RENL: A Framework for Social Media Marketing Strategy

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Abstract

As practitioners and industries become more comfortable with the use of social media applications as a marketing tool, social media is becoming ubiquitous. However, social media must be managed just like the rest of media that organizations use to deploy their content and marketing strategy as part of their overall marketing strategy. Nevertheless, scholar research on social media marketing strategy is scant, and as a consequence current use of social media marketing is generally more intuitive than planned. This paper aims to create a comprehensive framework by identifying and classifying strategic actions for social media marketing, and mapping them to different social media marketing strategies. The framework has been developed from a synthesis of theories from social media marketing and general marketing strategy, and features two top-level categories of social media marketing strategic actions: content-specific and platform-level strategic actions, each of them consisting of two subcategories: representation and engagement actions, and networking and listening actions, respectively. The proposed framework is expected to serve as a basis for further research on the effect of social media marketing strategies on consumer behavior, both from general and sector-specific perspectives.

Keywords: social media, social media marketing, social media marketing strategy, social media strategic actions, consumer behavior

1. Introduction

The emergence of second generation Internet-based applications, more commonly known as Web 2.0, has an important role in the development of social media. Social media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and which allow the creation and exchange of user generated contents (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Berthon et al., 2012). Social media can be thought of as focusing on content, with end-users taking an active role in the creation of that content. Prior to the emergence of social media, Internet
contents were a sort of one-way communication but, with the rise of social media, communication has shifted to a through two-way –or more– communication.

Nowadays, social media has become an integral part of many organizations’ marketing strategy. It has provoked a paradigm shift in brands and companies’ marketing strategies, as well as the way they engage and communicate with their target market. As practitioners and companies incorporate social media applications –e.g. blogs and social networking sites– and they become an important part of their integrated marketing communications and strategy, they have turned to question the return of their investment in social media (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010), which also raises the question of how to manage these applications more effectively.

Some common goals when using social media as a marketing tool are: generation of word-of-mouth advocacy, development of brand loyalty, increase in brand awareness, closer relationships with customers, management of customer service issues, or educating media and public about company-related issues (eMarketer, 2010). These goals emphasize the central role of customer in social media marketing and customer behavior as the objective, and also as a result of social media marketing.

Nonetheless, from an academic perspective there is a dearth of research focusing on social media marketing strategies (SMMS) and the strategic actions which are associated to SMMS, as well as their relations or their impact on consumer behavior. In general, it becomes evident that it is necessary to make an effort to bridge the existing research gap in the link between social media marketing strategies and consumer behavior studies.

Some prior studies have dealt with the impact and effects of social media marketing on consumer behavior. These studies describe the impact of social media on marketing outcomes –in terms of customer behavior– from social media marketing attributes or social media characteristics, such as the social network influence or the perceived social media content experience. Examples of the research lines are the studies by Wang et al. (2012), who investigated the impact to peer communication through social media websites on product-related attitudes and purchase intention, and Kim and Ko (2011), who studied the effects of perceived social media marketing activities –such as entertainment, interaction, trendiness, and customization– of luxury fashion brands on customer equity. However, these studies do not address the relation between customer behavior and specific social media marketing strategies. Hence, the question of how to effectively translate a corporate social media marketing strategies into marketing activities or strategic actions to achieve specific objectives in terms of their customers’ behavior remains unaddressed.

There are a few examples of scholar research on corporate social media marketing practices, but these studies fall short on the analysis of the different social media strategic actions implemented by companies, and they do not map the strategic actions to actual customers’ responses. In this sense, Pentina and Koh (2012) explored the emerging patterns in the implementation of social media marketing by Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and classified the recurring patterns into taxonomies of managerially relevant strategic types; more specifically, they used cluster analysis with variables based on the number and combination of social media applications/tools implemented by SME retailers. Another study of corporate social media marketing strategies practices was Lorenzo-Romero et al.’s (2013) exploratory research on social media adoption as marketing strategy among Spanish retailers. Lorenzo-Romero et al. (2013) identified the types of applications used by retailers and their impact on management experiences.
From the above, there is a research gap in the identification and categorization of social media marketing strategic actions in practice, as well as of the possible social media marketing strategies that they are linked to. This paper aims to overcome this limitation by characterizing the different companies’ social media strategic actions, as a means to find out how social media marketing strategies are translated into actual marketing activities. The resulting research framework is built from previous studies and literature on social media marketing – such as research on the characteristics, adoption and strategies of social media marketing, – as well as on the effect of social media marketing on consumer behavior.

Prior to investigating costumers’ behavior as the result of their exposure to social media marketing campaigns, it is necessary to examine the social media strategic actions that defined by different social SMMS. From these strategic actions, we can further measure the performance of social media marketing campaigns by investigating the response of customers as the result of their exposure to social media marketing strategic actions and, ultimately, how customers’ responses translate into behaviors as marketing outcomes. We expect that the results from this study will serve as a guideline for better integration of social media into companies’ overall marketing strategy while helping to maximize their effectiveness.

This rest of this paper is structured in three main sections: first, the theoretical background covers the literature review – and a description on the methodology followed to conduct it – of current theories on SMMS and strategic actions; upon this literature review, we further present our framework on categorization of social media marketing strategic actions and identify how they relate to SMMS; finally, we describe and discuss the findings as of the results of our framework concerning social media marketing strategic actions and their corresponding strategic plans and objectives from a SMMS perspective. Some concluding remarks are then drawn to address the implications from this study and suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical background
2.1. Literature Review Methodology
A careful search across scholar search engines has been performed and we made three categories of key words in order to carry out a systematic search: social media/web 2.0, general marketing and business strategies, and digital marketing. Although there is a lack of empirical research on general social media marketing strategies or strategic typologies of companies’ use of social media marketing, it is plausible that the generic strategic types in business or marketing fields may also apply to social media marketing strategic decisions relating to the selection and integration of social media platforms and tools. Therefore, and since social media are basically web applications, we decided to consider research in Internet or online marketing strategy as well.

Table 1 lists the key words and title terms used in choosing articles for the literature review. Papers and journals are mostly searched through Web of Knowledge, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, IEEE, and Google Scholar. Considering there are not yet many academic sources available for the studies of SMMS, additional studies were found in web articles and reports from the industry, practitioners or consultancy.

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<th>Key Words &amp; Title</th>
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<td>Social media/Web 2.0 marketing/campaign/adoption/strategy/strategies/action/activity/activities/tactic</td>
<td>Social Media/Web 2.0</td>
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Prior to our review on SMMS research, we have investigated extant literature on generic corporate business strategy and marketing strategy. **Organizational strategy** within an entrepreneurial insight is marked by their defined product-market domains (Miles et al., 1978) and how management commits resources to achieve objectives relative to the domain. In a general sense, **business strategy** is concerned with how businesses achieve competitive advantage (Slater & Olson, 2001). Miles and Snow’s (1978) and Porter’s (1980) typologies have emerged as the two dominant frameworks in business strategy (Slater & Olson, 2001). Miles and Snow (1978) identify how firms address the strategic issues based on their target market – whether securing its market share portion or entering a new market – or on their adoption of new technologies, while Porter (1996) views strategic positioning as performing different activities from those of the competition, or performing similar activities as competitors in different ways. In the field of marketing, **marketing strategy** is seen as the set of integrated decisions and actions by which a company expects to achieve its marketing objectives and meet the value requirements of its customers (Slater & Olson, 2001).

According to Varadarajan (2010), the terms “actions”, “activities” and “behaviors” within marketing strategy topics can be used interchangeably. Through this perspective, an organization’s marketing decisions specify the marketing actions, marketing activities or marketing behaviors that companies engage in.

It is worth noting that the term “tactic” has been used along with “strategy” or “action” interchangeably. In relation to “marketing tactics”, as by Varadarajan (2010), there are contradictory points of view evidenced within journal articles and marketing textbooks regarding the conceptual distinction between “marketing strategy” and “marketing tactics”, and these contradictions are related to the how the marketing mix of 4Ps (Product, Price, Place/Distribution, and Promotion) are interpreted. Thus, while some or all of organization behaviors pertaining to the 4Ps are sometimes seen as belonging to the domain of marketing tactics, other sources state that certain marketing behaviors in the realm of each of the 4Ps are characterized as marketing strategy (e.g. promotion mix: “push vs. pull” strategy) and others as marketing tactics (e.g. promotion tactics or pricing tactics). As such, Varadarajan (2010) states that marketing decisions are broadly distinguished as strategic versus non-strategic – or more strategic versus less strategic marketing decisions. In traditional strategic management literature, "strategies" have a long term temporal horizon and involve a substantial amount of resources and commitment; "tactics", on the other hand, generally refer to short-term activities designed to fine tune strategy, and they involve a smaller commitment of resources (Hillman & Hitt, 1999). Based on the latter view, we will refer to “marketing tactics” as “marketing actions” or “marketing activities”, since basically a tactic is a part of the firm’s strategic activities.
Marketing strategy is seen as tightly related to an organization’s positioning within the market place. From our review, marketing actions or activities are then built basically on decisions around market segmentation, targeting and positioning, and marketing mix positioning. Examples of this are the research conducted by Slater and Olson (2001) – who developed a taxonomy of marketing strategy types through cluster analysis by identifying firms’ marketing activities according to Kotler’s (1994) framework, including segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP)– and McCarthy’s (1975) marketing mix of 4Ps.

2.3. SMMS and Strategic Actions
There are many terms related to the “platforms” upon which the social media landscape is created, such as “applications” (Uitz, 2012) or “channels” (Evans, 2008). According to Uitz (2012), the most relevant social media applications for companies are:
1. Social Networking Sites (SNS), to build social networks or relations.
2. Blogs: websites where individuals or business entities can publish news or opinions on various topics.
3. Microblogging: a combination of blogs and instant messaging which allow users to post a short message (e.g. in a maximum of 140 characters).
4. Social bookmarking sites, used to organize, store and manage online resources.
5. Sharing sites, used to store and share photos, videos, or slides and other media with other users.

For companies, social media marketing activities are ideally driven by the overall strategies of the companies, and each of these platforms has distinctive characteristics that may define different activities within the social media sphere.

From our prior conceptualization of marketing strategy, in the context of this study social media marketing strategy (SMMS) is viewed as an integrated means and set of actions by which a company or organization expects to achieve its marketing objectives and meet the requirements of its target market through the use of social media tools and properties. Hence, social media marketing strategic actions (SMMA) can be viewed as the marketing actions, activities, behaviors or tactics within the social media mix that are specified by a given SMMS.

Based on our thorough review on general marketing strategy, digital or internet-enabled marketing and social media and web 2.0 marketing, social media marketing strategies and activities are basically built around decisions on these three areas:
1. Market segmentation, targeting and positioning (Slater & Olson, 2001; Pentina & Koh, 2012)
2. Positioning based on marketing mix (Slater & Olson, 2001; Varadarajan & Yadav, 2002; Liu & Cang, 2010; Constantinides, 2002; Wang et al., 2005)
3. Social media mix – a set of social media tools, which covers decisions about choice of social media applications and features, content strategies and goals of social media implementation (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Falkow, 2009, 2011).

Regarding marketing mix in a social media context, some previous considerations must be made: since social media are essentially web applications, we shall primarily focus on extant research on Internet or online marketing strategy. Internet or online marketing strategy has always been concerned about the traditional marketing mix of 4Ps. According to Lauterborn (1990, in Wang et al., 2005), the 4Ps might not fit well in e-markets, and therefore it might be preferable to replace it by the 4Cs model (Consumer wants and needs, Cost to satisfy, Convenience to buy, and Communication). Some people even think that the 4P marketing mix has been unable to adapt to modern
business and will be eliminated (Liu & Cang, 2010). Constantinides (2002) argues that the traditional marketing mix used in 4Ps lacks strategic elements and the basic element of Internet marketing: interactivity. He therefore proposed the so-called 4S web-marketing mix: Scope, Site, Synergy, and System. Nonetheless, Varadarajan and Yadav (2002) have shown that the generic approach of the marketing mix of 4Ps is applicable in an Internet-enabled environment. Liu and Cang (2010) also placed the 4Ps as the basic marketing strategy, given that its use is still relevant for companies. In other related work, Wang et al. (2005) find out that the 4Ps, 4Cs, and 4Ss are all reliable and are suitable for marketing strategy of three typical digital products—content-based products, software tools, and online services—given the different suitability for each of the products. In this paper, we share these views and consider that all available types of marketing mix models are relevant in social media marketing strategy, considering the different types of product or services that may be affected by social media activities.

A review on the classification studies of social media marketing activities or actions, showed an alarming scarcity of research on this topic. An exception is the study by Mergel (2013), who classified social media tactics based on observed social media adoptions in public service sector agencies and departments among US federal government. Mergel’s categorization of social media strategic tactics is as follows:

1. Representation, a tactic related with the representation of the agency on all potential social media channels.
2. Engagement: this tactic is aimed to have the audience interact with government in a natural conversation style.
3. Networking and “mingling”, used to keep a measured voice, stay on message and listen to citizens.

Constantinides (2009) proposed a classification of the role of social media applications based on how corporations can use social media as part of their marketing strategies. His approach was based on the types of social media applications, and their relation to marketing objectives. Constantinides concludes that there are two main ways of engaging social media as part of the marketing strategy: passive and active. Passive engagement, or listening-in, means using Web 2.0 applications as intelligence tools—i.e. as source of customer voice and market information--; active engagement, on the other hand, relates to the use of social media applications as having the following marketing purposes:

1. Public relations and direct marketing.
2. Engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, and personalities as means of customer influence.
3. Personalizing customer experience and products.
4. Engaging the customer as creator of product reviews, advertising concepts and co-production tasks.

3. RENL Framework: a classification of Social Media Marketing Strategic Actions (SMMA) and their associated SMMS

Based on the above, we propose a general framework for categorization of SMMA that also explains how SMMA are derived from the SMMS. Since our focus is on marketing objectives in terms of customer behavior, our framework is mainly based on literature on Business to Consumer (B2C) social media marketing. Our framework is built on the basis of the following factors:

- Social media marketing strategies set the overall tones and direction of the decisions on positioning and actions taken within the social media mix.
The classification of SMMA is adapted mainly from Mergel’s (2013) and Constantinides’s (2009), presented in the previous section:

1. Categories for social media tactics resulting from social media adoption (Mergel, 2013). Although Mergel’s categorization is stemming from social media adoption among government agencies, it is plausible that the categories are applicable to social media marketing among corporate or firms.

2. The social media role categories as part of a marketing strategy (Constantinides, 2009). These categories can be matched to Mergel’s (2013) categories, as we will show later on in this section.

SMMA extracted from the literature review shall be mapped into their each categories and their SMMS’s strategic plans and objectives.

Summarizing the classification of SMMA, we adapt Mergel’s categories of social media tactics to a general social media marketing context into four different categories, which conform the RENL framework for categorization of SMMA and SMMS (figure 1):

1. Representation: covers social media activities on company profile and information or scope of product/services offered.

2. Engagement or value-added proposition: covers the marketing activities that focus on customers’ interaction, add value for customers and generate benefits for companies – such as customer-relationship management, one-to-one marketing, customer empowerment, customer assistance, personalization of information, product customization, or customer loyalty programs (Müller-Lankenau et al., 2006).

3. Networking: this is related to the social media activities that facilitate conversations about brands and companies, and connect firms with their audience – including the decisions on what type of social media applications or tools are chosen.

4. Listening-in: these social media activities enable a passive way of social media engagement that aims at market research and intelligence, such as those analyzing social media contents and conversations – share of voice, sentiment, gaps, trends, and opportunities – or identifying relevant actors or influencers.

Combined with Constantinides’s (2009) categories, we extend the above framework into sub-categories where we develop each social media tactics into its role within social media. However, some modifications from Constantinides’s framework have been made. “Direct marketing” was changed to “promotion process” in order to make the term more general. We also included five additional categories, i.e.: engaging customers to participate in call to action for participatory promotion, customer support, engage with competitors, the decisions around social media mix and market intelligence. These additional categories were evidently found among sources to be in current practice in social media marketing. As a result, we have ten sub-categories of SMMA, concerning their role as marketing tools, within our RENL framework:

1. Public Relations (PR). Actions with this role are part of the representation tactic. PR, or publicity, is the marketing communication function that carries out activities designed to earn public understanding and acceptance (Hollensen, 2010).

2. Promotion Process. The actions included in the promotion process are part of marketing communication, such as advertising, sales promotion, and direct marketing.
3. Engaging online opinion leaders, key influencers, and personalities as means of customer influence. Actions within this approach are based on proactive engagement of social media personalities as product or brand advocates (Constantinides, 2009).

4. Personalizing customer experience and products. These actions aim at strengthening the ties between the customer and companies by offering customers the possibility to personalize their online experiences or customize products they buy (Constantinides, 2009).

5. Engaging the customer as creator of product reviews, advertising concepts and co-producer. These actions mainly aim at engaging customers as source of feedback, creativity and innovations for product or service development. Product reviews voiced by consumers online represent an emerging market phenomenon that is becoming critical in shoppers’ purchasing decisions (Mangold & Smith, 2012). Customer reviews can help companies to conduct corrective measures as well. Another way to involve customers’ knowledge and creativity is to engage them in product customization. The difference with the previous category is that this type of actions not only enables customers to customize the product they buy, but companies can make the customer-customized products available to other customers.

6. Engaging customers to participate in call to action for participatory promotion. Actions in this category are based on an approach to engage customers to be actively involved in the promotion process by creating competitions, quiz, or contests alike. Example of the action is employing contest providing particular incentives for customers to encourage customers to share contents about their experiences with the product or service (Parent et al., 2011).

7. Engaging with competitors in social media. This type of engagement is related with how brands and companies are intentionally connected with their competitors in social media sphere. The actions could be in the form of sharing competitors’ contents or following competitors’ accounts on social media (Tattersfield, 2013; Thompson 2013). The main aims behind it are to increase impressions, credibility, and thought leadership among target market, as well as source of inspiration and sharing ideas.

8. Customer Support. Although it could be considered as an element of the promotion decision (Slater & Olson, 2001), we regard customer support as related to customer engagement, since in the social media context, actions within this category proactively engage customer to post their feedback and concerns in social media applications related with the pre- or post-sales process (e.g.: Andzulis et al., 2012; Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2013).

9. Decisions around social media mix: social media platform/application and features selection. These actions are related to the networking tactic, including decisions about where, among the social media mix, the conversations between a company and their audience or target market should take place, and considering that each platform has its own tools and features that may suit different targets and purposes. These actions may take form of administering social media accounts (Pentina and Koh, 2012; Lorenzo-Romero et al., 2013), employing dedicated social media accounts for different product/service lines or different geo-locations (Saravanakumar and Suganthalakshmi (2012), or creating a group or community of people of similar interest in social media accounts (Andzulis et al., 2012).
10. Market Intelligence. Market intelligence actions are equivalent to listening-in tactics, which aim at monitoring the voices of customer or audiences. Marketing research is crucial to the selection of target markets and to the development of a value proposition (Slater & Olson, 2001).

Our findings further suggest that there are roughly around forty SMMA that could be currently in practice. Through our observations among the strategic actions identified, those strategic actions can actually be classified within two top-level of categories. They are in the context of this paper, namely, content-specific and platform-level strategic actions. Strategic actions falling into representation and engagement are basically content-specific actions, while categories of networking and listening-in can be seen as platform-level actions.

Content-specific strategic actions are related to how firms or companies produce or create their contents on social media platforms that have a translation to strategic actions. On the other hand, platform-level strategic actions are concerned with the selection of platform or application used to deploy the strategy; market intelligence actions are included in the latter category since these actions are conducted by monitoring the voices in the social media domain on top level of the social media content-strategies produced.

From figure 1, the SMMS covers the decisions on the strategic plans and objectives based on positioning. These plans are then implemented into more specific strategic actions. The two top-level categories of SMMA –i.e. content-specific and platform-level strategic actions– comprise of two subcategories which are based on the social media marketing tactics employed: representation and engagement or value-added proposition, and networking and listening-in, respectively. These subcategories have its each distinctive role of activities. There are then ten further subcategories of SMMAs based on the strategic roles of each action.

![Figure 1 – RENL framework for SMMS](image-url)
4. Conclusion
In this paper we propose the RENL framework, a comprehensive framework for the classification of strategic actions in social media marketing, and their mapping into different social media marketing strategies. Our proposed framework features two top-level categories of social media marketing strategic actions: content-specific and platform-level strategic actions, each of them consisting of two subcategories: representation and engagement actions, and networking and listening-in actions, respectively. The strategic actions were identified among current practices within social media marketing and considering their effect of on consumer behavior. These strategic actions can be mapped into the strategic plans and companies’ objectives. The framework is built with a general perspective, irrespective of industry or sector of application.

Knowledge on requirements for successful social media marketing strategy implementation has been of interest to both academic and practitioners. As social media is becoming ubiquitous and mainstream, companies cannot just jump into this media without a specific plan. By understanding how social media marketing strategy is implemented into activities or actions, it is expected that this framework can be of use for companies when deploying social media as a marketing tool, a decision that relies currently more on intuition and trial and error than on strategic thinking.

As this research is a pioneering study in the field of social media marketing strategy, our framework is built based on a mostly theoretical approach. Hence, further empirical validation is required; further research should contribute to refine this framework – specially, taking into account sector-specific characteristics – and continue to investigate the linkage between firms’ overall marketing strategy and the deployment of social media marketing campaigns as part of that strategy. Furthermore, the proposed framework is expected to serve as a basis for further research on the effect of social media marketing strategies on consumer behavior, both from general and sector-specific perspectives.

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