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Using benchmarking to evaluate public relations effectiveness through social media¹

Rationale

The raise of the network societies does not substitute our social need for hierarchies, or the need for economic exchange (despite its relative morality). The world “public” applied to the “network” (sphere or society) is meaningless, due to the desegregation of communities and formal groups that traditionally define all forms of public participation (cf. Castells 2010). As Castells notes (2010: 367): “The rise of communalism, in its different forms, weakens the principle of political sharing on which democratic politics is based”. *Informational politics*, the concept launched by Castells to describe the dissolution of the political sphere into an undetermined media sphere, engage citizens in a different use of public power and deepen the crisis of the contemporary democracy. As far as public relations are concerned, their position is encumbered by the presence of numerous public codes (economic, moral, linguistic, cultural, communitarian,

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inter-personal), being therefore subject of perpetual transformation. In this context, the discipline no longer applies to a linear process of communication, being transformed into a multi-channel and multi-agent risk communication (networks, communities, platforms).

Integrating social media in the corporate life seems to have relaxed the work climate, but communication duties become more complicated than ever. As an example, the Deloitte Report from 2009, dedicated to the analysis of the reputational risks at the workplace, pointed to the fact that using social media might cause numerous ethical pressures and reputational issues. The public relations specialist's role changed from an *éminence grise* (grey eminence) to a business consultant who becomes accountable for the financial performance of his/her organisation. This change is not only reflected in the closer participation of public relations specialists to decisions of marketing departments, but also in the fact that, being business strategists, they use their ability to connect business and communication objectives.

The development of online communication platforms generated an impressive and uncontrolled amount of information. In order to respond to this challenge, the public relations corporate functions had been used to adapt to the new modes of communicating. Many professionals have drawn attention to the

fact that public relations specialists have not reacted promptly enough to the challenges of online communications therefore they reached an impasse in 2009, which was quickly overcome in 2010 (European Media Landscape Report, 2011). Incorporating technical details about how search engines, blogging and microblogging platforms, webdesign and optimizations work, and acquire knowledge on the online monitoring instruments represent new requirements for public relations specialists. This *conversational competence* is conditional for managing the overwhelming user generated content that surpasses the media content created by public relations people.

The objective of this paper is to apply and convene upon a set of *performance indicators* to evaluate the best use of online media for public relations campaigns, so as to identify what factors contribute to improving the organisational capacity of companies to alleviate risks and risk communication through social media. The corpus of data was collected through an analysis of eight online campaigns of national scale conducted between 2009 and 2011. The cases had been selected against the following criteria: degree of integration of social media specific channels; coherent, identifiable strategy that was aligned to the general organisational strategy; high visibility in the national online sphere; having involved influencers from this area;

having set records in online coverage in the national context; having proved to be creative in building and implementing online campaigns; acting interdisciplinary in their conception and strategy; having obtained quantifiable reactions from the targeted public; having been recognised successful campaigns by the public relations practitioners' body; having consolidated the company's reputation by implementing specific campaigns.

The authors applied *functional benchmarking* as a process and method to achieve a comparative picture of the corporate *conversational* competence in dealing with critical issues. An assessment grid was conceived and operationalized in order to select the comparable processes. This grid included both *quantitative* indicators (number of social media indications, quantity of user generated content, traffic data, etc.), as well as *qualitative* indicators to measure: the degree of *innovation* in public relations processes (strategic vision, complexity of tactics, the influence of involved entities, the pertinence of channels), the contribution to increasing organisational *visibility* (reach, media coverage and media performance, post-campaign public audits, etc.), and also the *reputational* strengths of the company (brand equities, level of public trust and public's closeness to organisation, etc.).

The benchmarking method

The reason for choosing the benchmarking method, which is usually used to analyse project management results and performance, is due to the fact that all of the online campaigns which we have examined were initially created as company projects, confined to a certain period of time and with clearly defined objectives. We also considered benchmarking as one of the methods we would recommend to evaluate public relations campaigns, not only because qualitative and quantitative results can be mapped out, but also for its application in analysing holistic processes, in the examination of involved parties and relevant factors, as well as for its effects on the continuous adjustments of the organisational strategies according to the publics' inputs. Just as Dennis Bromley considered, we think also that benchmarking is defined as a surveyor's mark indicating a point of reference for levelling (Dennis Bromley, 2002) and we are confident in this method's utility, as „benchmarking involved the process analysis, not just the results, identifying disparities between the obtained and the predicted performance, and offering information concerning the way these inequalities can be eliminated, after analysing the processes” (Marinescu, 2007: 195). James Arrowsmith, Keith Sisson and Paul Marginson (2004) propose a classification of the diachronic usage of using various types of benchmarking by

companies. They consider that benchmarking has been developed in four stages: „Comparative statistical activity“, „Competitive benchmarking“, „Generic benchmarking“ and „Strategic benchmarking“. The authors consider that this particular last stage emerged in the 1990s, closely linked to the concept of *learning organisations* and ”focuses on the more qualitative driving forces behind successful organizations, including leadership, core competencies and the management of change.” (pp. 312-313).

In the present paper, we are interested in applying this form of *strategic benchmarking*, because public relations campaigns can be analysed as an organisational learning processes. It is important to clarify at this point the purpose of using benchmarking in our research project. In a traditional way, as we have already stated, the performance benchmarking has been used by organisations to evaluate their overall performance; by applying this type of benchmarking on public relations campaigns, we actually analyse the impact of these campaigns on organisational reputation. At this point, we are aware of the fact that, just as Dennis Bromley stated, „the concept of a reputational benchmark is metaphorical. It implies setting up a standard (ideal or average) reputation against which other reputations are compared.” (Dennis Bromley, 2002: 37).

Our objectives correlated to the use of the benchmarking method

are the following:

1. Identifying common processes in the conception and implementation of the eight selected online public relations campaigns.
2. Determining the degree of accomplishment of the planned outcomes.
3. Evaluating the impact of these in terms of *visibility*, *reputation* and *efficacy*.
4. Defining the methods of measuring the impact, aspect which we consider essential for the evolution of online public relations.
5. Identifying the level of maturity of online public relations practice in Romania.

While implementing this method we ran across some obstacles pertaining to the incipient stage of online public relations. We must also consider that the degree of innovation and constant change in the online communication field will always generate new challenges, a reason why we emphasized in this project the need for continuous monitoring and analysis of online public relations campaigns.

Using online media for PR

In order to get an insight from the communicators, we used the *Digital Marketing Report 2011*, prepared by Evensys, a

specialised company in public relations, marketing, advertising and communication events. In this study, 19 online communication specialists were questioned about the yearly trends in their professional field. The unanimous opinion was that in the years to come the campaigns will certainly have an online component and clients will start to ask for more specific evaluation reports, as they will require measuring the effectiveness of these campaigns. The cited specialists also referred to the qualitative evolution of online campaigns and the involvement in social dialogue, which is meant to consolidate the organisational reputation. Another revealed tendency was the qualitative improvement of the content generated by communication specialists, on behalf of organisations, to which we can add „social media’s transition from ”hype/buzz” to a performance based environment” (p. 5), as Marius Fanache, Managing Partnet la Media Cafe, states. The study mentions which are the most visible brands in the online Romanian environment, as follows: Dacia, BCR, eMag, Ursus, Borsec, Petrom, Pro TV, Dorna, BRD and Rum Chocolate (Ciocolata cu Rom). The same report offers findings about the number and the profiles of research agencies and companies as well as of the online advertising and publishing networks. In Romania there are 16 publishers and 54 digital agencies, to which we can add numerous programming and online research companies, as well

as other firms which work in the online environment. We can conclude that the community of online communication practitioners is quite large, a situation that implies a high degree of competitiveness and a demand for an increased qualitative performance. In order to get a better image of the Romanian public relations practitioners, we have also used data from the Public Relations Report 2011 (PR Forum Report, 2011) made by Evensys. Managers of the most important public relations agencies in the country expressed a series of opinions that all converge to the same main idea: the fact that „in 2011 we will see a more powerful integration of PR with other communication disciplines and with marketing” (p. 5), and the fact that ”the emphasis falls on the quality of corporate communication campaigns that involve reputation management” (p. 6), integrating offline communication with the online one or the ”digitalisation”, as Hortensia Năstase, Managing Partner GollinHarris Bucharest, called it. Sorina Savu, Senior Partner at Premium Communication, sums up all of these elements and identifies a main element in the Romanian’s public relations specialists’ perspectives: „Social media can be a great opportunity for PR, the only discipline concerned with two-way communication, with dialogue. The ball is in our court.” (p. 7)

Selected campaigns and benchmarks

The following campaigns have been analysed: „Life in 3” (“Life in 3”) of Romtelecom company, „Rediscover Romania” (“Rediscover Romania”) of Petrom corporation, „The Money School” of Romanian Commercial Bank (BCR), “Real Football” and “Metropotam Interbelic” of Timișoreana brand beer, “UEFA Champions League” of Heineken brand beer, „The LH5000 TV launch of LG Romania” and “The LED 3D TV launch” (“Lansarea televizorului LED 3D”) by Samsung. The strategies of these campaigns were very diverse. „Life in 3” (“Life in 3”) was created as campaign meant to integrate Romtelecom amidst its young public, „Rediscover Romania” (“Rediscover Romania”) was meant to revive Romanians’ interest for internal tourism and consolidate Petrom’s image, „Money School” was launched as a financial education program for BCR’s public, „Real Football” (“True Football”) and „Interwar Metropotam” (“Metropotam Interbelic”) focused on associating certain values with the Timișoreana brand and “UEFA Champions League”, „The LH5000 TV from LG Romania launch” (“Lansarea televizorului LH5000 de la LG in România”) and “The LED 3D TV launch” (“Lansarea televizorului LED 3D”) were developed around the main objective of obtaining visibility for the promoted products. The selection of campaigns from years 2009 and 2010 was due to the fact that we noticed a significant growth of online campaigns,

both quantitatively and qualitatively. The year 2010 was also significant for the most visible online communication campaigns that were created and implemented so far in Romania.

In the following chapters we shall present the categories and the benchmarks that resulted from the comparative analysis.

A. The Strategy. Benchmarked against organisational goals attained in the campaigns

The degree of openness of the organisations towards online communication depends on the *internal structure* of the organisation, its *profile* and the target publics' profile. IT organisations were the fastest to incorporate online communication strategies in their campaigns. Moreover, starting an online campaign is considered a strategic advantage, proving the technological capabilities of the company and respecting its organisational mission. Romtelecom, LG and Samsung are appropriate examples in this case. Organisational access to the publics has been facilitated and benefited from the credibility given by the transfer of reputation between the company and the *influencers*, who become important mediators for organisational reputation and play the roles traditionally assigned to public relations practitioners.

The organisations' aim was to integrate all communication components, both online and offline. At this point the interdisciplinary elements of public relations come into play. Integrating marketing, advertising, customer service, search engine optimisation, etc. has to be accounted for building a strategy, as the online environment calls for a consistent, coordinated and coherent organisational presence. Based on the integrated approach of channels and planning communication tactics, we could notice that broad campaigns are the most successful. From a territorial point of view, national campaigns, some even including expats, such as "Rediscover Romania", are the best choice and can lead to a successful campaign. Short campaigns, with short-term objectives, have created momentary involvement through creative tactics and have obtained high visibility. This is the case of "UEFA Champions League" from Heineken, „The LH5000 TV from LG Romania launch”, „Interwar Metropotam” or “The LED 3D TV launch”.

Creative tactics such as recreating a historical space online, based on the urban reality of the state capital, as in „Interwar Metropotam”, or using the bloggers' creativity to communicate with personalized messages the campaign's objectives, like the case of The LH5000 TV from LG Romania launch”, were used. We should also mention that, at the moment of their creation, all of eight campaigns were creative and challenging in terms of

their objectives and goals, which they accomplished and even exceeded, as was the case of BCR's „The Money School”.

B. The Length. Benchmarked against the best campaign case

While analysing the eight chosen campaigns, we noticed that the length of an online campaign starts from a month and can last up to eight months, according to its degree of complexity and objectives. The campaigns that are designed for a product's launch, like the ones for the LG LH5000 and Samsung LED 3D TVs, or those that aim to momentarily promote an initiative, like the „Interwar Metropotam” campaign, lasted for only a month and their most visible moment was the starting point. A transitional stage to the next campaigns, duration wise, is BCR's „The Money School”. This project is a particular case, both in terms of actual duration and time management. The campaign had three stages: raising the public's interest, launching the project and implementing the contest. The first month was allocated to the campaign's launch and the contest's launch, process which involved opinion leaders, namely five bloggers. At the same time, work was being done for building a community for people who were interested in managing personal finances and for creating a communication axis aimed at educating the target public about this activity. Constant and

consistent communication is more appreciated by the public than a fragmented and momentary one. Consequently, an online campaign's performance does not rely solely on its length, but more on its *rhythm* (or pace). The more regularly the public receives information, the more receptive it becomes and the more aware of the involvement of the organisation it is.

Thus we can assert that the performance standard for an online campaign's length is two months (not including preparatory research and planning stages). This period allows a constant information flow, without causing overexposure.

C. The Campaign Axis. Benchmarked against highest levels of public awareness

The eight campaigns that we investigated revealed that the objectives of online public relations campaigns are divided, the same way they are in offline ones, in informational and motivational categories. Informational objectives directly influence a company's visibility, while motivational ones affect organisational reputation. An online public relations campaign's performance is given by the combination of these two factors.

The biggest impact on the targeted public was of those campaigns that generated *experiences*, being driven by *motivational* objectives. Their form varied from objectives that

aimed to associate the organisation's image with certain values, as the case of „Real Football”, to increasing organisational reputation through association with relevant influencers, as in the approach of „The LH5000 TV from LG Romania launch” or to create a community around the services or products of the company, as „The Money School” tried to do. The standard for defining a campaign's objectives should definitely emphasise motivational ones and also include a set of information objectives that can ensure the necessary visibility for the campaign's tactics. They also need to have a concise and precise formulation, in order to facilitate their tracking and evaluation during the dedicated stage. All these elements were wonderfully exemplified in “The Money School” campaign, created by the Rogalski Grigoriu agency for BCR (Romanian Commercial Bank).

D. The Tactics. Benchmarked against the most sustainable changes obtained throughout the campaigns

Identifying a performance standard related to articulating online public relations tactics is a complex process. After implementing this benchmarking, we identified a series of elements that lead to an online campaign's performance, as follow: *creativity* is a factor that helps stimulate the public's interest and involvement, using *characters* that are close to the target public's profile able

to broadcast the campaign's messages, *interconnecting* the communication channels, implementing a *feedback* system and motivating the *creation of user generated content*. Associating with a well-known online brand, as happened in the „Interwar Metropolitam” campaign, was also a tactic that helped ensuring a success, as this collaboration was forged in a creative way and values of both brands were compatible.

Online public relations campaign needs more than a commentary system in order to facilitate the broadcast of content items across channels. That is the reason why the observed campaigns offered options such as embedding a “Like Box” on their websites that would allow users to become fans of their Facebook page directly from the official website's pages, or a share button that could offer those who were interested the possibility of posting on their own Facebook profile a small piece of text, a video or a photograph; or a “Like” button that could allow the target audience to manifest its appreciation for an element inside the campaign, or even a Twitter widget that would post the last updates on the company's account or the last tweet in the campaign's hashtag. The Facebook press conference that was implemented for “The LED 3D TV launch” for Samsung was among the most innovative tactics used in Romanian online campaigns. Being the first event of its type in

the country, the conference attracted a great deal of public, among which many influencers, who afterwards supported the campaign on their blogs and social media accounts.

Another important aspect about building an online campaign is distinctly marking the official social media company accounts so they are not mistaken for other accounts, created by other users. Using the company logo is no longer sufficient and must be accompanied by correct information published in the “Info” section, next to a link to the company’s official website. Not only bloggers and influencers are involved in campaigns because they know the targeted publics, but also *local cultures* and communities. This is the case of „Interwar Metropotam” campaign, which included the *urban culture website* Metropotam.ro in the project for the Timișoreana brand. The campaign included, among other tactics, creating a historical version of the website, with news from the inter-bellum period of Bucharest. The campaign relied on the credibility of this website within its community of loyal readers.

As for the channels, all the campaigns we analysed had a *multi-channel approach* to the online environment, meant to build and consolidate the organization’s presence in a coherent and unitary manner. The rationale for this approach lies in the way Internet users utilise the technological platforms that are at their disposal. The interconnectivity of these platforms, which are very

accessible, makes it increasingly easy to broadcast messages from one channel to another. This constitutes both an advantage for organizations and a challenge, because the company might not have an official presence on certain channels.

E. Publics, endorsers and campaign architects.

Benchmarked against the best strategic orientation.

All eight campaigns were created by the communication, marketing or public relations departments of the client organisations. The public relations practitioners from these departments worked together with public relations agencies, such as Rogalski Grigoriu, Borțun-Olteanu or 2ActivePR, with digital agencies, such as Webstyler, Kinecto, iLeo or FourHooks, but also with influencers from the target areas, such as bloggers Vali Petcu (Zoso), Bobby Voicu, Cristian Manafu, Victor Kapra or Simona Tache. Interactive and digital agencies can deliver complex online campaigns, starting from designing the concept to the implementation stage, as was the case for “The Money School”, “Interwar Metropotam”, “Real Football” and “Life in 3”. These active relationships between organisations, agencies and influencers represent an interesting alliance. We consider that the way these parties work together and the way the information flow functions between agencies, consultants and the organisation are two of the factors that will shape the future online public relations practice. Also, these relationships

are the ones that could lead to creating theoretical fundamentals for this emerging field of online PR.

An essential detail that must be taken into consideration when segmenting the publics is related to the overlap of interests of the publics of social networks. According to *Who's Getting Social* study from 2010, Hi5 and Facebook have an overlap of 78%, Facebook and LinkedIn overlap 22% and Facebook and Twitter cross 14%. This is an unavoidable fact, since the Romanian social networks users have, on average, 4 social media accounts. Incorporating this detail in the communication strategy is considerably important in order to avoid overexposure. In the case of the "Money School" we can say that this aspect was not taken into consideration, creating a slight informational overload on the channels that were used in the campaign. The same thing is valid for "Rediscover Romania", that took over Facebook and Twitter during the campaign, by posting pictures, videos and promoting blog articles on these two social networks, and also by using the "#throughromania" ("#prinromania") hashtag. The campaign that managed to communicate in a personalised, differentiated, unobtrusive way with the targeted publics was the "Life in 3" campaign, that separated the publics of the actual show from the endorser Bianca Albu's audience, managing to involve the public at a deeper level than the simple momentary interaction. The

character became an important part of the Romanian bloggers' community, having a pervasive presence.

The performance standard for involving online influencers in a campaign depends on the *number of influencers involved and on their measurable impact over their publics*. Based on the Romanian experience, we recommend an optimal number of *three influencers* who should be involved in an online public relations campaign, chosen from different professional orientations, all relevant to the organization, thus covering a wider target audience.

The online environment should be approached through the means of a **strategic planning** effort, the same as any other communication environment. Among the benefits of creating an online communication strategy lies the following: increased impact, reaching objectives with better accuracy, identifying environment trends, better issues management and gaining insight into the target public. Online communication possesses the advantage to be able to manage not only a reactive perspective, but also a proactive one which enables communicators to actively manage feedback. Taking into consideration that organisational involvement in the online environment is a relatively recent one, we can emphasise that the organisation can and should learn from every online communication campaign it creates. This learning process has

also implications that affect organisational resources, from human to financial resources.

Conclusion

The analysis of these eight campaigns revealed real difficulties in establishing performance standards for evaluating online communication campaigns, because public relations practitioners do not constantly use a series of key performance indicators (which they do not even share), and this fact constitutes an obstacle in creating benchmarks against the best practices in the field. Moreover, we could not distinguish a direct connection between the online communication campaigns and a company's financial performance, which increased that corporation's productivity. This observation is also supported by Romanian online communication practitioners such as Ligia Adam, who stated in the interview she gave us that "value is hard to measure because it relates to the know-how of the environment and the time allocated to each project (and also innovative ideas, adapted and implemented in the online environment)." This is another reason for which a *Good Practice Guidebook* for online communication would prove to be both useful and a real necessity.

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