

Internet and Market perspectives of Non Wood Forest Products: the case of mushrooms, truffles and herbs of Greek SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays Internet is a successful key for the promotion of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) by offering benefits to e-commerce through Internet marketing. A vast majority of SMEs related to agri - food sector has an eminent presence in the Web. This paper studies the characteristics and the connection between Internet and Social media Market of Non Wood Forest Products especially of Mushrooms, Truffles and Herbs of Greek SMEs. The research compares the connection between a social media profile of SMEs and its official website in firms in the above sector. As it derives through this study there is not a specific correlation that improves a connection between the SMEs profile of a social media and its website and Social media predominate in the internet market. Therefore, firm owners should focus on social media profile characteristics and features.

1. Introduction

Contemporary society is characterized by continuous, growing and fast changes and emerging research applications that require the adaptation of fast communication features, exchange of Information and data and include ICTs in everyday life (Andreopoulou et.al., 2011). Through convenient applications on the Internet, people interact with each other and engage in activities related to daily life, electronic commerce (e-commerce) by using virtual platforms (Piccoli & Ives, 2003; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004; Andreopoulou; 2013; Turban et al., 2018). Internet is an interactive channel that can be used for informational purposes and by the same time it can eliminate not only the distances but also it can offer its services 24/7. The target consumers audience is extended globally, as e-commerce changed the traditional way of businesses as it provides a new marketing tool and can apply to potential customers for a firm in a more general public as it offers the opportunity to gain customers worldwide (Kalfagianni et al., 2017).

The website of a business is crucial for the success of a SME, as it concerns the Internet market of the product and it can be characterised as a dynamic intermediate mean between buyer and seller (Dwivedi, Kappor and Chen, 2015). Websites serve as an important point of contact for most companies, assessing their effectiveness or quality of the website is important as a way to understand whether the company is providing the type and quality of information and interaction to satisfy website users (Tsekouropoulos et al., 2012). This is especially true for companies selling goods and services on their websites such as products derived from forests other than wood (Kalfagianni, 2017).

Among the various Internet applications, social media, including social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn have become extremely popular in the past decade. A business social

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profile can built relationship with the customers and achieve win – win deals with them (Töllinen & Karjaluoto, 2011; Andreopoulou et al., 2012).

Regarding Non Wood Forest products, since 2009 Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) mentioned them as a sector of priority. The definition given by FAO and approved by other organizations, describes them as products that derive from forests, scrubs and tree plantations and differ from the sense of wood (FAO, 1999). The last years, there is a trend for a healthy and mediterranean diet, aroma - therapy and environmentally friendly products that increased the demand of Non Wood Products (Eand Misen, 1995; Pattenella et al., 2006). Mushrooms, Truffles and Herbs are an every day-consumed food especially in the area of Europe (Bharali et al., 2017; Shaaban & Moawad; 2017). They are used since ancient times in traditional medicine and are of great importance for people by the Mediterranean Sea (Jones, 1996; Eddouks et al., 2017; Manju et al., 2017). Moreover, it is though that selling forest product other than wood can be a more relevant source of income (Freed, 2001; Merlo & Croitoru, 2005; Subedi, 2007; Sisak, Riedl and Dudik, 2016; Živojinović et al., 2017).

In this paper, the research is focused on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that are located in Greece and cultivate Non Wood Forest products. There were retrieved firms that both use Facebook and official websites in order to communicate with their customers. In addition the firms were classified according to their marketing and digital characteristics and by the same time there are described their social media network profiles as to their characteristics. Also it is given a focus to the correlation between the promotions of a firm by different digital means.

2. Methodology

For the aim of the study, there were collected 16 SMEs that have a presence in Social media, e.g. Facebook and at the same time they promote their products (mushrooms and truffles) through websites. Moreover, for the same reason 17 SMEs that deal with herbs and promote their products both in Social media and Websites were selected. All firms are located in Greece and deal only with Non Wood Forest products, for that reason they are cultivated and packaged by them, in Greece. The research was focused on finding all SMEs that are dealing with Non Wood Forest Products and they have a presence both in Social Media and Websites.

Regarding the Social Media profile of SMEs seven (7) marketing and organizational criteria were studied and analysed as to their characteristics as mentioned by the literature (MacCann & Barlow, 2015). All quantitative data were collected from their individual social media sites. Referring to quantitative data there were examined: number of fans (according to the “Likes” that companies have on their profiles), followers (according to people who “Follow” them in Facebook), frequency of postings (that was categorised in three groups: daily, every 2 days and rare), response time to comments of future clients, clear managerial aims and goals (described by their management status on Facebook), promotion techniques that use “like and share” for competition and gaining products though drawing different posts of the firm and general information for the products of the firms and their characteristics as they are mentioned or not from the Facebook ‘s administrator of the firm.

For the official websites of the SMEs, there were selected firms that have less than 5,000 visitors, according to the online searching tools “StatShow” and “Similar Web”, aiming to select similar SMEs related to their total digital commercial activities. The aim was to find the number of pages that a user navigates by a visit each time and it was also taken under consideration the qualitative parameters that have to do with the richness of a website (giving information about the location and the goals that the enterprise has set), the importance of information (that should be exact, complete and up to date), the navigation design which should be easy even to people with disabilities, the value of time of customers navigation, the existence of newsletter that should keep a contact between user and firm, product details for each product and promotional techniques or online shop for making ordering easier.

At the end, it is described the correlation between the number of fans of the SMEs Facebook page to the visitors that visit the official website per month.

3. Results

Through the analysis of data, it was founded that both Mushrooms and Truffles and Herbs correlated SMEs were distributed non-normally in none of the five quantitative variables (which are: pages per visit, visitors per month and pages views per month regarding webpages and Fans and followers regarding Facebook profiles). In Table 1 are presented the Medians of every variable in each of the two categories of SMEs (Mushrooms and Truffles, Herbs). As Table 1 presents it, Internet users do not visit more than 1 page per visit. Furthermore, there are more visitors to Mushrooms and Truffles Websites than those in Herbs. This is also, followed in Facebook were there is a double numbered for Mushrooms and Truffles pages.

Table 1. Medians of quantitative variables.

	Mushrooms and Truffles	Herbs
Website pages per visit	0	0.5
Website visitors per month	465	30
Website pages view per month	1035	30
Facebook Likes	988.5	452
Facebook Followers	985	451

According to the analysis of the qualitative variables Table 2 was conducted. The majority of SMEs related to Mushrooms and Truffles are paying attention to the Design of the Website; as they have created websites that are easy to navigate, while herb's Website do not pay attention. The majority of the Websites give important information for the products and they specify the goals and objectives of the SMEs. On the other hand, most of them do not promote their products through on-line shops but instead they are proposing websites navigators for a more personal contact with them. What should be mentioned is that firms that are related to herbs are giving great importance to inform future clients about their products but they do not continue having a future contact with them through the subscription in a newsletter.

The qualitative analysis of Facebook profiles showed that none of the SME of both categories promote products or give the opportunity to Facebook users for a discount to the products. Moreover, it should be mentioned that most of them have specific goals that are communicated to future clients.

To conclude there was no correlation between number of likes (Fans) in Facebook profile and Website visitor per month for the SMEs in Herbs (Pearson Correlation Coefficient = -0.9, $p=0.7$) but there was a small correlation between number of likes (Fans) in Facebook profile and Website visitor per month for the SMEs in Mushrooms and Truffles (Pearson Correlation Coefficient = 0.2, $p=0.3$).

Table 2. Qualitative variables of Websites

Website	Mushrooms and Truffles		Herbs	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Information	93.75%	6.25%	100%	-
Importance Information	75%	25%	82.3%	17.6%
Design	68.75%	31.25%	53%	47%
Convenience	62.5%	37.5%	58.8%	41.2%
Value of time for customers	43.75%	56.25%	53%	47%
Newsletter	12.5%	87.5%	11.8%	88.2%
Product details	50%	50%	53%	47%
Promo - shop	12.5%	87.5%	17.7%	82.3%

Table 3. Qualitative variables of Facebook profiles

Facebook profiles	Mushrooms			Herbs		
	Yes	No		Yes	No	
Objectives and Goals	62.5%	37.5%		70.5%	29.5%	
Promotion with "Like and Share"	-	100%		-	100%	
General Information	87.5%	12.5%		76.5%	23.5%	
Response to posts	50%	50%		53%	47%	
Frequency of response to posts	Every day 31.25%	Every 2 days 31.25%	Rare 37.5%	Every day 23.5%	Every 2 days 11.7%	Rare 64.8%

4. Conclusion

As it was mentioned above, an effort to find SMEs that are both promoted in Social media, e.g. Facebook and through official Websites was found difficult, as the majority of them prefer only one of these means to communicate with customers. For this reason only 16 SMEs were examined for the Mushrooms and Truffles Market and 17 for Herbs market.

There was mentioned a trend for Mushrooms and Truffles SMEs than for Herbs, regarding the visitors of the Websites and Facebook pages. It seems that the majority of SMEs in both sectors give general information of their firms in both means of communication and most of them make an effort to propound a user friendly website that will attract future customers it will worth the spending time of them to the site. Unfortunately, in both sectors SMEs do not pay attention in promoting there products by giving special characteristics that will make them unique and competitive to others. A vast majority of them is trying to have a contact with the visitors by persuading them to become members or give their e-mails in order to register to their newsletter.

By this research it was not mentioned a correlation between the number of fans in Facebook and Website users. It seemed that the presence of social media links in websites do not augment the number of fans in Facebook and vice versa presence of link of website in Facebook profile do not augment the number of website visitors.

It is thought that, probably the small number of SMEs that were included in this article may have given a not clear impression of the real situation between the connection of Website and Social Media Profiles. It is evident that social media predominate in the internet market of Non Wood Forest Products. Thus, it is important that the SMEs owners should focus on social media profile characteristics and features, aiming to increase their profit. Additionally the small number of visitors and fans makes this result unclear.

We hope that this article will give important information to stakeholders of the areas of Mushrooms, Truffles and Herbs and it will be a guide for entrepreneurs. It is though that it will boost the market of the area of Non Wood Forest Products and it will be an important base for the future creation of Facebook profiles and Websites.

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