is necessary that use of valuable social networks to communicate. Facebook as the most used one and Instagram as the king of social food, are two valid channels to

promote the brand by enhancing the uniqueness of the products offered, to be responsive and adopt a consumer centric approach to build long-term relationships.

## **CONCLUSION**

The objective of this thesis is the study of the social media marketing strategies and activities related to a specific industry, the Agri-food businesses. Based on the size of the company which adopts social media strategies, the drivers, motivators and barriers are different. In the last few years even SME from all over the world have started profiting from social networks and their advantages. Moreover, since the main purpose of organizations is to increase profit by selling their products or services, especially in this particular situation of the pandemic, social media is particularly used as a place for promotion and online sales.

The company analysed in this research, Fresco Natural bar is one of them. The author investigated the brand's social media pages Instagram and Facebook from January to December in 2020 and the e-commerce data from March 2020, when it has decided to develop an e-commerce platform and different strategies for social commerce because of the first lock down. The outcomes, emerged from the interview made to the owner of the company, are consistent with what has been previously mentioned in the first part of the research. The drivers that led Fresco natural bar to implement a social media strategy are the need to adapt to the new

technologies, track the competition, attract potential consumers, create long term relationships, retain the existing consumers, enhance the brand positioning, and promote the products. However, there are some barriers that limit the effectiveness such as the lack of resources and time, inappropriate monitoring techniques and the scepticism about some focal points in the social media, the brand awareness and the engagement. Therefore, different tactics have been implemented in order to have positive results in terms of sales. After that the second part of the investigation regards an elaboration of Facebook and Instagram insights to investigate the appropriateness of the WOM and engagement, CRM and advertising tactics. Despite the fact that the influencer marketing did not produce significant results according to the owner of the company, all the other tactics culminated in the increase of the post engagement in some period during the last year. In addition, for the last investigation, in order to examine the importance of the engagement in the sales trend, a specific regression model has been created.

. What emerged is that the engagement variable and the advertisement had both an impact on the items sold from March to December. As a conclusion, Fresco natural bar should involve the concept of engagement in the monitoring phase and take advantage of some useful tools for the periodical check. Besides, the consumer centric approach that is verifiable through the use of an editorial plan and the concentration of the activities on the supply of information and the offering of a special treatment for the consumers are particularly important. For future research,

the recommendation is to boost the research by considering a longer period of time for a single case study and try to extract more information among the Agri businesses about the use of social media activities in terms of engagement and advertisement for the increase of the profit for this particular field.

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