Utilisation of Online Public Relations Tools in Chemical Companies in the Czech Republic

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Abstract: Effective online marketing communication is one of the basic prerequisites for the company's success in the market. Today, however, it is not only focused on customers, but also on other stakeholders. Most often used for this purpose are digital public relations, the intention of which is to influence public opinion and create a positive image of the company. The aim of the paper is to summarise data from primary research focused on the analysis of websites of chemical manufacturers regarding the current use of digital messages and communication channels in their online public relations. The study was prepared using descriptive statistics tools. The results show that in terms of written forms, companies most often use the news section. Audio-visual content can only rarely be found on the websites. Links to social networks are also not a matter of course on the web. The most frequently presented social networks include Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Keywords: online communication; online marketing; digital public relations

JEL Classification: L60; M21; M31

1. Introduction

Digital, or online public relations are based on traditional public relations (PR) (Tong, 2021), which are intended mainly to create and support effective two-way communication between the company and its surroundings (Tong, 2021; Mckie & Sriramesh, 2017). The company's goal within this mutual dialogue is to build or increase brand awareness through persuasion, influencing and informing so that it contributes to its reputation and positive image (Stedron et al., 2018; Petrovici, 2014) while creating interest and building long-term relationships and trust between the organisation and its stakeholders (Tetrevova, 2017). In this context, all entities related to the company and its activities are considered stakeholders (Tong, 2021; Tetrevova, 2017; Karlicek, 2016). These typically include, for example, owners, investors, employees, customers, suppliers, the media, etc. (Tetrevova & Patak, 2019; Fageha & Albinu, 2016). It is obvious that each of these groups of the public will have its own priorities and requirements for information provision, and therefore it is important that PR communication always tries to ensure a specific, precisely targeted two-way information flow. And this is exactly what modern digital communication technologies taking advantages of online PR allow.

Digital communication technologies allow companies to effectively use both classic and proven, previously only printed, forms of communication and new forms for their online PR

communication. According to the degree of their innovativeness, online PR messages can be divided into two groups – traditional written and new modern audio-visual forms (Janouch, 2014). Classic written forms of online PR communication include (Rosokhata et al., 2020; Janouch, 2014):

- **press releases** intended to objectively and reliably convey to readers basic information (who, what, when, where, how and why) about phenomena or events that have (not) happened or will (not) happen. The structure of press releases is fixed in PR. Each of them should contain the title, place and date of issue as well as contact details (Karlicek, 2016).
- **articles** intended to provide a clear, factual and logical explanation of an idea, fact, phenomenon or event. They often describe the context, causes or consequences, classify and analyse data (Osvaldova et al., 2007).
- annual reports the purpose of annual reports is to provide comprehensive, balanced
 and comprehensive information on the development of the company's performance,
 activities and current economic status. In the Czech Republic, they are an official
 document that entities with audited financial statements are legally obliged to publish
 (Svoboda, 2009).
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports provide both positive and negative information about the impact of organisations' activities on society, the environment and the economy (Tetrevova, 2017; Hyrslova & Kubanova, 2015).
- questions and answers (Q&A) are a specific form of discussion where users ask questions and wait for a relevant answer. Some companies list this form of communication on their websites as a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) section. (Janouch, 2014; Prikrylova & Jahodova, 2010).

The following can be included in modern audio-visual forms of online PR communication: (Rosokhata et al., 2020; Janouch, 2014):

- **podcasts** these are audio recordings that users can listen to via digital streaming platforms (Janouch, 2014). The popularity of the podcast has grown extremely in recent years. This is probably because, unlike other forms of communication, the listener can receive the information presented here in a passive way while performing other activities. (Active radio, 2020).
- **videos** within online PR they can take various forms, e.g. tutorial, demonstration video, case study, interview, company video, etc. (Janouch, 2014). Each of the formats has a different recommended length (Gillespie, 2019).

PR messages should be presented in all forms that appear to be effective for the target audience. The communication must then be presented through the appropriate media. If the company chooses the wrong communication channels, the impact of the message may not be as originally intended (Janouch, 2014). Frequently used communication channels in online PR include websites (Rosokhata et al., 2020; Janouch, 2014), blogs (Rosokhata et al., 2020; Janouch, 2014) and social networks (Janouch, 2014).

Websites are the most important element of the organisation's online presentation (Prikrylova & Jahodova, 2010). They are intended to present information about the company, their products and activities (Janouch, 2014; Prikrylova & Jahodova, 2010). The number of pages and sections is at the discretion of each company; however, each website should include a homepage, general information about the company and contact details (Hornakova, 2012).

A blog is a type of website (Phillips & Young, 2009) where the content is presented in chronological order from newest post to oldest. There are three basic types of blogs – corporate, product and branded. Company blogs are used to publish everything related to the company, such as news, various announcements, but it also includes the publication of various textual and audio-visual materials for products. Product blogs are designed to promote and sell a specific product or service. Brand blogs are used to market and promote the brand in new business markets and with new customers (Byron & Broback, 2008).

Social networking sites, which have become an absolute hit in recent years (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016), are used by around 3.5 billion users worldwide (Statista Research Department, 2021). The huge advantage is that they allow easy and fast communication, sharing information, photos, videos, etc. with other users from around the world. They also bring users up-to-date information, allow them to build or change their own identity, create a community of people with the same interests and opinions, educate, refine and expand knowledge, etc. (Losekoot & Vyhnankova, 2019; Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009). Today, there is already an inexhaustible number of social networks that use various communication tools or focus on specific (interest) groups (Frey, 2011). The five most popular social networks used in online PR on the Czech B2B market are Facebook (87%), LinkedIn (62%), YouTube (54%), Instagram (34%) and Twitter (10%) (B-inside, 2020).

The paper presents the results of an analysis of the current utilisation of various digital forms of PR communication on the official websites of chemical companies in the Czech Republic and evaluates the connection of monitored websites with other modern communication channels, such as popular social networks. The subject of the analysis were all chemical companies associated in the Association of Chemical Industry of the Czech Republic, which represents more than 70% of production from the chemical, pharmaceutical, petrochemical and plastics and rubber industries in the Czech Republic, being thus the largest Czech organisation of its kind. The following chapters describe the research methodology and present the results, on the basis of which recommendations are formulated for streamlining the online PR communication of the investigated chemical companies.

2. Methodology

The starting point of the research was a systematic literary search of both printed and Internet sources. The literature search was followed by the collection of primary data. Primary data were obtained using content analysis. Data collection was performed from March to April 2021.

The official websites of the chemical companies associated in ACI CR were the subject of the analysis. Only enterprises that are engaged in at least one chemical production of the 19+, 20+, 21+ or 22+ NACE classification category in their main or secondary activity were included

in the database. With the help of the online register of economic entities, 54 companies were included in the basic database in this way. For selected companies, their official websites were subsequently identified using the official ACI CR website and Google search engines.

The analysis of the website first focused on the following sub-areas – identifying the basic characteristics of the surveyed companies (number of employees, year of establishment); verifying the existence of key elements of their website (homepage, general information about the company, contact details). Due to the importance of the Responsible Care (RC) initiative in the chemical industry, information on their membership in this organisation was added to the basic characteristics of the surveyed companies, including verification of the validity of the relevant certificate. The information was obtained through the official RC website.

Subsequently, the research focused on answering the following research questions:

- What are the most frequently used types of written and audio-visual forms of online PR communication in the surveyed companies?
- What other online communication channels are referred to on the websites of the surveyed companies?
- Are there any differences in the level of use of the examined forms of communication and communication channels, depending on the various characteristics of the surveyed companies?

To determine the results of an analysis of the differences in the level of use of the examined forms of communication and communication channels, depending on the various characteristics of the surveyed companies, the χ -test (chi-square test) was used. If the basic test conditions were not met, an exact Monte Carlo significance estimate was used (χ mc). Yates's correction was applied to 2x2 tables. After establishing statistically significant differences, post hoc tests were performed to reveal more detailed information about the difference. All tests were performed at a 95% confidence level.

Statistical data processing was performed using Microsoft Office Excel and IBM SPSS 24 software.

3. Results

3.1. Basic Characteristics of the Surveyed Companies

The primary analysis of the basic characteristics of the surveyed companies (a total of 54 manufacturing companies in the chemical industry) showed that the surveyed companies can be classified into three categories – small companies with 10 to 49 employees (13%); medium-sized enterprises with employees in the range of 50-249 (54%) and large enterprises with more than 250 employees (33%). Based on the date of establishment of the surveyed companies, it was found that the research sample consists of 56% of companies established between 1972 and 1999, 33% of companies established in the first decade of the 21st century and 11% of enterprises established in 2010 or later. At the time of the research, 76% of the surveyed entities were registered for the voluntary RC initiative, 71% of which had a currently valid certificate, comprising 54% of the total number of surveyed companies.

Subsequently, it was found that all surveyed companies have created an official corporate website, which in all cases contains all three basic recommended elements of the website – home page, general information about the company and contact details.

3.2. Degree of Presentation of Various forms of Online PR Communications in the Surveyed Companies

In the first phase, a detailed analysis of the company's website focused on determining the degree of presentation of various written forms of online PR communications, i.e. press releases, articles, annual reports, CSR reports and questions and answers. During the data collection, it was found that a large number of companies uses the news section to publish information about events in the company and its surroundings, and therefore it was included among the examined written forms of communication. The results are shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Presence of individual written forms of PR communication on the websites of the surveyed companies

Figure 1 shows that the most widely used form of online PR written communication is the news section (85%), which allows the company to quickly and concisely inform the public about what is happening in the company and its surroundings. Their structure often oscillates between a press release and an article. By contrast, the least used tool is the "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) section (7%). The low interactivity of the researched sites is evident here.

In connection with the ever-growing popularity of the corporate social responsibility issue, it was an interesting finding that a relatively small number of the surveyed companies (28%) publish CSR reports on their websites. It seems that the reason may be the fact that from the point of view of companies it is often enough to share information about their social responsibility activities in other parts of the website, e.g. in annual reports or on the "environment" tabs, etc. Our research has confirmed this assumption. It turned out that less than a third (16) companies have a "Social Responsibility" or "Sustainability" tab on the main page of their website, another 13% of companies have this information available in tabs such as "About Us", "About the Company", "Our Policy" etc. The remaining 56% of companies do not explicitly mention sustainability, resp. social responsibility on their websites, but inform about selected aspects of corporate social responsibility – such as ecology, quality, etc.

Furthermore, the presence of audio-visual forms of online PR communication – videos (e.g. business tours/field trips in the company, description of the history and its operation, acknowledgements by the company director) and podcasts was ascertained on the official websites of the surveyed companies. It turned out that audio-visual forms of online PR communication are still not the standard for the companies surveyed. While less than half of companies (48%) have published videos, none of the surveyed production companies publish

podcasts on their websites, despite their being, according to published research (Active radio, 2020), a very popular form of communication.

3.3. Interconnection between Communication Channels

The final part of the website analysis focused on finding out the current state of interconnection between individual communication channels, or the existence of click-through possibility between websites, blogs and social networks. The analysis revealed that only two companies (4%) provide a link to the blog on their own website, doing so thereto only in a fictitious way as bookmarks only redirect users to another part of the official website. By contrast, links to social networks are almost a standard issue on companies' websites. The location of links to social networks within the examined sites is evident from Figure 2.

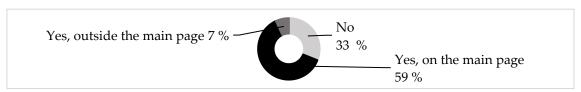


Figure 2: Presence of links to social networks on the websites of the surveyed companies

Figure 2 shows that links to social networks can be found on the official websites of 66% of the companies surveyed. Less than 2/3 (59%) provide them directly on the main page. This can be assessed positively, as it undoubtedly increases the probability of potential visits thereto. Somewhat striking is the finding that 33% of the companies surveyed do not link to any social network on their website. It is obvious that a relatively large group of surveyed companies does not yet fully appreciate the importance of modern communication channels for corporate PR, which can significantly undermine their desired image of modernity, innovation and flexibility.

Given the current development of social networks and the ever-increasing interest in targeting stakeholders through them, it was analysed in more detail which specific social networks the surveyed companies link to on their websites. Namely, the links to social networks that are currently most frequently used on the Czech B2B market were monitored, i.e. Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter (B-Inside, 2020). If there was a link to another social network on the website, it was included in the "other" category. The results are summarised in Figure 3.

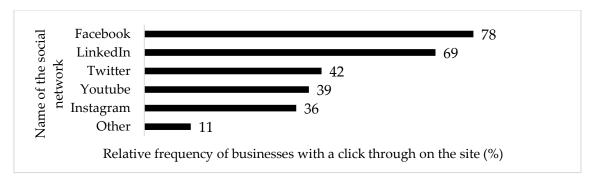


Figure 3: Presence of links to individual social networks on the websites of the surveyed companies

Figure 3 shows that the most used social network in the monitored companies is Facebook, which according to public research is one of the most popular (Statista Research

Department, 2021; Wozniak, 2015) and therefore it can be considered appropriate of the surveyed companies to prefer it. Not surprisingly, most of the businesses surveyed link to LinkedIn. It is understood as an important professional network connecting employers with job seekers and thus making it easier for companies to find their potential employees (Frey, 2011). It should be noted that current trends in the use of social networks need to be carefully monitored, as the preferences of social network users change and evolve quite dynamically. It is interesting that 11% of the surveyed companies have published a link to other than the most preferred social networks. Specifically, these are the social networks Vimeo, Google+, Vkontakte and Xing.

3.4. Differences in the Levels of Use of Different Forms of Online PR Communication and Links to Other Online PR Channels Depending on the Characteristics of the Surveyed Companies

As part of the analysis of the results, it seemed interesting to analyse the differences in the levels of use of researched forms of online PR communication and links to other PR communication channels depending on the identified characteristics of the surveyed companies, i.e. depending on the size, age and degree of involvement in the RC initiative.

No statistically significant differences were found when monitoring the differences in the levels of use of the examined variables according to the size of the company in terms of the number of employees. As regards the year of establishment, there was only one statistically significant difference, namely the presence of the FAQ section on the website $(\chi mc = 8.640; sig = 0.020)$ (see Figure 4).

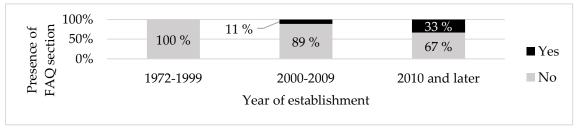


Figure 4: Differences in the presence of the FAQ section on the websites of the surveyed companies according to the year of establishment

The results revealed that younger companies are more likely to use the FAQ section in online PR communication than older companies.

Other interesting information was provided by the testing of variables depending on the membership of companies in the RC initiative and subsequently according to the current validity of the relevant certificate. In relation to the membership of companies in the RC, only one statistically significant difference was demonstrated, namely in the presence of information on social responsibility, or sustainability on the website of the surveyed companies (χ mc = 8.640; sig = 0.044) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 shows that RC members report on sustainability on the web more often and comprehensively than non-membership companies.

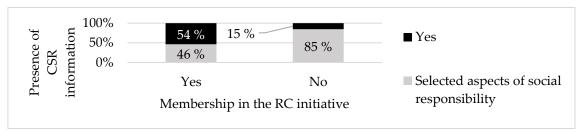


Figure 5: Differences in the presentation of CSR/sustainability information on the websites of the surveyed companies according to the membership in RC

Depending on the validity of the RC certificate, statistically significant differences were again identified in the presence of a tab informing about CSR, or sustainability (χ mc = 9.631; sig = 0.047) and also in the publication rate of CSR reports (χ mc = 9.078 sig = 0.010). The obtained data are summarised in Figures 6 and 7.

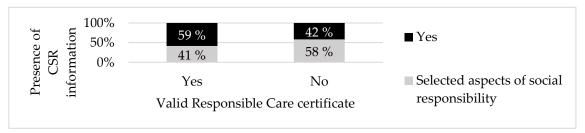


Figure 6: Differences in the presence of CSR/sustainability information on the websites of the surveyed companies according to the validity of the RC certificate

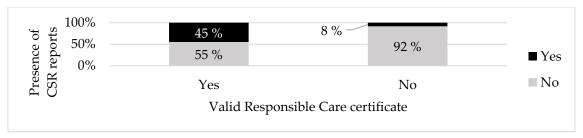


Figure 7: Differences in the presence of CSR reports on the websites of the surveyed companies according to the validity of the RC certificate

The above graphs (Figures 6 and 7) show that companies without a currently valid RC certificate mainly focus only on some selected aspects of social responsibility (58%), logically publishing less CSR reports than companies with a valid certificate. The given statistically significant differences were also confirmed by post hoc tests.

4. Discussion

Online PR communication is certainly a very current and important topic, as it allows companies to easily and effectively address not only customers but also the general public. A wide range of tools and forms of online PR communication can be, if suitably combined, an interesting way to pass on the necessary information to the target group and at the same time to establish and deepen the mutual relationship. Nevertheless, it seems that some companies, especially in the industrial market, are still lagging behind as for initiatives in this area of PR. Our research also aimed to find out the current state in the issue of using various tools and means of modern digital PR in chemical companies.

The results of the research show that most of the surveyed companies apply a more conservative method of PR communication in the online environment, where the main fundamental shortcoming can be seen in the lack of space for possible dialogue with stakeholders. As regards written forms of online PR communications, companies most often use the News and Press Releases sections. In the case of audio-visual forms, video communication is preferred, but it is only used on less than half of the websites examined. Modern forms of online PR communication are used only sporadically here, specifically it is only the FAQ section, which only historically younger companies have included in their communication. While it can be assumed that chemical companies, often operating exclusively in B2B markets, certainly traditionally prefer direct contact (personal, telephone, etc.), especially with customers, the dialogue with other stakeholder groups, especially the general public, should be available through an online environment where official corporate websites play an irreplaceable role.

Another proof of the more conservative online PR communication of the surveyed companies is the low willingness to publish information on today's very current CSR issues on the web. Only a minority comprehensively communicates data on their social responsibility; less than 2/3 of the surveyed companies publish only partial, selected aspects on the website in this area, which can be considered insufficient. The research exposed an interesting fact that companies that participated in the voluntary RC initiative have published information about CSR and publish separate CSR reports on their website more often than companies without membership. It can be therefore concluded that joining the RC allows for an easier transition from solving only selected areas of social responsibility to a full-fledged CSR concept.

The initiative of companies in providing links to other online PR communication channels on their websites can be evaluated more positively. While only two surveyed companies link to a blog, almost 70% of the surveyed companies provide a link to social networks on their website. We can therefore deduce an effort to follow modern trends, as evidenced by the selection of presented CIS. The most presented as well as the most popular is Facebook, which can be found in 78% of companies with published links to the social network sites. The second most popular social network is LinkedIn (69%), as also confirmed by the research of B-Inside (2020). Twitter ranked third in our survey (42%), while it was YouTube in the B-Inside survey. Twitter finished fifth with 10% (B-Inside, 2020).

It is obvious that the companies surveyed are trying to use their websites for online PR communication, however, we can see a huge potential to improve and streamline it. Based on the obtained data and the results of the analysis, the following recommendations can be proposed to the companies surveyed:

- **clearly set priorities and communication goals in the field of online PR** and adapt any further communication strategy accordingly.
- **conduct a survey of corporate website visitors** to determine their satisfaction with existing content and user friendliness and provide suggestions for improvement.

- **update the existing website design** due to the often outdated look and the lack of responsive display components on mobile devices of various sizes.
- provide comprehensive information about socially responsible activities on the company's website, thereby supporting, among other things, the company's competitiveness and reputation.
- introduce new modern and interactive forms of online PR communication and thus create, for example, blogs, podcasts or a FAQ section, by which the company can attract even hard-to-reach groups of the public and thus secure an interesting competitive advantage in the field of communication.
- create modern profiles on social networks and publish links thereto on the website in order to establish other high-quality communication channels that can be used in areas other than online PR communication.

5. Conclusion

Online PR is becoming an integral part of modern marketing communication. The interactivity enabled by new communication technologies has traditionally been used mainly in the consumer market. The industrial market seems to be a bit of a latecomer, yet current trends in online PR communication are beginning to be used to advantage here as well. The research we have presented shows the situation in this area for chemical manufacturing companies in the Czech Republic.

The results revealed that the majority of Czech companies with chemical products do not have well-developed online PR communication. The companies mainly use traditional written forms of online PR communication on their official websites, such as various news in the news section or press releases. Audio-visual content in the form of corporate videos is present on the websites of just under half of the companies surveyed. The neglect of the benefits of web interactivity is evidenced by the very low representation of the FAQ section, where only historically younger companies included it in their online communication. The presentation of information about the company's CSR activities is also far from ideal. Less than 1/3 of the surveyed companies deal comprehensively with CSR on their websites, while most of them offer information only on selected CSR topics, especially in the area of environmental responsibility. However, research has shown that those companies that are involved in the voluntary RC initiative report their CSR activities more comprehensively on the web or even publish separate CSR reports more often than companies without membership. Although modern audio-visual forms of online PR communication, such as podcasts, are only sporadically encountered on the websites surveyed, the fact that 70% of the enterprises surveyed provide a link to their official company social media profiles on their websites indicates a certain positive development of online PR communication. Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are among the most preferred by the chemical companies surveyed.

The results of the research allowed us to propose the following recommendations to the surveyed companies, which should contribute to the effectiveness of their online PR communication:

- modify the content and modernize the appearance of the website in accordance with visitor requirements;
- provide comprehensive information about socially responsible activities on the company's website;
- introduce new modern and interactive forms of online PR messages;
- create modern social media profiles and publish links thereto on the web.

We believe that these recommendations could have a positive effect, especially in the development of important public relations, improving the company's image and market position. Although the research had its limitations – a relatively small number of companies surveyed and a focus only on the chemical industry – given the similar situation in communication in B2B markets, it can be assumed that the results could be applicable in other industries as well. However, this should be verified by follow-up research.

Conflict of interest: none

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