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WHERE TO INVEST IN ONLINE MARKETING EDUCATION IN MICRO AND SMALL ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to identify the educational needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the field of online marketing. This paper extends a local Czech study via international research (Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Italy). Primary data was gathered using an electronic questionnaire ($n = 376$) focused on the enterprise side and semi-structured interviews ($n = 18$) with online marketing agencies. Based on a comparison of questionnaire survey results and semi-structured interviews the main problem areas in the effective use of the online marketing tools were identified (complexity of the individual tools; lack of human resources, time and finance, bad previous experience; lack of knowledge and competencies). The research results indicate the definition of recommendations for micro and small enterprises - the main emphasis should be given to create a course that will create specialists for communication with online marketing agencies with the general knowledge of each online marketing tool.

KEYWORDS

Education, on-line marketing, micro enterprise, small and medium enterprise, outsourcing

INTRODUCTION

SMEs play an important role in the national economics of all countries (Gancarczyk and Gancarczyk, 2018). They support the country's economy (Macpherson and Hold, 2007) and play an important role in reducing the country's unemployment (Woźniak et al., 2019). In the current globalized society with the highly linked markets, these SMEs face major challenges (Paul and Rosado-Serrano, 2019). SMEs have many strengths and weaknesses. Adequate financial resources like lack of liquid capital (Masroor and Asim, 2019), lack of personnel education connected to environmental management (Lee, 2009), and low staff education (Nikolaou et al., 2016) are commonly considered as main weaknesses.

The world is getting more and more globalized and people have started to change their buying behaviour (Sobol et al., 2018). Internet usage and internet purchasing are increasing (Pernot, 2020) and the path of purchase is changing overall (Xu et al., 2014). Individual online marketing channels increase complexity and start to be a challenge for companies (Anderl et al., 2016). Each of the online marketing tools are already so highly complex, that it is not possible to manage them effectively by one person (Pokorná and Pilař, 2014). Companies are often focused on the activities in which they have very good knowledge, such as offline advertising and sales support, but they still lack the sufficient knowledge to reflect the modern technological environment, such as online

marketing tools like Websites, Social Sites, E-mail marketing, PPC advertising etc. (Semerádová and Vávrová, 2016; Claudiu-Dan, 2015; Pauwels et al., 2016).

The great advantage of using individual online marketing tools is the possibility of shortening the supply chain and selling products directly to consumers, which is exactly the advantage that can be obtained through selling online (Chakraborty et al., 2018; Sui and Rejeski, 2002). One of the reasons why most companies do not sell their products or services directly to the final customers is the lack of financial resources to carry out direct marketing (Kiang et al., 2000). Online marketing, however, is a way to target the end consumer financially highly effectively (Lessmann et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, this paper’s aim is to elucidate the problematic areas in the use of the online marketing tools, to identify the main educational needs of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the field of online marketing.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For the data, an electronic questionnaire was administered to the employees and the CEOs of firms with different sizes (i.e., <10 employees; <50 employees; <250 employees). A total of 376 responses were received from five countries (Bulgaria, Czech, Finland, Hungary, Italy), for details see table 1. The data was collected from December 2019 to February 2020. The questionnaire aimed at investigating two crucial topics. Firstly, what online marketing activities are created internally or externally. Secondly, in what areas do companies recognize the greatest opportunities for improvement. The questionnaire contained 3 categorization questions, focusing on sector, company size, location and 6 questions focused on the use of individual online marketing tools in the company (see table 2) and 6 questions focused on the need to improvement in individual online marketing tools (see table 3), both of these areas were possible to answer through a 5-degree Likert scale. The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to confirm the difference based on the size of the enterprise.

Concurrently, randomly selected marketing agencies were contacted with semi-structured interviews. A total of 18 interviews were conducted. The aim of this interview was to identify problems in working with SMEs companies in the implementation of online marketing activities.

	Czech	Bulgaria	Finland	Hungary	Italy	Sum
micro <10	70	14	34	25	44	187
small <50	46	10	28	4	18	106
medium <250	56	4	16	1	6	83
Online marketing agencies	9	3	3	3	3	21

Table 1: Structure of the questionnaire survey

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the questionnaire survey, micro enterprises (<10 employees) prevailed in all countries. The first analysis area by the enterprises was focused on segmentation online marketing activities which are created internally, externally, partly internally or not being used at all. The results revealed that in the micro enterprises segment they mostly deal internally with following online marketing tools - websites, social media, email marketing and analytics. On the other hand, they don’t handle all the tools as SEO and PPC (see table 2). Small enterprises handle internally most of the areas (Website, SEO, Social Media, E-mail marketing and Analytics) except PPC, which is usually not addressed at all. Most of the medium-sized enterprises outsource SEO and handle internally Websites, PPC, Social Media, Email Marketing and Analytics. On the contrary for PPC there is a consensus where 33% of companies deal with activities internally and 33% do not deal at all.

Based on these results, it is possible to identify that the websites are handled by SMEs through

internal resources. The micro enterprises do not solve the SEO, the small and medium-sized enterprises through outsourcing. The least used is PPC, both for micro and small enterprises. For medium-sized enterprises, there is a match between the use of internal resources and non-use. For Social Media, e-mail Marketing and Analytics, the situation for micro, small and medium-sized businesses is relatively the same, with the most internal resources used for these activities.

Category	Areas					
	Website	SEO	PPC	Social Media	E-mail	Analytics
< 10 employees	Website	SEO	PPC	Social Media	E-mail	Analytics
We do internally	55.61%	33.16%	26.20%	75.94%	52.41%	55.61%
We use outsourcing	14.97%	18.18%	17.11%	3.74%	6.42%	14.97%
Partly internally and partial outsourcing	14.97%	5.35%	6.42%	6.95%	3.21%	14.97%
Not being used	14.44%	43.32%	50.27%	13.37%	37.97%	14.44%
< 50 employees	Website	SEO	PPC	Social Media	E-mail	Analytics
We do internally	68.87%	43.40%	25.47%	71.70%	65.09%	68.87%
We use outsourcing	16.04%	23.58%	15.09%	5.66%	7.55%	16.04%
Partly internally and partial outsourcing	12.26%	8.49%	5.66%	7.55%	2.83%	12.26%
Not being used	2.83%	24.53%	53.77%	15.09%	24.53%	2.83%
< 250 employees	Website	SEO	PPC	Social Media	E-mail	Analytics
We do internally	59.04%	31.33%	33.73%	65.06%	68.67%	59.04%
We use outsourcing	4.82%	33.73%	10.84%	2.41%	1.20%	4.82%
Partly internally and partial outsourcing	36.14%	25.30%	22.89%	4.82%	26.51%	36.14%
Not being used	0.00%	9.64%	32.53%	27.71%	3.61%	0.00%

Table 2: Usage of online marketing tools

These results need to be put in the context of the second part of the questionnaire survey, which was focused on identification of the needs for improvement (see Table 3). From this part of the research results that micro-enterprises and medium-sized enterprises need major improvement based on self-evaluation in all areas. Medium-sized enterprises need major improvements in Website and SEO, on the other hand they need a little improvement in the area of PPC, social marketing, email marketing and Analytics.

Category	Areas						
	< 10 employees	Web	SEO	PPC	SM	E-mail	Analytics
We need major improvements		29.95%	43.32%	36.90%	39.57%	35.83%	38.50%
We need improvements	29.41%	25.67%	22.46%	26.74%	26.20%	33.16%	
We need a little improvement	23.53%	11.76%	13.37%	20.32%	16.04%	11.23%	
We handle fine	17.11%	19.25%	27.27%	13.37%	21.93%	17.11%	
< 50 employees	Web	SEO	PPC	SM	E-mail	Analytics	
We need major improvements		59.43%	64.15%	63.21%	48.11%	54.72%	70.75%
We need improvements	18.87%	14.15%	10.38%	21.70%	16.98%	10.38%	
We need a little improvement	11.32%	11.32%	10.38%	20.75%	14.15%	9.43%	
We handle fine	10.38%	10.38%	16.04%	9.43%	14.15%	9.43%	
< 250 employees	Web	SEO	PPC	SM	E-mail	Analytics	
We need major improvements		54.22%	53.01%	25.30%	28.92%	38.55%	36.14%
We need improvements	32.53%	7.23%	27.71%	30.12%	14.46%	16.87%	
We need a little improvement	10.84%	37.35%	42.17%	34.94%	43.37%	40.96%	
We handle fine	2.41%	2.41%	4.82%	6.02%	3.61%	6.02%	

Table 3: Self-evaluation in the area of on-line marketing activities improvement

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to confirm the difference based on the size of the enterprise. As can be seen in Table 4, there are statistical differences in three areas. Websites and Analytics in category of management (insource or outsource) and PPC in area of improvement.

In area of Website, is possible to identify statistical difference between micro-enterprises and small businesses, and the difference between small businesses and medium-sized businesses (see table 4). This is due to the fact that in small businesses, about 69% of websites are designed as internal activities. This is the largest share of all categories. Another area is analytics, namely the difference between micro and medium-sized enterprises, which is mainly due to the fact that about 15% of micro-enterprises do not use analytics at all.

In the area of improvements, it is the PPC area where a distinction can be found between micro and small enterprises and between small and medium-sized enterprises. This is due to the fact that about 63% of small businesses need major improvements.

	A vs. B		A vs. C		B vs. C	
	W	p	W	p	W	p
Website	-3.851	0.033	0.983	0.899	3.776	0.038
Analytics	-0.396	0.992	-4.152	0.018	-3.619	0.051
PPC	-5.399	<.001	-0.784	0.945	3.773	0.038

*A – micro-enterprise; B – small enterprise; C – medium enterprise

Table 4: The difference based on the size of the business in the use of online marketing tools and the need to improve them in the business

The third part of the questionnaire survey was focused on identifying the main problem for effective use of online marketing in their company.

Based on this question, the following barriers could be identified across countries:

- Staff competence is missing
- Lack of human resources

- Lack of financial resources
- Distrust of a quality service provider
- Bad past experience
- Poor management's willingness to invest in new communication channels
- Distrust in the effectiveness of online marketing
- High initial investment
- Lack of creativity

From the enterprises perspective, the biggest identified problem results from the combination of several factors. Among them, missing employee in-depth competencies, the lack of adequate human resources in terms of the time capacity of the current employees, and the lack of financial resources to recruit new employees, or selecting employees who would only take care of online marketing. There is also a lack of trust in online marketing agencies because of poor past experience, supported by management's idea of the need for high initial investment which prevents from pushing online marketing activities effectively.

Additionally, we extended and deepened the analysis of the problem through semi-structured interviews with experts from online marketing agencies. Notably, they were asked to explain what they see as a biggest obstacle in cooperating and working with the SME businesses. According to their perspective, crucial issues can be related to:

- **Lack of human resources and time** - The most common problems are associated with human resources. In the micro and small companies is often managing the online marketing activities of a person who does not have proper competencies. Also, since this person is not assigned fully for online marketing activities, another important factor is the lack of time by such a person to properly dedicate to these activities.
- **High cost pressure** - The client does not thoroughly understand the complexity of individual options and tools of online marketing. In order to use individual tools of online marketing effectively, it is necessary to dedicate a specialized professional figure in this field to each tool.
- **Unrealistic demands** - There is a great difficulty in finding a match between budget and client expectations. In many cases, the budget rarely meets the needs and wants that clients would like to achieve.
- **Lack of ability to articulate fundamental business** - Companies' issues often translate into troubles in setting up a suitable business vision and strategy, given the inability to define target groups, people and related marketing strategies
- **Lack of knowledge** - In most cases, companies do not catch the relevance of using online marketing tools from a business perspective. They do not understand their potential in terms of advantages, disadvantages, possibilities of targeting and measuring.
- **Bad experience** - The client tries individual tools of on-line marketing without the necessary knowledge. For example, Google often offers a \$ 40 voucher to try PPC. The client does not have the necessary knowledge, the campaign sets up badly and is subsequently disappointed.
- **Wrong/insufficient problem definition** - The client often does not have an overview of the need to define the objectives of individual activities. Whether the goal is to win customers, get followers, educate, or inform social network users.
- **Unwillingness to test new things** - Online marketing tools today offer a wealth of techniques to target a customer and how to link individual tools to reach a user. The client often is not aware about these options, thus is reluctant to trust them.
- **Unwillingness to invest money in analyses** - Analyses are an important step before starting any marketing campaign. The client does not want to put money into conducting such analyses and insists on his or her opinion, which may not obstacle to reach the predefined goal.

- **Selling services to companies, when you speak “different” language** - The client does not know the terms such as CPC, CTR, retargeting, etc. Then, the communication is led to the wrong direction, without appreciating the real benefits of segmentation and targeting of PPC advertising.

By comparing the questionnaire survey on the part of entrepreneurs and the semi-structured interviews on the part of experts from online marketing agencies, the main problems can be identified as lack of human resources, time and financing and from others bad previous experience. These results are confirmed by studies by Cerratio and Piva (2012), which identify the lack of human resource as one of the main problems in entering international markets, which is due to online (Reuschke and Mason, 2020). Nowadays, the tools of online marketing are so sophisticated and digital technology has been transforming globally (Sharma et al., 2020). They offer so many options that are not possible to use effectively their full potential by using just the internal sources of the micro and small enterprises, often represented by a single person, that is operating all these areas in just part time of his working activity.

The problem of human resource has been identified from both sides. The low-cost attitude of SME leads to dedication of the online marketing tools management to an employee who is in charge also of other company activities and therefore has no time to be following the current trend and options of each online marketing tools, which leads to the non-effective use of the online tools. That also results in the bad experience with the tools and entrepreneurs are getting distrustful. These facts are also supported by the result of the questionnaire survey, where both micro and small entrepreneurs on the basis of self-evaluation need major improvement in all online marketing tools, but at the same time do not have human resources and time.

One solution to the lack of human resources could be outsourcing, that is often used by the Medium Enterprises especially. The study of Porto and Abreu (2018) showed, that decisions to outsource pays off for the companies when there is an increase in advertising spending, but low levels of investment bring the highest return on sales. The decision not to outsource to an advertising agency with low advertising expenses seems to be the most satisfactory to generate profit return for a small firm.

Given the lack of money and human resources, it is possible to recommend courses that applicants will be able to complete online in accordance with their workload. Here, LMS Moodle is an ideal solution, which is currently an important tool for teaching (Beranek and Remes, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Individual online marketing tools are an effective means of attracting and retaining customers and increasing their competitiveness in today’s global market. The main problem of the online marketing tools for micro and small enterprises lies in their complexity, which exceeds the capacities of one employee. This employee is supposed to be able to manage all these tools together with following the newest trends and managing also other activities of his scope of work. In the other words, the main recommendation based on the research results is that micro and small companies should be using the services of professional marketing agencies and provide their employees which are responsible for managing the online marketing necessary training in the field of general orientation in online marketing tools, campaign goals and their measurements. Conclusion of the research supports the results of the local CZ study of Pokorná and Pilař (2012), which suggested a need of focusing on the micro enterprises employees’ education in their ability to communicate with the online marketing agencies and leave the management of these tools on the marketing agencies. This research confirms and extends these results to small entrepreneurs (<50 employees) and evaluates these results through the international study.

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