

Twitter: a Viable Marketing Tool for SMEs?

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Abstract

Purpose - The present research aims to explore whether Twitter is a tool that should be taken seriously by Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in their marketing strategies, taking the stance of SMEs – how they perceive, use and see the future of Twitter for their businesses. The research has three objectives: firstly, to explore how SMEs use Twitter in their marketing strategies; secondly, to explore their perception of Twitter's benefits/limitations as a marketing tool, compared to other social networks; and thirdly, to explore their plans for improvement/future use of Twitter in their marketing strategies.

Design/methodology/approach - Because the micro-blogging area is underexplored, especially from a business perspective, a qualitative-interpretivist-exploratory methodology has been chosen. The research method which will be utilized in the project is semi-structured one-to-one online synchronous interviews, conducted on a homogenous sample comprising 4-5 Romanian and British SMEs with around 2 employees from the marketing/PR departments of each company. The present paper comprises stage one of the project, which has been a pilot in-depth interview with a British SME, aimed to explore initial insights while testing the validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the research.

Findings - The present report only discusses the pilot findings, which are not definite conclusions but just provide guidance for further research, indicating whether the methodology/method/questions were suitable/useful and thus identifying new areas for further exploration. The interviewee's conclusion, also supported by the research findings, is that, although Twitter should not be viewed as "the be all and end all for our communications", it is still a critical platform to embark on, especially if companies want a chance to listen to/influence consumers' opinions.

Practical implications - In general, it is agreed that social media and Twitter can have as much benefits for the business in terms of networking, relationship and online branding opportunities as irreparable and costly damages caused by the negative electronic Word of Mouth (e-WOM). Consequently, the present project takes initiative towards a more clear understanding of how and what should be done, if anything, with models like Twitter as marketing tools.

Originality/value - Using social media and especially Twitter for marketing purposes is only a recent phenomenon, as it is mainly since 2008 that social networking sites exploded in user numbers and marketing applications. Therefore, there is limited academic research into this area and much of it is focused on the user side, with little known from the companies' perspective. Most information regarding Twitter has been based on best practice, industry trial and error, and a few research papers looking into how consumers perceive the micro-blogging tool. The business stance has been acknowledged as a significant gap in the literature, consequently demonstrating the value and originality of the present paper. Because social networking and especially micro-blogging is multi-faceted, the focus of this project has been Twitter as a word of mouth/ electronic word of mouth (WOM/ e-WOM) marketing tool, utilizing research proving the benefits/limitations of WOM/e-WOM for businesses.

Research limitations - The paper presents a qualitative study on the perceptions and uses of Twitter as a form of e-WOM marketing by small and medium-sized enterprises. These findings should be further explored in subsequent interviews, in order to compare perspectives, and even discover how Twitter can be used as a form of spreading commercial messages (for example, promotional codes) instead of simply informational messages. It would also be useful to explore companies that have encountered and dealt with negative e-WOM. Furthermore, since the present paper has been focusing on Twitter as a form of e-WOM marketing, further research could explore the potential of Twitter as a relationship marketing tool, as revealed by the research findings. Perspectives from B2C organizations or other countries could also be useful for a broader view of the Twitter area.

Keywords: Twitter, Marketing Strategies, SME, Media, WOM/e-WOM

Paper type: Research Paper

Introduction

2009 was the year when 800million monthly visitors thought “life wasn’t worth living unless it was documented on Facebook and Twitter” (Clark, 2009, p.6; The Economist, 2010). Easy-to-use technologies and sensible privacy control settings allowed social networks like Twitter, Facebook or Linked-in to provide a streamlined experience to an exploding number of users and a valuable tool to marketers, with 53% of them claiming to increase their social media investments even further in 2010 (Davidson, 2009).

However, out of all social media platforms, Twitter stands out, in terms of both characteristics and growth. Launched in 2006, Twitter gained most of its popularity as a micro-blogging tool in 2009, when it reached 58.5million users world-wide, a 949% increase since September 2008 (Schonfeld, 2009). The specificity of Twitter lies in its messages – tweets – that can have maximum 140 characters, with the default setting public, which means that the essence of events can be transmitted on a large scale across the network, instantaneously (Jansen et al., 2009). This made Twitter’s owner, practitioners and the few researchers in the field to define Twitter as “an information company” (The Economist, 2010, p.5) or a form of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication (Jansen et al., 2009; Zhao and Rossen, 2009), which is the online projection of traditional word-of-mouth (WOM). This is very important since WOM essentially represents “the process of conveying information from person to person” and it is becoming acknowledged as one of the most effective forms of marketing (Jansen et al., 2009, p.2169).

Twitter is a versatile tool, used for socio-political campaigns, citizen journalism and increasingly for marketing purposes, with companies like Dell reporting to have gained £1.9million from sales and cost savings via Twitter (Campaign, 2009; Davidson, 2009). Practitioners also predict that Twitter will play a major part in the 2010 social commerce phenomenon that could significantly affect business models online (Marsden, 2010). Nevertheless, there are numerous open questions and controversies related to Twitter’s actual business potential (Dorbian, 2010), especially due to little research (Zhao and Rossen, 2009), Return on Investment (ROI) measurement issues (Fisher, 2009) and a lack of strategic understanding and planning (Gunning, 2009); there are even critics questioning Twitter’s actual future (The Economist, 2010). Furthermore, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)* seem to have a more acute dilemma, since the lack of necessary resources, people and time have prevented most of them to experiment with Twitter (The Economist, 2010; Moran, 2010).

Out of all social media platforms, Twitter is one of the most controversial and outstanding networks, seeing praise for its spectacular 2008-2009 949% increase (Schonfeld 2009) and for its enormous untapped potential, especially in the electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and social commerce arenas (The Economist 2010; Jansen et al. 2009; Zhao and Rossen 2009; Marsden

* SMEs are defined by the European Commission as enterprises with less than 250 employees, and a turnover of less than €50 million (European Commission, 2010, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/sme/facts-figures-analysis/sme-definition/index_en.htm)

2010). Nevertheless, the model has also been questioned in terms of its future (The Economist 2010), and its business suitability (Dorbian 2010), with critics accusing the difficulty to understand Twitter and to measure results (Fisher 2009). The literature review completed in the previous part of the present research also concluded a severe lack of studies to explore the overall viability of Twitter for business purposes (Jansen et al. 2009) from companies' perspectives, especially small and medium-sized companies (SMEs[†]) (The Economist 2010; Moran 2010).

Consequently, the present research aims to explore whether Twitter is a tool that should be taken seriously by SMEs in their marketing strategies, taking the stance of SMEs – how they perceive, use and see the future of Twitter for their businesses. As informed by the identified literature gap, the research has three objectives:

1. To explore how SMEs use Twitter in their marketing strategies;
2. To explore their perception of Twitter's benefits/limitations as a marketing tool, compared to other social networks;
3. To explore their plans for improvement/future use of Twitter in their marketing strategies.

Because the micro-blogging area is underexplored, especially from a business perspective, a qualitative-interpretivist-exploratory methodology has been chosen. The research method which will be utilized in the project is semi-structured one-to-one online synchronous interviews, conducted on a homogenous sample (Daymon and Holloway 2002) comprising 4-5 Romanian and British SMEs with around 2 employees from the marketing/PR departments of each company.

Before the actual research project, a pilot interview has been conducted in order to gain prompting/probing skills, as the researcher was inexperienced in interviewing techniques (Bell 2005), and also to test whether the qualitative methodology, the interviewing method and the proposed questions (Appendix A) are suitable, logical and useful for answering the proposed aim/objectives, thus contributing to the trustworthiness of the research project; the researcher also asked for feedback from the interviewee, which will inform interviews in the main project.

Literature Review

Using social media and especially Twitter for marketing purposes is only a recent phenomenon, as it is mainly since 2008 that social networking sites exploded in user numbers and marketing applications. Therefore, there is limited academic research into this area (Zhao and Rossen, 2009; Jansen et al., 2009) and much of it is focused on the user side, with little known from the companies' perspective. However, there is a workable amount of research into the business and marketing benefits of WOM/ e-WOM, and, as previously discussed, Twitter has been recognized as a major representative of e-WOM (Jansen et al., 2009; The Economist, 2010; Trusov et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2007). Consequently, the literature that will be reviewed will deal first with the WOM phenomenon, and will then discuss the micro-blogging academic and industry studies available.

WOM

WOM was found as an important and effective marketing tool ever since the 1950s-1960s (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955; Dichter, 1966); however, these studies were frequently contested in more recent research, mainly because their inference methodology was considered less appropriate than an observational one (de Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Trusov, 2009). Because it is a form of

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communication initiated by independent actors, WOM is perceived as more reliable and trustworthy, therefore generally agreed as a strong influencer on decision-making and brand advocacy (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Brown et al., 2007; Dichter, 1966). Nevertheless, while some researchers believe it is “the most important and effective communications channel” (Keller, 2007, p.448), other academics are more reserved, mainly because WOM has two limitations.

Firstly, WOM is a complex concept, difficult to measure and understand (Trusov, 2009; Dellarocas, 2003; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004), and while some scientists propose a customer service-customer satisfaction-WOM-new customer acquisition link to make its benefits more quantifiable in terms of sales, profitability and cost savings (Wangenheim and Bayon, 2007; Tax et al., 1998), this pitfall still made many researchers reach contradictory conclusions in successive studies (Van den Bulte and Lilien, 2001 and 2003, cited in Trusov, 2009).

Secondly, engaging in brand WOM depends upon involvement with the product/service or purchase decision – consequently, WOM effects cannot be replicated across all product/service categories. These arguments made de Bruyn and Lilien (2008) to posit that there is actually very little known about the effects of WOM communication and therefore, a more moderate view of WOM benefits should be adopted, where offline WOM and traditional marketing complement, rather than compete, each other (Stephen and Galak, 2009).

e-WOM

Currently there are various online applications (online feedback mechanisms, viral marketing, social networking, blogging) that are a form of WOM, however, considering the speed, scale and ubiquity of the Internet, many researchers agree that the effects of e-WOM are more impactful, and even different, from those of offline WOM, favouring rapid product adoption or leading to increased sales and brand advocacy through solving product and customer problems faster and cost-effectively (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Dellarocas, 2003; Trusov, 2009; de Bruyn and Lilien, 2008; Jansen et al., 2009).

Consequently, rather than a complement, e-WOM could actually become a serious threat to traditional advertising models, since increasingly more people base their decisions on e-WOM in the contemporary fragmented landscape (Smith et al., 2007; Dellarocas, 2003; Godes and Mayzlin, 2004).

Of course, there is also the disadvantage that, if mishandled, negative e-WOM can spread at alarming rates, having the potential to ‘make or break’ a brand (Davidson, 2009). Moreover, the WOM measurement difficulties also translate in the online world (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004), especially since e-WOM implies even more conversations, with only 19% of them actually referring to brands (Jansen et al., 2009) – de Bruyn and Lilien (2008) or Dwyer (2007) propose that different measurement methods are needed for e-WOM, however, so far, there does not seem to be a straightforward solution and measuring ROI is still a major drawback in the adoption of e-WOM marketing tools such as social media (Fisher, 2009).

Another pitfall is that online environments can allow companies to pose as independent consumers, thus manipulating the conversations and eroding WOM’s primary advantage – credibility (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004; Brown et al., 2007); nevertheless, studies by Mayzlin (2004, cited in Godes and Mayzlin, 2004) and Smith et al. (2007) show that this is not an impediment in consumers still relying on e-WOM.

All the above-mentioned studies, however, focus more on WOM/e-WOM from the user perspective – motivations, mechanisms, and linkages – and only few infer, rather than explore, the business viewpoint. Researchers agree on a scarcity of studies exploring social networks as forms of e-WOM (Brown et al., 2007; Jansen et al., 2009; Zhao and Rossen, 2009); moreover, only one of the studies found by this research takes a more brand-related perspective.

The study conducted by Jansen et al. (2009) endeavors to understand micro-blogging not purely from a social view, but also from a commercial one. Nevertheless, their methodology only implies analyzing brand mentions in tweets. They consequently admit that the importance of Twitter as a form of e-WOM in marketing strategies should be tested taking a business stance.

Industry Controversies

As reviewed so far, the area of WOM/e-WOM communications is still relatively ambiguous; the social networking – micro-blogging and Twitter – arenas are even more under-researched – and not even industry views are helpful. Companies like Dell, Best Buy or Waterstones, having adopted Twitter as a marketing tool, reported benefits as described in the WOM/e-WOM sections (Moran, 2010; Davidson, 2009). Many articles agree that Twitter is still in its infancy, with a significant untapped potential for brands, and urge companies to embark now, when experimenting and mistakes are still allowed (Owen, 2009; Arnold, 2010).

Conversely, some practitioners believe the Twitter model is not so useful for business purposes (Dorbian, 2010), rather for “fermenting social revolutions” (Campaign, 2009, p.21), and claim that Twitter is only a hype (The Economist, 2010), with only 25% of brand owners giving it a central role in 2009 (Marsden, 2010). Industry articles also present failure scenarios (Skittles abusive tweets – Campaign, 2009), justifying them by the inappropriateness of Twitter/social media for marketing.

In general, it is agreed that mishandling social media and Twitter can have significant negative impacts, as e-WOM could produce irreparable or costly damage (Davies, 2010; Ritson, 2009; Paine, 2009) and that research is needed in order to clearly understand how and what should be done, if anything, with models like Twitter as marketing tools (Fisher, 2009; Rusbridger, 2010; Nettleton, 2010; Janusz, 2009; Bohi, 2010).

There is also another important issue – contrary to general belief, Twitter is not free, if properly undertaken as a marketing tool (Davies, 2010); it requires time to develop relationships, as well as commitment, people, finance and management buy-in (Nettleton, 2010; Jacobs, 2009), conditions easy for large companies like Dell to achieve, but very difficult for SMEs to comply with (The Economist, 2010) – only 17% of UK’s SMEs use Twitter as a marketing tool, and not many are convinced of its strategic viability (The Economist, 2010; Moran, 2010).

Aim and Objectives

Consequently, the present research aims to positively contribute to this situation, by exploring whether Twitter is a tool that should be taken seriously by SMEs in their marketing strategies, taking the stance of SMEs – how they perceive, use and see the future of Twitter for their business.

The objectives of this study are informed by the gaps found in the literature review:

- To explore how SMEs use Twitter in their marketing strategy
 - Resources, time, people, training required;
 - Methods of using Twitter as a marketing tool;
- To explore their perception of the benefits of Twitter as a marketing tool, as compared to other social networks
 - Attitudes towards Twitter vs. other social networks – perceived advantages and disadvantages, improvements needed;
- To explore their plans for improvement/future use of twitter in marketing strategies.

Research Methodology

Method

The pilot aimed to preserve most of the main research’s conditions, therefore data collection was handled through a semi-structured online synchronous one-to-one in-depth interview (Skype

chat), which allowed the data to be instantaneously recorded, therefore saving time for transcription, gave geographical flexibility, as the interviewee was in another town than the researcher and allowed comfort for the time-short interviewee (Wright and Crimp 2000). The interview lasted for 2hours 45minutes, more than predicted, and probably the length was also increased by the need to type, which should therefore be reconsidered in the main project, as it may cause inconvenience to participants, although the interviewee agreed chatting was useful for reviewing ideas/questions and being more reflective about the answers (Daymon and Holloway 2002). Furthermore, the participant's internet was disconnected at one point, which would have compromised the interview if longer-lasting; therefore, a solution should also be foreseen for this event.

The pilot sample is a Marketing Account Executive in a British SME (Appendix B). Two prospects were initially considered – the actual participant and a PR specialist from a Romanian SME; however, because of the latter's work commitments and time-pressure for the researcher, only an in-depth interview with the former prospect was undertaken.

Methodology

This study aims to take the business perspective, therefore making it a business-to-business (B2B) research (Wright and Crimp, 2000), where opinions of individuals as decision-makers in companies are important. Because the area of micro-blogging as a form of e-WOM is under-researched, especially from business perspective, a qualitative–interpretivist–exploratory approach will be chosen, in order to uncover how companies utilize Twitter, to gain practical insights into how employees perceive Twitter as a useful marketing tool and perhaps new ideas that could be recommended to other similar companies (Collis and Hussey, 2009; Churchill and Iacobucci, 2005).

Semi-structured one-to-one interviews will be utilized as the research method, since “they are a useful form of data collection that allow you to explore the perspectives and perceptions of various stakeholders” (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, p.166). It is an appropriate method mainly due to its flexibility: the answers can inform the conversation - which is extremely useful especially in a B2B context, when the interviewee is an expert or an actual practitioner (Wright and Crimp, 2000; Bell, 2005)-, useful ideas can spark off that have not originally been considered, and more in-depth views can be explored, some even related to more confidential or commercially-sensitive information (Daymon and Holloway, 2002) or views that the interviewees would not otherwise express in a focus group (Bell, 2005), especially in a business group discussion (Wright and Crimp, 2000).

The semi-structured approach is more flexible and more useful because the area is under-researched and the researcher herself is not so familiarized with this subject as business practitioners are – the guiding questions will be informed by the objectives previously outlined; moreover, considering the researcher's inexperience in qualitative research, an unstructured interview would be too risky in possibly deviating from the subject and not gathering the relevant data.

Considering the limited time frame for this research and the difficulty to gain company consent, the interview sample will consist of 4-5 Romanian and British SMEs (to be agreed, different countries have been chosen in order to get a more complete, transferable view, with UK more developed in online marketing technologies and Romania less developed in this perspective), with around 2 employees from the marketing/PR departments of each company (as these companies are relatively small, most probably there will only be 2-3 employees dealing with marketing in each), therefore online synchronous interviews will be conducted, because this is more cost-effective and time-saving for the participants, and it also allows them the comfort of their own environment while replicating the synchronous side of face-to-face interviews

(Daymon and Holloway, 2002; Wright and Crimp, 2000). Both the interviewer and the interviewees have the necessary technological skills, therefore this will not be a problem.

The most important disadvantage facing this method is that, despite the online approach, it is still time-consuming (Bell, 2005). Consequently, the communications used to gain consent will include a disclaimer of confidentiality and time, which at least allows for interviewees who accept the invitation to plan their schedule appropriately. Moreover, interviews are subjective, both the researcher and the respondent being prone to bias (Daymon and Holloway, 2002); however, peer reviews and tutorials will be undertaken, and a pilot interview will be conducted, in order to gain prompting, probing and accuracy experience (Bell, 2005).

The interviews will be transcribed and will then be analyzed using the coding method (Collis and Hussey, 2009; Daymon and Holloway, 2002). A raw analysis will be conducted after each interview and then re-checked with the literature, in order to find ideas that were under-discussed or new ideas that could be compared or further explored in subsequent interviews. The coding method will be helpful for structuring information according to the identified objectives; however, an open mind will be kept so that other issues, that might not be part of large categories but may still be of importance, will not be overlooked, therefore mitigating some disadvantages of coding (Daymon and Holloway, 2002) – again, this will also be supported through peer checking, ensuring more reliability and objectivity for the study.

Data Analysis

Fairclough (2003) proposes three levels of analysis for critical discourse analysis, which could also be applied to qualitative research analysis – description, interpretation and explanation. The description phase equates to reading and open-coding the interview in categories according to interesting emergent ideas or compared to the literature (Daymon and Holloway 2002; Miles and Huberman 1984); interpretation and explanation entail placing categories into important themes/patterns, whose meaning is discussed in relation to the research's aim/objectives.

However, it should be noted that the present report only discusses the pilot findings, which are not definite conclusions but just provide guidance for the main research, indicating whether the methodology/method/questions were suitable/useful and identifying new areas for further exploration. The three emerging themes of the pilot interview were related to a) networking and relationship-building, b) e-WOM and c) requirements, and will be used in our further researches.

a) Networking and Relationship-Building

This was probably the most interesting theme that materialized from the interview. The literature review mainly intended to look at Twitter as a form of e-WOM (The Economist 2010; Jansen et al. 2009; Zhao and Rossen 2009), with tentative relationship marketing-customer service-customer satisfaction links (Wagenheim and Bayon 2007; Tax et al. 1998). Nevertheless, because the participant's agency is a small Business-to-Business (B2B) service company, servicing via Twitter was perceived as unsuitable, as public tweets contradict confidentiality agreements:

None of them want to run the risk of putting out confidential info for the world to see.
(L151-152, 47R).

Consequently, this area would only be suitable for Business-to-Consumers (B2C)/B2Bs products and will need further exploration in the main research to gauge Twitter's adaptability to different business models.

Instead, the interviewer's perception was that Twitter actually provides the abilities for exploratory networking with "like-minded people" (L268, 82R), for finding/speaking to potential clients or just for maintaining conversations with existing customers and "engaging with

supporters” (L62, 23R), therefore proving more suitable for business networking than other social platforms like Facebook, which is reserved for friends (L264-271, 82R).

The interviewee discussed using Twitter for building agency expertise via professional tweets/blogs, thus making potential customers feel more confident in the company:

[blogging] helps reassure them we know what we’re talking about and what we’re doing. (L134-135, 42R),

and therefore increasing chances of conversion or of engaging in positive e-WOM, which might lead to even more new customer acquisitions (Wagenheim and Bayon 2007; Tax et al. 1998):

Basically, Twitter has been great in widening our network of contacts, which sometimes turn into new business or free help, and creating kudos for ourselves. (L200-202, 59R).

However, the confidence boost is also given by the use of Twitter for pure relationship-building as well, so “not just sell, sell, sell” (L130, 41R), which presents “a human side to the agency” (L302-304, 91R; L127, 41R) and allows showing:

a bit of love to charities and other people we worked with (L178-179, 53R) [or] *just [to] people we like talking to.*(L142-143, 44R).

Since current studies/trade articles mainly focus on large B2C/B2B product companies that cannot possibly engage in in-depth relationships with numerous customers, this theme was under-discussed in the literature review; nevertheless, this seems to be an important issue for B2B service companies and SMEs in generally, where relationships are critical and manageable; consequently, the main research should also explore Twitter-related networking/relationship-building possibilities.

b) e-WOM

Although not explicitly, the interviewee agreed that e-WOM is one of Twitter’s main benefits, as found in the literature review (Zhao and Rossen 2009; Jansen et al. 2009), used for promoting the agency, events or blog-posts. Being public, tweets are more likely to reach a wider business audience, faster:

Not everyone subscribes to our blog’s RSS feed, so they might not get read by nearly as many people if we didn’t tweet the link. (L135-137, 42R).

e-WOM could therefore contribute to the previously-discussed exploratory networking or expertise-building, while positive WOM can be spread by satisfied customers, bringing in new business:

Tweets about us are usually how nice we are and that we know our stuff. (L156-157, 49R).

The interviewee took an interesting approach towards negative e-WOM on Twitter, arguing that:

whether you’re on Twitter or not, people are already saying things about your company (...) Twitter is only one more online space they can talk about you. Being on

Twitter will at least give you the opportunity to have your say about what other people are saying about you. (L242-247, 72R)

This points to the fact that, if properly understood, Twitter could be wisely used as a crisis management tool to influence e-WOM about the company. Nevertheless, this view should be taken cautiously, as the pilot participant has not had this situation with her agency yet:

We're lucky not to have any bad tweets about our agency, just good ones so far! (L155-156, 49R).

The interviewee's conclusion, also supported by the research findings (Stephen and Galak 2009), is that, although Twitter should not be viewed as "the be all and end all for our communications" (L304-305, 91R), it is still a critical platform to embark on, especially if the company wants a chance to listen to/influence consumers' opinions:

So the question really is, can companies afford not to be on Twitter? (L253-254, 75R).

These findings should be further explored in subsequent interviews, in order to compare perspectives, and even discover how Twitter can be used as a form of spreading commercial messages (for example, promotional codes) instead of simply informational messages. It would also be useful to explore companies that have encountered and dealt with negative e-WOM.

c) Requirements

As discussed in the literature review, the interviewee also admitted that Twitter needs consistency and commitment, a clear understanding of its purpose, functionalities and tools, and a strategic implementation if it is to yield the best results. She also admitted to the difficulty in measuring Return-on-Investment, as results "are more people-oriented than financial ones" (L194-195, 58R) and the tools provided by Twitter are still very basic. Time was also a repeating category – Twitter requires time for engaging with people and updating regularly, and time is money, whether for hiring specialized extra-staff or for working on social media platforms instead of on paid-accounts, and this confirmed the research findings that, contrary to popular belief, Twitter is not free (Davies 2010). Nevertheless, the most interesting issue, which was not found during research, was the organizational culture fit; Twitter requires management buy-in, flexibility, no-pressure, trust and passion. The interviewee's past experiences have convinced her that:

The company's culture is really important Twitter is such a fast and immediate media, it's nearly impossible to engage with people if you don't use it often and you don't respond to people within a time frame they expect you to respond (L226-229, 67R).

This view should be explored in the main research, in order to discover patterns/advice that could help SMEs to adapt for better implementation of their Twitter strategies.

Overall, a semi-structured approach with the proposed questions (Appendix A) proved useful for allowing interesting new themes to emerge; however, some amendments have been brought to the questions/prompts in order to better explore subsequent interviews (Appendix C). A need for variety also surfaced: the Twitter area should be discussed with other B2B service/product companies, but also with B2C service/products companies, as the business model strongly dictates the balance of Twitter application (WOM or relationship-marketing). Furthermore, the pilot company was a marketing agency, which naturally needs to know/apply new media developments, therefore a useful perspective would be from non-marketing SMEs.

Trustworthiness

The quality of this research is dependent upon the researcher taking steps to ensure qualitative research trustworthiness – credibility, confirmability, dependability, transferability – (Daymon and Holloway 2002; Silverman 2006). Already the presently-discussed pilot was undertaken to diminish bias by testing the appropriateness/accuracy/usefulness of the methodology/method/questions and by allowing emerging themes not previously considered/alternative explanations/negative cases and the participant's feedback to inform more appropriate research lines (Daymon and Holloway 2002), and this will also be considered in the main research. Member checking through collection of primary data from different sources will be utilized in the main research, allowing emerging ideas to be analysed/tested after each new interview (Daymon and Holloway 2002) and also a final report copy will be presented to each participant for validation/comments, if desired.

Furthermore, peer debriefing has been and will be used for checking the questions/coding/interpretation in order to identify 'blind spots'/bias and provide alternative explanations. The research decision-making process has been rationalized, and a rich description of participants will be given (Appendix B for pilot) in order to enhance transferability of the findings to other settings. Lastly, a reflective approach has been taken throughout the project and will be further employed for the main research, as discussed below.

Conclusions & Reflections

The research has been a lengthy and difficult process, especially due to the researcher's inexperience and the constant time-pressure, but time-management abilities were greatly improved. The primary challenge was to find an appropriate, relevant and manageable research topic for this small-scale project, and to focus the literature, while making connections with other marketing theories as the topic lacked proper research per se. Crafting a comprehensive plan helped the researcher with word-count fitting and with focusing the project for the first time, therefore useful planning skills were gained.

The researcher learned that, without a focused topic/clearly-identified literature gap, the aim/objectives/entire research would be compromised. Peer checking and tutorials were very important and useful in helping to maintain focus and in eliminating bias caused by the researcher being over-involved in the project. The importance of clear aim/objectives was proved at the methodology/method/question formulation stage – after spending days of reflecting/changing/re-writing the objectives, it took only a few hours to formulate and justify a qualitative/interview approach and the questions (which were then peer-checked as well), which, in turn, proved suitable and useful during the pilot.

The interview proved very complicated: one of the initial prospects encountered other work commitments, the researcher lacked interviewing skills, and the interview was frustratingly-long and interrupted by technology issues, which might have compromised the process unless the interviewee had been very helpful and willing to spend the 2hours 45minutes and the Internet had not fixed quickly. Furthermore, as the notes taken on the side of the transcript showed, although several questions were added on-the-spot in order to follow interesting leads, which got the interviewee to speak of several present/past experiences, more could have been done in this respect, because several views were not questioned further.

The participant's feedback proved the questions' validity, but also indicated that some questions were formulated poorly (sometimes because of the researcher's apparent intention to brag in front of a professional; however, they were always explained well afterwards).

The researcher also views that some questions were leading and found it difficult to identify the boundary between prompting to get people talking and leading to obtain the expected results. Sometimes, the researcher also prompted too soon, not leaving time for the participant to think, which resulted in some double-question situations. However, the researcher believes that further practice, especially with live interviews, will help to improve and a first step undertaken was to participate in other focus groups/interviews in order to observe/learn. The interviewee also considered that the researcher's inexperience with Twitter was a good case for semi-structured interview, but could have hindered potential findings that would have emerged, had the researcher been a heavy user. Nevertheless, the researcher believes this inexperience actually cleared some bias of pre-conceived ideas regarding Twitter usability, and could also be the perspective of many SMEs new to Twitter. During the coding/analyzing stage, peer checking again proved useful, as the researcher initially identified 5 themes, whereas there were only 3, and did not structure the analysis correctly, which was immediately identified by a peer. Lastly, upon reflection, it became clear that care should also be taken when trying to explore themes with new participants, as disclosing certain information regarding company strategies could potentially lead to serious ethical issues, although no explicitly sensitive information will be discussed. For this reason, all information will be anonymised and treated generally, with no reference to previous companies.

Appendix

Appendix A – Initial Questions

1. Do you use twitter in your marketing strategy? Since when have you been using it?
2. Do you use any other social networks/ which?
3. Why did you start using twitter?
4. How do you use twitter (purposes, relation to other media forms)?
5. What have you put in place for incorporating twitter into your marketing strategy (costs, time, people, other resources)?
6. What have been the results of using twitter? How do you measure them?
7. What challenges do you face with twitter/ are there major drawbacks?
8. What do you think are the offsets for other companies not adopting twitter?
9. What is your perception of twitter, compared to other social networks?
10. Have the results obtained using twitter as a marketing tool changed your opinions about it?
11. What future plans do you have for twitter as part of your marketing strategy?
12. What improvements would you need from a twitter model in order to consider it a more strategic part of your marketing (if any)? Why would you like these improvements?

Appendix B – Participant Profile

The interviewee is a Marketing Account Executive for a London-based fundraising, marketing and communications agency, specialized in the third sector: charities, non-profit organisations and social enterprises (therefore a B2B service company). The agency is a SME as it has 3 founding partners and 5 employees. The interviewee's role within the company comprises several tasks: account management, taking down notes during meetings, writing contact reports, drafting a communications plan schedule and day-to-day correspondence by phone or email to clients, being the face of the agency, both online and offline. One of the company's partners is a prolific Twitterer, so the agency has been engaging in Twitter ever since its 2009 opening, however they also have a Facebook page, a Flickr account and a blog. Twitter is used as a marketing tool for promoting the agency, but it is also something which may be recommended to clients. The participant considers herself as a heavy Twitter user, having explored it for both professional and personal use.

Appendix C – Amended Questions

1. Could you please tell me a bit about your company? (Prompting: profile, size, activity area, people in the marketing department)
2. What is your role within the company?
3. Do you use twitter in your marketing strategy? Since when have you been using it?
4. Do you use any other social networks/ which?
5. Why did you start using twitter? (Prompting: personal initiative, recommended, required)
6. What did you first think of Twitter as a marketing tool? (Prompting: useful, promising, useless)
7. How do you use twitter (purposes, relation to other media forms)? (Prompting: WOM – spread information or commercial messages, get leads, relationship marketing, networking, customer service, prove expertise, build confidence in customers/potential customers, put a human side to the company, crisis management tool)
8. What have you put in place for incorporating twitter into your marketing strategy (Prompting: costs, time, people, other resources)?
9. How did you find out what you needed to do in order to effectively use Twitter?
10. What have been the results of using twitter? How do you measure them?
11. How did you find out about these measurement tools? (Prompting: facilitated by Twitter for businesses, through third party applications, was it easy/difficult)
12. How flexible is your company culture/management team in relation to using Twitter as a marketing tool? (Prompting: difficult/easy to get management buy-in, tight/loose control of tweets, commitment/non-commitment to Twitter, flexibility/rigidity in using/measuring, pressure/no-pressure in demonstrating ROI)
13. What challenges do you face with twitter/ are there major drawbacks?
14. What do you think are the offsets for other companies not adopting twitter?
15. What is your perception of twitter, compared to other social networks?
16. Have the results obtained using twitter as a marketing tool changed your opinions about it?
17. (if it is another marketing company) Could you please tell me about a situation where you did not recommend Twitter to your clients for use in their marketing strategy, if any? Why did you not recommend it?
18. What future plans do you have for twitter as part of your marketing strategy? (Prompting: use it more/less, use it differently, make it more central in the company's communications mix)
19. Do you/would you use Twitter as an internal communications tool/ (like an Intranet) Why/ why not?
20. What improvements would you need from a twitter model in order to consider it a more strategic part of your marketing (if any)? Why would you like these improvements?

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