FACEBOOK USERS PROFILES: ARE THEY RELIABLE SOURCES OF INFORMATION FOR BUSINESSES? - poster

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Abstract

Social networks can be successfully used to promote any business, being developed in such a way to allow both individuals and business organizations to interact one with each other. Companies may obtain important information about users of social networks which will help to a better understanding of their profile and their needs and, consequently, to build their marketing and sales strategies. According to the latest data, Facebook is the most popular social network, with the highest number of registered users from all over the world. The current paper aims to determine the way Facebook users – and more precisely young students belonging to Romanian economic field, behave in respect to this social network from the point of view of information valuable for businesses.The findings of the paper are based on a survey deployed in 2014 and these reveal that most of the users grant access to their profile only to friends and friends of friends, limiting the exposure to public, including here possible business market prospectors. Also, although users provide in general real information for some items of their profile, they avoid displaying more personal details about them, regardless of their policy for profile visualisation.

Keywords

Social networks, Facebook, Profile identity, Business

JEL Classification

L14, L86, M00

Introduction

Social networks can be defined as websites based on web frameworks that allow (1) to create a public or semi-public profile inside a system governed by some rules, (2) to make a list of users who wish to be in contact with and (2) to view and scroll through the contacts

in order to create other new connections. The type and the nature of these connections may vary from site to site. (Boyd, 2007)

By using the social networks, people create their own communities through which they can discuss common topics, share their opinions about the places they visited, about the shows or movies they saw or simply about the products viewed or purchased (Mangold and Faulds, 2009).There are social networks organized around certain common ideas/interests or professional communities. There is a huge amount of information submitted inside such communities that can be extremely valuable for the business environment. This is the reason why business organizations could not miss such an opportunity.

What makes social network sites unique is not only they allow individuals to interact with other unknown persons, but rather that allow users to articulate and to make visible their own knowledge and experiences, influencing other individuals (Sabou et al, 2014).This fact can lead to connections between people which otherwise would not be made, but most often this is not the main purpose of these networks, so such meetings can be seen frequently as "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005) between people who have and share an offline connection.

According to Metcalfe's Law (Chalasani, 2008), as the number of nodes in a network is higher, the larger is the network impact. The presence of a business organization within a social network opens its access to a huge number of potential customers, customers who interact with one another and influence each other (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014).

Companies can develop their own business by doing the following actions:

- take the advantage of existing information within the social networks;
- try to present new products or services to new created communities of loyal consumers;
- make customers to discuss and find out what the consumers think about the existing products or services;
- increase the number of loyal customers; - gain new consumers.

Thus, for the business organizations become a necessity to be present on the major social networks, to open to the public, so to exist online. However, the presence on a few networks leads to a dilution effect of such campaigns. At the same time, if an organization does not exist on a large social network and a group of consumers starts a denigration campaign against, the slow reaction time can lead to a disaster of the company image. Such a decision is hard to take, organizations must focus on those social networks that bring the best exposure, being as active as possible, but also they need to keep their presence on as many networks in order to gain a better exposure.

For all these players, social media provides the proper tools through which they can achieve their goals and to improve their work. While the economy was trying to recover from the crisis, the social media platforms, especially social networks, grow exponentially. For example, while the global economy in early 2009 was at the lowest level since World War II, the Facebook reached 100 million users in the same period. (Stone, 2009)

Using Facebook for business
Facebook is the biggest social network, it started as a social network of academics from Harvard, but quickly expanded as a global network (Cassidy, 2006). By using Facebook, business organizations can create their own pages to advertise their products and to easily reach the customers. Through these profiles, organizations become more "human", they

approach customers and give them the impression that talk to a friend and not to a big multinational company director. Building a profile on Facebook enables organizations to open for any potential customers, to advertise the products and people behind these products, those who created, developed and brought them to the market.

For organizations that aim to have a closer connection with their customers, this change means that there is a way to listen and hear what it is said about the organization and its products, to start a conversation and to develop a meaningful virtual relationship with customers. However, for those wishing to further control the message sent, this change means rethinking the entire communications strategy. (Kelsey, 2010).

The Facebook network includes two types of communities, private and public ones. Private communities can be generated by using groups, while the public ones can be made through the pages. Groups can be useful if an organization wants to create an internal community of employees or when an organization seeks to increase confidence among consumers, allowing them to form a group in order to give them the impression that they access first-quality information. Usually, only a part of the information that is presented in the group can be public. This is why the Facebook settings can form three groups: open (open access), closed (you can only access the group if you receive the administrator approval) and secret (by invitation only, and the discussions in this type of group are not included in any search).

Thus, through the communities formed in order to improve their offer, business organizations can:

- feel the market;
- discover the customer needs;
- find defective items;
- determine customer complaints;
- know what the competition is preparing.

For organizations, it is recommended to build pages that are public, so everyone can see, can be easily found at a simple search and can be integrated with other applications and online platforms.

Building an organization page is totally different than the creation of a personal profile of a regular user. For personal pages, Facebook allows users to create profiles, while for organizations and artists it is only allowed to create pages that are called "Fan Page" and must be associated with at least 5000 accounts. Such pages are divided into three categories:

• Pages for local businesses
• Pages for brands / products
• Pages for artists / public figures

When an organization wants to create a Facebook page, it is recommended to build such a community because there are a number of advantages, including (Sweeney, S., Randall, C., 2011):

- launching research and market studies
- generating traffic for organization web pages
- help building a positive image of the organization
- promoting organization related events
- higher sales
- launching various promotional campaigns

According to a study by O'Neill (2011), more than half of the Facebook users are fans of 2 to 5 companies. As consumers take their purchase decision based on emotion, such a behavior can be successfully exploited in the online environment, especially through social networks. More than creating their own pages, companies may also have a proactive attitude, investigating the behavior of their potential customers (Asur and Huberman, 2010), based on specific profile information. The downside of this quest for possible business partners or customers may be the fact that profile information and users' online activities and behavior are not always available to public; also, there is no certainty whether the information registered by users when they create their accounts is real or not. Such false profile information could influence the online market research performed by a company.

Research. Methodology, objectives and results.

The main purpose of the research was to find out if and how Facebook is used by students belonging to Romanian economic academic field, from the point of view of companies looking for information throughout social media about possible customers or business partners.

Taking into consideration that young people are the most active in social media (Lenhart et al, 2010) and also that the target group is formed by young students who use internet and, presumably, Facebook or other social network, we considered that the most appropriate way of distributing the questionnaires of research is online. Therefore, the research online questionnaire based was undertaken in 2014 and there were 277 respondents, young students belonging to Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

Data was gathered and analyzed with statistical software Minitab and Microsoft Excel.Taking into consideration the sample size of 277 respondents, for 95% confidence level, the resulting margin of error is about 6%.

The research is much wider and the results presented in the current paper are partial ones, offering interpretation only to objectives relevant for businesses as it follows:

- identifying the amount of Facebook users among the selected sample
- finding if business related purposes are those leading students to using Facebook
- determining the level of reliability for the declared personal information, as this is vital for companies aiming to build marketing online strategies within Facebook.

From the total number of respondents, 12 (4.3%) are declared non-users, arguing that Facebook is time consuming and, for the purpose of socialization, they prefer face to face communication and meetings with friends. The rest of them, 265 (95.7 %) stated that they use Facebook for various reasons. By investigating their motivations for using Facebook, we found out that the most important refer to discussing with friends and obtaining information. A respondent could select one or several reasons for accessing and using this social network and the situation is presented in figure no.1.
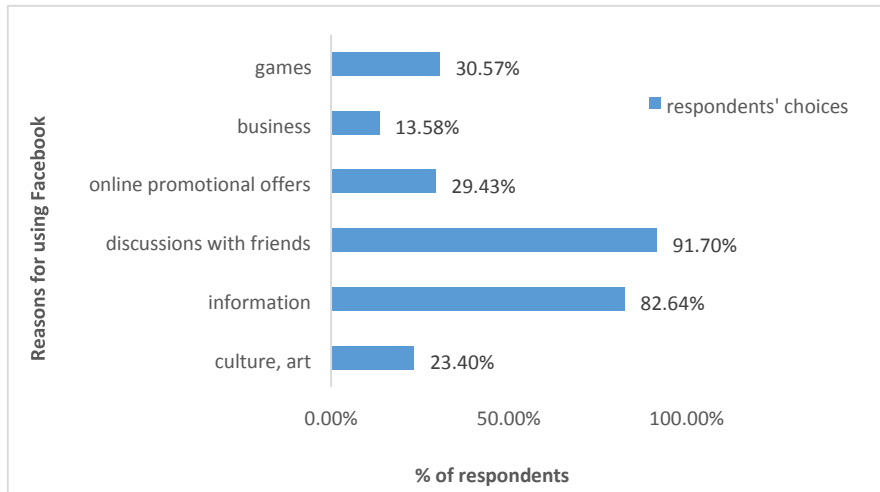
Figure no.1: Respondents' reasons for using Facebook

Further on, we looked for their options of making available their profile information to friends, to friends of friends or to everybody. From the point of view of a business prospecting the Facebook to see possible contacts or customers behavior, it is important to find as many people with their profile and social network activities visible by everybody. Therefore, we analyzed the respondents from the point of view of their using Facebook also for business and/or for benefiting from promotional offers or not. Their options for making the profile available to public or not is presented in figure no.2.

As it can be noticed, the highest percentage belongs to respondents who state that the access to their profile is allowed only to friends, regardless of their using Facebook for business and promotional offers search reasons or not. We may appreciate that the majority of young students belonging to Romanian economic academic environment grant access to their profile only to their friends. At the opposite side we see that only a very small percentage of respondents grant access to everybody.

Testing the differences of behavior between users of Facebook for various purposes except those relating to promotional offers searching and business and those users looking also for business and promotional offers we did not find any relevant difference between the proportions. Thus, although we can notice differences among the two categories of respondents (those interested also in business and promotional offers and whose who are not), at 95% confidence level, the margins of error make impossible to state that there would be a difference between the two groups in respect to the percentage of users who grant access to their profile to friends, to friends of friends or to the public.
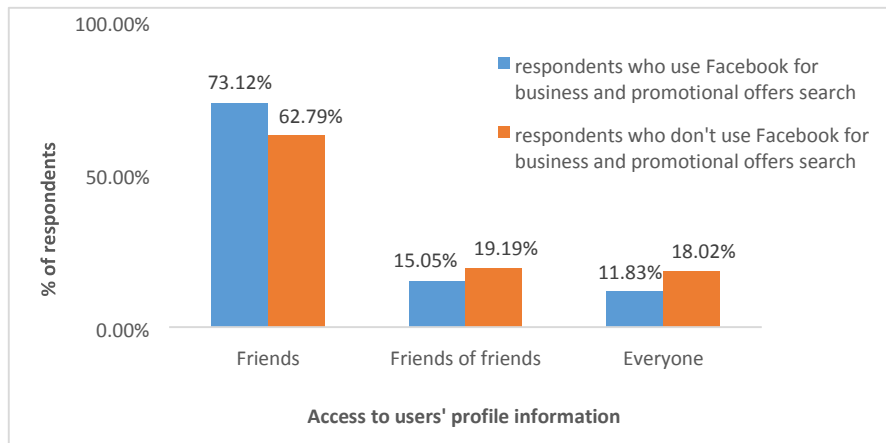
Figure no.2: Access to respondents' **Facebook profile information**

This means that business developers prospecting the Social Media and looking for possible customers meeting a desired profile cannot rely much their own online quest, because most of Facebook users do not share profile information with everybody. Of course, the profile information – be it available to public or private, may be used targeted by the advertising system of Facebook, just as is the case of Google. The only issue here would be that of information trustworthiness. Therefore, our research focused on identifying the reliability of information Facebook users register when they create their profile (figure no.3).
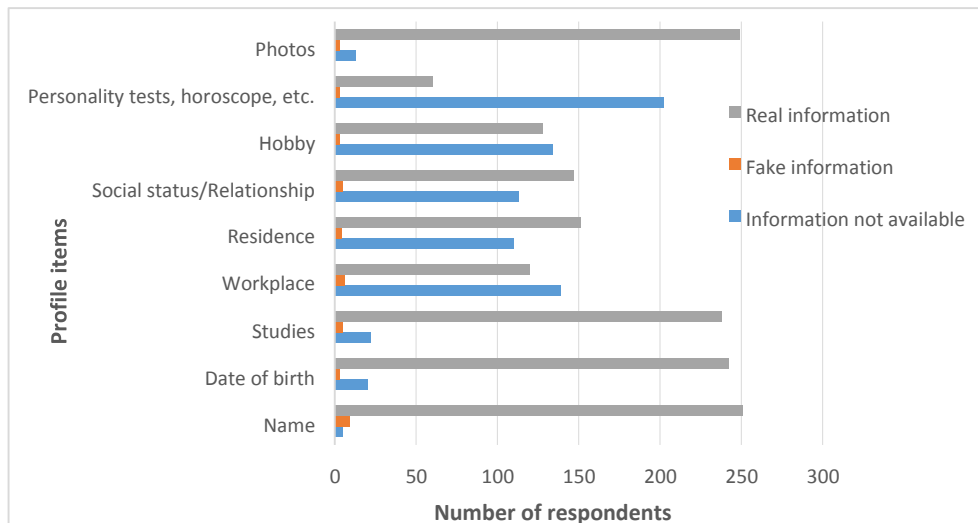

Figure no. 3: Information comprised in various profile items

As it can be noticed, general information about the users (such as name, date of birth, studies, and profile photos) are real and included in the profile by most of respondents. Exception makes the item referring to workplace, which   However, a more detailed information which will allow a deeper analysis of users' profile (results of personality tests, social status, hobbies) by the interested companies is less available. Testing the differences about profile items information between users of Facebook for various purposes except

those relating to promotional offers searching and business and those users looking also for business and promotional offers we did not find any relevant variation between the proportions.

Conclusions

Regardless of age or occupation, technology has become very important in people's lives. Social media overcame any borders and allowed much easier information and cultural exchanges. Organizations from all over the world have realized that today it is not enough to build a website where the products and services are presented and where the customer can view details and then decide whether buying them or not. Now consumers have become increasingly more involved and connected with each other, their opinions becoming increasingly important for others. If companies want to get closer to their customers, they ought to be very present on social networks. However, their presence is not enough if the communication is not based on a research of the possible customers' profiles and behaviors within social media. As Facebook is today's most popular social network, our research focused on determining young educated students' behavior throughout this network, from the point of view of a business researching the profile of its possible customers.

The research has shown that most of the young students from Romanian economic academic environment use Facebook. From the point of view of the way is granted access to personal profile information, there were found no statistically significant differences between users who enter Facebook only for entertainment (discussing with friends, getting informed, playing) and learning (about culture and arts) and those users who look also for business opportunities and promotional offers. Neither were found differences between groups in what concerns the information available for the various profile items. Most of users give real identification information (such as name, date of birth, studies) and skip the more personal one (social status, personality traits as they result from social media applications, horoscope etc). Very few users give fake information and this could be explained by the fact that the main purpose of using Facebook is discussing with friends, and also by the fact that most of users grant profile access to friends and friends of friends. The conclusions of the research indicate that businesses might lack in depth personal information about certain users, as only identification data may not help too much. However, although user's profile lacks in depth personal details, the information available is accurate and real.

Research' results and conclusions have to be considered relevant for the population of young Romanian students belonging to Bucharest University of Economic Studies, characterized by a relatively uniform cultural and educational background. Extending the assumptions of the research to other populations has to be done with caution. Nevertheless, the obtained results may be premises for further similar research and comparisons, as these will enrich the overall perspective of business development through Social Media in general, and Facebook in particular.

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