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IMPACT OF DIGITAL MARKETING ON SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS – CASE OF THE UNILEVER COMPANY

Abstract

Digital marketing, placed on the application of the Internet and digital tools, is one of the means to achieve business sustainability, as well as competitive advantages in the market. This paper presents the basis of the concept of digital marketing, as a new phase in the development of marketing, and its connection with the concept of sustainability. This paper aims to point out how much impact digital marketing can have on business sustainability and the creation of positive business outcomes, shown through the example of Unilever and its Dove brand. The paper analyses the digital marketing activities that this company has undertaken in the development of its Dove brand, which has resulted in its successful positioning in the market, as a brand that is sustainable and socially responsible on the one hand, and profitable on the other.

Keywords: *Unilever, Dove, sustainable business, digital marketing*

JEL classification: *M310*

УТИЦАЈ ДИГИТАЛНОГ МАРКЕТИНГА НА ОДРЖИВО ПОСЛОВАЊЕ – ПРИМЕР КОМПАНИЈЕ УНИЛЕВЕР

Апстракт

Дигитални маркетинг, заснован на примени Интернета и дигиталних алата, једно је од средстава за постизање одрживости пословања, као и конкурентске предности на тржишту. У овом раду приказана је основа концепта дигиталног маркетинга, као нове фазе у развоју маркетинга, и његова веза са концептом одрживости. Циљ рада је да укаже на то колики утицај дигитални маркетинг може имати на одрживост у пословању и на стварање позитивних пословних исхода, што је и показано на примеру компаније Unilever и њеног брэнда Dove. У раду су анализиране активности дигиталног маркетинга које је ова компанија предузела у развоју свог брэнда

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Dove, што је за резултат имало његово успешно позиционирање на тржишту, као брeнда који је са једне стране одржив и друштвено одговоран, а са друге стране профитабилан.

Кључне речи: *Unilever, Dove, одрживо пословање, дигитални маркетинг*

Introduction

The modern market is characterized by the presence of fierce competition, as well as a high level of consumer involvement in the creation of values, that are delivered to the market. In such conditions, firms compete for survival and stay on the market (Jevtić, Riznić & Milovanović, 2021; Zucchella & Magnani, 2016). It pressured them to re-evaluate their business models and offerings, in accordance with the challenges and opportunities they represent. That is what is commonly called digital transformation. (Daspit, 2017; Killian and McManus, 2015; Onetti et al. 2012; Moi and Cabiddu, 2020). In other words, companies must learn how to rapidly adjust to new business scenarios. Digital transformation is demonstrated by the incorporation of digital technologies into all operational aspects of any organization's activities. In general, offering customers the ability to search and buy online requires companies to re-specify their business models (Leefflang, Verhoef, Dahlström & Freundt, 2014, p.5).

According to Ziółkowska (2021), the new phenomenon can be observed today. It is referred to as the “digital revolution”. It is based on changes in consumers' behaviour, but also on changes in the organization of economic relations. It affects changes in all business areas including marketing.

Modern informational technologies create a new market area, which is wider reachable compared to traditional marketing channels. It blurs the boundaries between physical distance and time mismatching, making a wider marketplace for customers over the globe. With the implementation of digital technologies in marketing and business generally, a lot of transactions are simplified, like purchasing, communication, payments etc.

In the digital economy, customers are now empowered with a high level of company transparency. This transparency results that a brand can no longer make false, mistrustful promises. Companies now focus their attention on building digital relationships with their customers (Kannan, 2017).

Marketing is an area that is continually evolving with the market. One of the most influential marketing phases is digital marketing, which fundamentally relies on technological development. Digital marketing is a term that has evolved over time. It describes the marketing which is used for digital products and services. They are distributed using digital channels, as a new way to win consumers' hearts and build their preferences, promote brands, increase sales etc.

Digital marketing is related to sustainable business, and there are many examples of how it works in practice. The structure of this paper is as follows. After a short introduction, the second part of this paper gives a brief overview of digital marketing (r)evolution and its relations with sustainability, with practical examples of how the company Unilever increased sales of their brand Dove, using direct marketing.

1. Digital marketing (r)evolution

Marketing has changed significantly in the past decade. The American Marketing Association (AMA) has changed its definition of marketing several times. The new 2007 definition implies that “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (AMA, 2007). Wind (2008) highlighted that marketing transits through different concepts during the period of time (i.e. the four Ps: product, price, place, and promotion; the three Cs: company, customers, and competitors; customer satisfaction; relationship marketing; permission marketing, and collaborative marketing). Each of the listed concepts is being questioned and affected by a world of empowered consumers, fierce competition, globalization, improvement in technologies, and the interdependencies of these forces.

Chaffey & Smith (2017) point out that digital marketing is a new way of thinking and a useful tool for creating a business which is customer-led. That means that digital marketing involves customers in all activities, through constant dialogue.

Digital marketing is an evolving concept, whose popularity has been rising since the 1990s and 2000s (Paul, Bhuimali, Aithal & Bhowmick, 2018). Nevertheless, there are a lot of different definitions that describe this phenomenon. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines digital marketing as the application of digital or social channels to boost a brand or reach consumers. This type of marketing may be performed over the Internet, social media, search engines, mobile devices and other channels. It requires new ways of marketing to consumers and understanding the impact of their behaviour.

According to Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2017) “digital marketing is not created to replace traditional marketing. Instead, the two should coexist with interchanging roles across the customer path” (p. 52). Because digital marketing is more agile, their goal is to generate results when traditional marketing cannot.

Besides AMA, there are a lot of organizations whose business is based on marketing practice. These organizations create their own definitions of marketing and its elements and phases, which are noticed by some authors. Some of them give the definition of digital marketing, also. The Digital Marketing Institute defines digital marketing as “the use of digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with them” (Smith, 2007). Simply Digital Marketing defines the term: “Digital Marketing is a sub-branch of traditional Marketing and uses modern digital channels for the placement of products, e.g., downloadable music, and primarily for communicating with stakeholders e.g., customers and investors about a brand, products and business progress” (Royle & Laing, 2014, p.65).

Deighton & Sorrell (1996) alleged that digital marketing consists of direct marketing and interactive marketing. Direct marketing’s function is to consider customers as individuals and to pay attention to their personalities and to their actions, as one entirety. On the other hand, interactive marketing has the capacity to speak to customers and to collect and retain that customer’s answers. According to Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan (2017), digital marketing and traditional marketing are intended to exist side-by-side in Marketing 4.0. Their definitive goal is to achieve customer trust and loyalty.

Simplified digital marketing can be defined as reaching marketing goals through the application of digital technologies and media.

Holder (2008) and Wind & Mahajan (2002) assert in their research that digital marketing is basically direct marketing which is implemented through new media - as a new marketing channel model. There is a significant difference which is noticeable between direct and digital marketing. Digital technologies raise the interaction with customers to the highest possible level. That results in firms' achieving less audience wastage.

One group of authors explains digital marketing as a completely new marketing, not the traditional one which is upgraded by digital channels, communication, etc. (Taiminen & Karjaluo 2015; Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluo & Jayawardhena, 2012; Liu, Karahanna, & Watson, 2011; Rowley, 2008).

Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2016) point out that digital marketing in practice implies the management of various forms of the firm's presence online, which includes websites, social media pages, online communications with customers, etc.

According to Wymbs (2011), the primary application of digital marketing so far has been Internet-based research marketing and digital promoting. In that sense, digital marketing's future is going to be based on customers' wants in order to follow them everywhere they go. Today's consumers are becoming more and more mobile and socially engaged. For one of the biggest generations – Millennials, digital marketing is the guarantee for them to be reached (Okazaki, Katsukura & Nishiyama, 2007; Smith, 2012). One of the greatest digital marketing missions is providing the required information for the customers at the place they want it and at the time when they need it. The adage "If a company cannot be found in Google, it does not exist" completely describes this new generation's attitude (Taiminen & Karjaluo 2015). They are the main audit group related to this, new marketing era, especially because they are influenced by online marketing channels, and also, they are influencing each other constantly (Smith, 2012).

There is no suspicion that digital marketing is a serious revolution that has changed marketing to the core. (Wind & Mahajan, 2002). And it should be changed because buyers are changing. In that sense, the future evolution of marketing is obvious. Besides the evolution, marketing is adjusting to new business ideas, and one of them is sustainability. The relationship between these two will be discussed below.

2. Digital marketing and sustainability

The global idea of sustainable business is not new, it lasts for decades. According to Van Dam & Apeldoorn (1996), the significance of the effects of economic activity on the environment started to grow in the early 1970s. For decades, proponents of the early idea have argued that environmental and ecological strategies could actually lead to competitive advantages and better financial performance. (Sharma, Iyer, Mehrotra & Krishnan, 2010). Savitz and Weber (2006) point out that a sustainable company is one that can generate profit for its stakeholders while protecting them through care about the environment.

Rapid and extensive industrialization and urbanization around the world in recent years have created a number of serious environmental problems in almost all countries across the globe (Radivojević, Krstić & Stanišić, 2018, p. 25). Both, sustainability and sustainable development became unavoidable dimensions in all business activities. In that sense, the relationship between sustainability and marketing is one of them.

Many authors agree that sustainability and marketing have a lot of contributions to each other. A lot of papers in these two fields testify to that (about 2000 papers since the 1990s). Thus, the gap between them is still prevailing. This gap can be explained as a difference between behaviour and beliefs between society and marketing on the one hand, and the firm's potential to follow and adjust to a sustainability trend, on the other hand. Digital marketing can have a key role in connecting them. (Diez-Martin, Blanco-Gonzalez & Prado-Roman, 2019).

According to Dumitriu, Militaru, Deselnicu, Niculescu & Popescu (2019) sustainability has a positive impact on business, decreasing potential risks by enlarging brand equity and reputation – empowering companies to get through difficult times. Companies that meet consumers' needs and environmental protection requests have a clear environmental positioning on the market. These companies are mostly listed as the most successful ones.

Winsemius & Guntram (1992) highlighted that environmentally responsible actions include building a green supply chain and empowering companies in developing distinct advantages over the competition present on the market. Their key role is to create customer satisfaction because only a satisfied customer is willing to buy other offered goods and services (Sun, Garrett & Kim, 2016).

With the increased impact of environmentalism, customers are more interested in buying products which generate the least impact on the environment (Chang & Fong, 2010). In that sense, customer satisfaction as a business imperative transmits to a new level, so now we can talk about green satisfaction. That is an acceptable level of consumer satisfaction, according to their environmental, sustainable and green expectations and needs (Vafaei, Azmoon & Fekete-Farkas 2019). Therefore, for the companies, there is a new market opportunity: to be green, and green marketing can be a tool used to win it.

Green Marketing becomes implemented in practice by many companies, that wanted to improve their performance of companies and minimize their impact on the environment (Souri, Sajjadian, Sheikh & Sana, 2018). According to Hunt (2011), green marketing can be classified into ecological marketing (1970s), environmental marketing (1980s) and sustainable marketing (1990s). Sustainable marketing is considered as a current, third age of the green marketing concept. Its focus is on developing sustainable improvement and a sustainable economy (Hunt, 2011). In this concept consumers, green consumers, are one of the main initiators of sustainability marketing.

All listed can be implemented and combined with new IT. In that sense, we have a completely new approach to digital marketing. Many companies worldwide recognized its importance. In this paper, the example of how digital marketing can be used for successful business and sustainability at the same time will be discussed. The practical example, which will be explained below, is based on the business practice of the company Unilever, and it is the brand Dove.

3. Practical implementation of digital marketing to achieve sustainability in business – the example of Unilever Company and its brand Dove

3.1. Unilever strives for sustainability

Unilever PLC is a UK multinational corporation headquartered in London, England. The company was founded in 1929 as a small family business. Thanks to rapid progress and successful cooperation with partners, Unilever is a leading company in various business areas worldwide. Unilever has over 400 household name brands, and a 25 million-strong global network of retailers. Unilever sells its products in over 190 countries, and 2.5 billion people every day use them. It has three principal product divisions: Home care, Beauty & personal care, and Food & Refreshments, and each division has hundreds of successful brands.

Unilever started by establishing a socially responsible business in 1995 when it published its Code of Business principles. Since then, the company has sought to ensure that companies comply with laws and regulations, as well as protect trademarks and images, and prevent wounds to people or the environment. Unilever started the implementation of this Code through two main courses: The Nutrition Enhancement Programme (includes 16,000 products which are estimated for levels of trans-fats, saturated fats, sodium and sugars, and, where necessary, action is taken) and the so-called Sustainability Programme.

The first steps in implementing sustainability in business started in the following years when the company started to use sustainable raw materials in their production (e.g., sustainable sources of fish, palm oil, and tea). In 2009, Unilever launched its Compass strategy, which relies on the genuinely sustainable business model: to double the size of its business organization while reducing its environmental impact. That was recognized and rewarded by the public. By 2010, Unilever had won numerous awards related to sustainable business (i.e., the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices, for the 12th consecutive year, in 2015, for the 15th year, Unilever is named the leader of the Food, Beverage & Tobacco industry group with a score of 92 out of 100). Their activities continue by adopting the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan, encouraging sustainable agriculture at the World Economic Forum in Davos, contributing to the launch of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and joining global calls for action at the 2015 Paris Climate Conference (COP 21).

In 2016, Unilever won another industry record by sending null non-dangerous waste to landfills across more than 600 sites in 70 countries, including factories, warehouses, distribution centres and offices. In 2017, the company undertook a study that included 20,000 adults on how their sustainability worries result in their choices in-store and at home, and the results showed that a third of consumers (33%) choose to buy from brands they believe are doing business well socially or environmentally (Unilever, 2017). During that year, Unilever was involved to guarantee that all their plastic packaging is fully reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2025, and called on the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods industry to do the same. By 2019, Unilever had achieved to use of 100% renewable energy across five continents.

Through three product divisions, this company's achievement in environmental protection is significant. Besides environmental protection, this company cares about people all over the world. In this paper, we will analyse one of the Beauty & personal care brands, which is the most successful one, Dove. Special consideration will be given to this company's digital marketing campaign. The main question we are going to answer is what Dove does in its marketing and where it succeeds.

3.2. Digital is what Dove is all about

Dove is one of Unilever's biggest brands which is present worldwide. It was founded in 1957 in the US when they began the innovative beauty cleansing Bar. Since that year, it has grown rapidly, and today they offer various types of products such as body washes, hand and body lotions, facial cleansers, deodorants, shampoos, conditioners and hair styling products.

Products based on moisturizing are what makes Dove different, and that is the reason why it is strongly supported by dermatologists across the world. Inspired by women, Dove strives to provide superordinate care to all women, heightening real beauty.

For more than a decade, Dove has been working to make beauty become a source of confidence, not anxiety (Unilever). Its special mission is to ensure that the next generation is self-esteem and grows in positive energy and achieves their full potential. But Dove's care is not committed only to people, they care about animals, too. In 2018, Dove gained accreditation by PETA, which marks it as a brand that commits not to lead any tests on animals anywhere in the world.

Dove has a significant marketing position. Through courage and innovation, this company sells more than just beauty. In 2004, Dove launched The Dove Self-Esteem Project (DSEP), which was dedicated to educating young people and their parents about what real beauty should be like. The results of Dove's recent global study - The Global Beauty Confidence Report, 2016, showed that attitudes are changing slowly and that women's and girls' anxiety about their bodies is the greatest ever.

In 2021, the Dove brand was esteemed at approximately \$5.1 billion U.S. dollars and its digital campaigns have won influential awards on both national and global levels over the last 15 years (Digital marketing institute, 2021; Lisafen, 2021).

The constant presence online and carefully created digital marketing campaigns, special projects and programs made the strong base for success. What Dove did to be successful will be presented below.

3.3. Dove: An excelling approach to digital marketing via Self-Esteem Project

The Dove Self-Esteem Project, which has been implemented for more than a decade enabled Dove to become the best-selling Unilever brand. Dove provoked revolutions in the field of female beauty. This project was realized through digital marketing media, and in several campaigns. In using digital marketing Dove is the absolute pioneer. It did not sell the products, but the real beauty of choosing the new approach to customers. It turned out as a good decision because the used media was adjusted to the target group, and the messages they sent provoked a great public response.

Through several campaigns, Dove became recognizable by promoting real female beauty, while emphasizing their imperfections. The campaign took place in several phases, and the goal of all phases was to attract as much public attention as possible through provocative activities. Showing women in their real light, without makeup was a revolutionary move, which attracted a lot of attention. With its activities, Dove provoked revolutions in the field of female beauty. A strong message was sent to women all over the world about self-confidence. Thanks to the Real Beauty campaign, Dove's sales multiplied from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion during the first ten years of the campaign (Digital Marketing Institute).

Back in 2004, Dove initiated talks on a very sensitive topic that concerns women around the world. Through a revolutionary approach - a concept that emphasizes true beauty, Dove has begun to build a strong community of its consumers. According to one of the announcements that this company made public, this started a new phase in the 60-year celebration of female beauty and care.

The first step forward is Dove with the Real Beauty campaign. Showing women in their real light, without makeup was a revolutionary move, which attracted a lot of attention. Characteristic of this campaign was the installation of billboards with images of women and provocative messages like "Wrinkled or Wonderful" invited passers-by to vote. The results were shown on the billboards directly.

The second phase of the campaign began in 2006 when a project was launched to help improve young people's self-esteem through online articles, video forums and workshops on topics such as self-esteem, body positivity and bullying, via a web portal. Their goal was to educate more than 15 million young people on how to be self-confident. In the same year, Dove initiated the idea of a self-portrait "True Sketches of Beauty". Throughout this phase of the campaign, it was shown that there is a significant difference between how women see themselves and how others see them. Special attention was drawn to a series of videos where daughters describe their mothers for Mother's Day in 2013.

A new step forward in terms of communication with customers happened in 2015, and it is about cooperation with the social network Twitter. The struggle for the acceptance of natural female beauty became even stronger then. The goal of the collaboration which Dove established with Twitter was to reduce the number of negative tweets about body image. "To launch the campaign, Twitter and Dove teamed up to create a video ad about the shame of the body that aired during the 2015 Oscar premiere. During 2015, women used #SpeakBeautiful more than 168,000 times and left 800 million impressions on social media about the campaign" (Digital Marketing Institute).

The next phase in this project was a photo campaign realized in 2017. This campaign included a partnership with Shutterstock. The photos showed "real women", determined and brave, with the message #realbeauty. With this, Dove encouraged other brands to come forward with the same goal. Another campaign, called #showus, was launched to collect as many photos of women from different backgrounds as possible, including those from 2017, as a reminder to the media to join their women's empowerment program around the world.

Special attention is paid to young women, who are daily influenced by the content on social networks, and, among other things, by the influence of emphasizing perfect bodies. The new 'No Distortion' campaign was launched in 2018 and was intended for

women aged 16 to 25. With the introduction of the “No Digital Distortion” label, Dove products have become synonymous with their commitment to the #realbeauti concept. This symbol appears on all Dove content placed through both traditional and digital channels.

The next step in the project is a partnership with the Cartoon Network series “Steven Universe” to educate young people about the importance of trusting your own body.

This short retrospective describes one program that lasts more than decade. With several campaigns realized through the program, Dove reached a lot of women. In the 2017 Dove Global Girls Beauty and Confidence Report, the biggest academic report by Dove to examine the effect of body esteem, pressures and confidence on girls everywhere showed some results. Over half of the girls around the world do not have high body esteem, 82% of them think every girl has something about them that is beautiful. Their mission is not over yet. Worldwide by 2020, Dove is going to double its social impact through the Dove Self-Esteem Project by reaching the lives of another 20 million young people around the world. (Dove, Self-Esteem project)

3.4. The keys to Dove’s success

Through connection with customers, Dove encouraged women to talk about their insecurities. They spent a lot of resources to reach an audience. The marketing campaign they implemented was based on channel integration to send a strong message. Besides social media, the website, and digital marketing channels, they used mass media communication. The result was that Dove became a brand which is tightly related to several associations, which are used in their campaigns: #realbeauty, #selfesteem, and #showus movements.

By involving other companies in its campaigns, Dove made a significant partnership. The most prominent one is the partnership with social media Twitter. This partnership brought benefits for both sides. The #SpeakBeautiful hashtag succeed in affecting women to talk online by reducing negative twits about beauty and body image. Dove was helping their partners to effect a change in global advertising, not just in their ads.

For brand promotion on other social media, Dove encouraged different people to present its products as they want them. Their accent was on their variety. They also rely on peer-to-peer recommendations. The website which supports the Self-Esteem project is still viral, and open for new participants to join, as a teacher or students.

These are just the initial steps regarding the focus on real beauty, that is, what their brand has become. The continuation of Dove’s campaign began under the name “It’s On Us”, which made it clear that it was continuing its mission. Dove has committed to hiring real-world models in its further campaigns, as well as to co-finance the campaigns of its competitors if they decide to hire Dove models. In January 2020, Unilever also committed itself to include several different groups in its campaigns to work with on the campaign. Whether the campaign will continue to achieve the expected effects or not will be seen in the future. What is certain is the great determination of the Unilever Company to release young women and girls through its Dove brand from the restraints and imperatives of beauty that they encounter on social networks. That is why this issue

is central to their website. For Dove to succeed, great support from people is needed, which we believe will not be missed, because the key thing that Dove did is hit the target - they deal with a big social problem through beauty promotion, which becomes even more important by involving young people and children.

Conclusion

The growing demands that the market and the environment impose on companies make their business activities more difficult. They face great challenges to respond to all that. At the same time, new tools and ways of doing business are being developed, which, if used in the right way, can greatly contribute to companies. In addition to the already established market and environmental requirements in the form of making a profit and sustainability in business, the use of digital tools has a significant role in business. Digital marketing, as one of the areas that use digital tools, enables companies to more easily achieve the set goals while respecting various requirements from the environment.

This paper shows that digital marketing is a tool that has a lot of potential in achieving successful business results while achieving sustainability. Much attention has been paid to this topic, both in literature and in practice. The new, digital channels it uses to make it much easier to reach consumers, as well as offer them more than just the products themselves. Undoubtedly, digital marketing is especially suitable for accessing the younger generations.

An example of Unilever's business practice, presented in the line, indicates that a socially responsible and sustainable business has been built for many years. Numerous awards and achieved records only further support the already mentioned fact. It is also shown that the combination of digital and sustainable can be crucial in creating a sustainable competitive advantage in the market. Unilever is a good business example of how the correct use of digital marketing can lead to a wider market, better positioning, building a good image, and the image of a socially responsible company.

The success of the Dove brand, Unilever, is proof of the positive impact of digital marketing on business. Through the Self-Esteem campaign, Dove has become a world-renowned brand, which not only cares about women's beauty but also encourages women around the world to celebrate their natural beauty. The increase in sales that the company has achieved from the sale of products is only one of the indicators of success. In addition, a large number of participants in the campaign, followers on Twitter, and activists only further confirm the success of the Dove brand. Upon considering all the previous points, it can be concluded that Dove made a revolutionary move by entering the market boldly with innovative ideas. This is exactly what enabled the company to achieve an unbreakable connection with its consumers through caring for people, of whom there are more and more every day.

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