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Image development in the Internet – opportunities and threats



IMAGE DEVELOPMENT IN THE INTERNET- OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

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Introduction

The paper discusses issues related to communication via the Internet in the process of building an organization's image. The authors focus on the preparatory actions and strategic decisions that need to be taken so that long-term communication with Internet users could lead to expected results. The authors also point out to possibilities and ways of using the available tools and present in the selected case studies successful image-enhancing actions.

When on 1 January 1983 a decision was taken to merge the ARPAnet and CSNET¹, giving rise to the Internet, hardly anyone realised the world was about to change beyond recognition. Within the two following decades the idea of computer connection reached out to practically all fields of human activity.

With its ever widening availability, the new communication technology has become a natural environment for dialogue, information exchange and, consequently, the opinion forum. Today every subject that actively functions in public space, be it a company, an institution or an individual, must think about being present online (to a larger or lesser extent). This means, whether we like it or not, that our image is co-created by the Internet.

Before we post messages about ourselves in the Internet...

To ensure that this process takes place in a controlled and effective way it is advisable to prepare its initiation. Since image and reputation building is a long-term process, random and improvised forms of activity rarely give desired results. An introductory phase of utmost importance, if not absolutely indispensable, is an analysis of a subject's identity leading to an explicit awareness of its assets, which are going to serve as a basis for image building. The need for image enhancing activity in the Internet is obvious.

1 ARPAnet – the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network founded in 1957 by the US Defense Department. CSNET – the Computer Science Network – created in 1981 for scientists and researchers that could not be directly connected to the ARPAnet.

Yet, in practice numerous organizations who answer “yes” when asked whether they pursue image-oriented policies in the Internet at the same time find it difficult to point out three attributes defining their identity and three most essential values with which they want to be associated by their stakeholders. Why is it impossible to plan the subsequent phases of image and reputation building campaign without coping with the identity issue first? The answer is buried in how an organization’s image is essentially created in the stakeholders’ minds. This happens first through differentiating an organization from a mass of similar entities and creating mental links between its name and symbols on the one hand and some notions well known (and preferably valued) by the general public on the other. But there appears a problem: if we persistently want to associate with our brand too many notions, then the process is doomed to failure. Only few managers with a professional attitude to the issue are able to self-impose this (let’s add – only seemingly drastic) constraint and resist the overwhelming temptation to communicate everything at once. Yet, the secret of the successful image of many well-known brands lies, however, among other factors, in deciding at the planning stage to select one out of all competitive advantages (the notion of competitive advantage applies also to non-profit organizations, being synonymous in this context with values offered to stakeholders) defined by means of the identity and key advantages analysis and making it a brand’s flagship attribute distinguishing the organization from its competitors. If this strategy succeeds, the flagship attribute will also become a dominant feature of an organization’s image identifiable with the company. But if we try to do the same with a dozen or so attributes, the public will fail to associate any of them with our company. We will remain, like a character from Bareja’s film, “resembling no one”. Obviously, the identity attribute that we want to make our distinctive mark and a basis for our image must be our actual asset. An attempt at “creating” such a feature irrelevant of the real situation, even if initially successful, sooner or later is bound to backfire and bring about an image crisis.

Why are some uncomplicated tasks so difficult to accomplish?

What constitutes the biggest barrier to adopting the above discussed strategic assumption? It appears that owners, CEOs, managers and other decision makers find it extremely difficult to focus in the company communications on one selected identity trait because they are convinced that by doing so they will prevent the public from finding out about other excellent qualities of the product and the organization itself. Such self-constraints seem to be synonymous with yielding to competition. If such reservations had been shared by the board of directors at Volvo in 1957, today this brand wouldn’t enjoy a reputation of the world’s safest car maker. Accentuating this feature in public communications (obviously preceded by introducing actual design changes) and consistently emphasizing it over other, equally true, qualities of the car allowed the brand to create and maintain its strong characteristic image. Does it mean that clients don’t notice other advantages of the car? Is the Volvo perceived to be unreliable, slow and uncomfortable?

Another barrier and a cause for some sort of image dilution is so commonly met impatience and lack of consistency. As previously stated, image building is a long-term process and must be planned in time

if it is to result in forming any strong associations with the brand. The problem is that some managers are not able to make a clear distinction between the two theatres of marketing operations: the one mentioned above involving long-term planning and iron consistency in communicating one or maximum two strategically vital qualities, and the other concerned with marketing campaigns dictated by the exigencies of the moment requiring creativity, fresh ideas, frequent changes in content and ways of interacting with stakeholders. If applied to the long-term building of the brand image, these requirements disrupt the continuity of the process and cause confusion among the recipients of the marketing message, leading ultimately to a failure to bring the image building process to a successful conclusion. The efforts to form a clear and socially approved image of the organization are compromised before the intended image impresses itself on the stakeholders' minds.

Another reason for failure in building an organization's image is sometimes the inability to give up a market share and come to terms with the fact that for different target groups the organization's image will be different. Attempting to transmit communications to everybody and, what's worse, by means of the same methods, tools and communications channels is likely to result in failure and disappointment. Explicit and unambiguous identification and definition of traits shared by different client groups within an organization's reach (synonymous with a conscious choice to give up fight at all costs for other clients) based on the analysis of an organization's identity, its situation on the market and its assets, will open a possibility to plan image enhancing activities correctly. The stakeholder segmentation, if conducted properly at the early stage, may prevent transmitting messages in void or using methods unacceptable by the addressees, eliminating strategies that are either ineffective or downright hurtful to the image.

Only after we have dealt with the above issues and made the necessary choices, can we launch promotion activities. The process of communicating identity or, in other words, of building the desired coherent image, should carry the same set of key messages regardless of an environment where it takes place. It is true of both traditional and modern communications that make use of new information technologies. So how to conduct the process in the Internet? What tools offered in the Internet can be helpful and how to use them effectively? The answers to these questions will be given in the subsequent part of the paper.

Image development in the Internet

Image is defined as a perception or a reflection of a subject's identity perceived in the mirror of its broadly understood market environment. Image is significant not only in the process of relationship building but also in crisis situations a company may encounter. Image is subjective, resulting from evaluations made by the environment so in many cases it is difficult to talk in terms of unambiguous perception of an image. Furthermore, image perception is often subject to simplifications and mental shortcuts as well as to stereotypes shared by target groups. From an organization's point of view, positive image is of utmost importance and that is why so much attention is paid to its shaping and strengthening and so much care is put into associating values with a brand. It is worth remembering that image building is a multifold process involving multiple communication channels, methods and resources.

Today an individual person or a company functioning in developed economies cannot imagine information transfer without the Internet. Likewise, image building can hardly succeed while bypassing this information channel or other modern technology solutions. The processes of forming first impressions as well as building and maintaining relationships that used to take place in face to face situations have now transferred to the web, assuming a new, more complex characteristics.

One of the most important steps, and often the first to be made by a business to create its image in the net is to set up and maintain a company or product website. Even small and micro-businesses feel this need and are aware of the fact that in today's marketplace winning a new client frequently begins via the Internet. Few people look for business partners in a phone directory. Owing to the rapidly advancing technological progress, not only companies but also individuals can easily construct their own websites with a minimum investment of money, time and work. Another tool available for image building in the net is Google. Apart from being used as a search engine it also provides a system for building coherent image and relationships in the Internet. Hence advertising through AdWords and other complex SEO/SEM activities consume considerably more resources than the press, radio or even TV advertising. What is meant by reputation building via Google is not only achieving a situation when after typing a given phrase into the search engine we are able to locate our company. More importantly, Google enables monitoring of what, 'the net says about us'. Because internet users are active simultaneously at many places, companies create profiles on increasingly popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Nasza Klasa, YouTube, Twitter or LinkedIn. Discussing those tools in detail goes beyond the scope of this paper. Although they are widely popular, it is worth pointing to their role in increasing brand visibility. Brand visibility will result however not from high fan numbers but from a meaningful and authentic dialog with community members. A crucial role in business environment is played by GoldenLine, a well-known social service which successfully functions as a communication platform for business people. Interestingly, GoldenLine also attracts head hunters who run there recruitment projects targeted at experts and top-level specialists with high qualifications and an impressive work record.

Finally, it needs to be noted that today's increasingly efficient systems will soon enable indirect communication without any need for face to face contact. Skype is a communicator already used for this purpose but it can be expected that in the near future both the quality and volume of such contacts will improve dramatically, eliminating to a large extent the need for travelling in business and for private purposes.

The rules of image development in the Internet

While executing image enhancing activities it is useful to observe a number of rules in order to gain satisfying results. Firstly, **the rule of the prism** encourages us to look at our company from the point of view of a client, an observer or a person taking a decision based on the information in the Internet. When designing online campaigns or planning sporadic actions it is useful to stop and think how an internet user is going to evaluate our activity as that's the very moment when the image is being shaped. Secondly, **the rule of planning** says that all online activities should be well prepared and planned in time. It is

not recommendable to generate ideas without prior analysis of the situation including a comprehensive analysis of all online activity so far. It makes sense to answer the question which activities were successful and which ended up in failure. Thirdly, **the rule of the gravity centre** recommends that online activity should focus on one or two, maximum several markers that make a company stand out from the competition. If initially it was not crystal clear, it is necessary to identify the key value based on the brand and market research and analysis in order to give solid foundations to future activities. This principle could be also named the rule of distinctiveness as it is concerned with making a brand more distinctive through unambiguous communications. The fourth is the **rule of a long-term approach** which postulates that image is built on an on-going basis over a long period of time. Consequently, if we are interested in an immediate effect (e.g. increased sales) it makes sense to direct resources to advertising aimed at instantaneous though impermanent results. If we accept however that our goal is to build a strong image, the rule of a long term approach assumes a special significance. Despite the fact that in the Internet everything is happening faster than in the real world, image building requires patience and a long-term perspective. The fifth rule accentuates consistency in all activities undertaken. It is unacceptable to send incoherent communications at random directions. The **rule of consistency** is a pre-requisite for successful image building and applies to the offline world too. Obviously, consistency must be a characteristics of all elements, not only the website graphics or a company logo. Finally, there is the **rule of iteration**. As in the real world, a one-off message is not sufficient to anchor the key image attributes and permanently associate them with the brand. To achieve this purpose a constant (repeated) presence is required at places frequented by stakeholders. Though they cannot guarantee the effect in the form of a desired image in the net, the above principles represent a set of recommendations which when ignored are likely to cause online communications to miss their target altogether.

Practical aspects of building an image in the Internet.

The familiarity with image building tools offered by the Internet is not enough to gain more than these tools promise to give. The extra bit needed is an idea for an interesting online campaign that would use the Internet only as a medium for spreading its message. It is not surprising then that beside using obvious gimmicks and tools available in the Internet certain companies opt for a mix of offline and online solutions while involving users in joint actions. An example of such marketing could be the action Operacja Kapsel run several years ago for the Polish fruit juice producer Tymbark. The campaign used the popularity of computer games and of the Tymbark bottle cap, one of the most recognizable elements of this brand (mainly due to texts on the reverse of the cap). The Tymbark game was the innovative *alternate reality game* – a type of games blurring the boundaries between the computer world and the real world. The game engaged thousands of internet users, resulting in nearly half a million visits to a website specially constructed for the purposes of the campaign and, more importantly, in the nationwide internet publicity. The main goal of the campaign was to attract the highest possible number of the brand admirers by involving them in the quest for the stolen Tymbark cap of historic value. Information about the cap

was searched not only on the company's website but also on the most popular networking services using practically all online and offline communication channels then available. These channels were tracked by hundreds of users who were given new clues while the quest progressed. Some tasks required team work and looking for answers in the real world. The game's finale was celebrated in Cracow, where one of the players found "the stolen cap" and won the reward. The non-standard, at that time, approach brought resulted in an unexpected outcome. Apart from raising huge interest on the part of internet game players, the campaign attracted attention of all important media dedicated to enthusiasts of new technologies and advertising or image campaigns. The Tymbark campaign was on many occasions presented as a case-study during conferences on image building in the Internet. Not only did it succeed in attracting attention of target groups to the brand and the company but it also changed the perceptions of the brand as created for young people full of energy and passion – thus partying with the previous image of "a quiet juice for children". Because Tymbark managed to permanently engage genuine game players its campaign was catapulted onto the levels of popularity unprecedented in the history of the Internet in Poland instead of passing unnoticed as many other promotion events.

Another oft-quoted example of the effective image enhancing campaign was The Fun Theory, a social action of the German car maker Volkswagen. The idea behind the campaign was to create a series of films promoting socially acceptable behaviours connected with environmental protection and health care, which soon had a life of their own in the net. This happened owing to the so-called viral marketing: internet users sending the films on to other users. This formula worked so well because the films were interesting and amusing. For example, one film showed how to persuade passers-by to use traditional stairs instead of an escalator (by replacing steps with keys sounding like the piano when stepped upon) and another one how to encourage rubbish segregation (after disposing a bottle into a purpose-made container you would score points like in the games popular in the 1990s. The effect of the campaign was stunning – some of the films (the campaign made a dozen or so films) were viewed nearly 200 million times each! Even more publicity was added by presenting the Volkswagen campaign as a case study at numerous conferences, just as it happened in the case of the Tymbark campaign. What accounted for Volkswagen's success was not only the marketing formula but also an inspiring idea to use trivial issues to provoke a change of mind attitude. This campaign undoubtedly strengthened Volkswagen's reputation despite critics saying it was so universal that practically any company could use it to promote its products. Whether it is true or not is open to question, but the fact remains that encouraging pro-social behaviours is generally welcomed by the public. In addition, promoting such values by a private company fits well into a pattern of strengthening image by successful CSR strategies.

Some companies decide to promote their brand through an apparently simple form of online communication which is a company blog. This electronic diary is however often either misused or not used in full. This is due to the fact that quite often companies are not aware of all possibilities offered by this channel or simply have no idea how to use it to entice clients or build the image. So what activities should be taken to ensure that a company blog fulfils its role? There are no explicit answers. This said, the way

a blog is run is always important. Based on the analysis of similar forms of communication, one thing is certain – content is absolutely vital. For example, Bank Zachodni WBK uses its blog to post up-to-date information about competitions for clients, new possibilities (e.g. how to raise deposit interest rates, lower credit interest rates or obtain partial cost return when paying by card) or news from the world of banking. So, although the blog serves as the actual product placement (because it contains plenty of the advertising materials), the clients consider it both accessible and convenient as the information provided by the bank is useful. The bank benefits from making clients use the services promoted on the blog and also in terms of enhancing its image as a responsible institution which is willing to keep its clients informed and is interested in open communication – as evidenced by the discussions accessible through the posts on the bank’s website.

Another example of a company that takes full advantage of possibilities offered by online communication is a small shop called Rupieciarnia. Its blog, run by the staff, uses brilliant ideas for client interactions – it focuses on the promotion of the knitting kits by demonstrating what can be made with the use of a range of products offered. In addition to enhancing the company image, a blog of this type serves to provide information and inspiration to cultivate a hobby.

The clothing retailer Cropp is a company that makes even better use of the Internet potential while tailoring its promotion activity to its target group. The materials posted on the company blog are tongue-in-cheek instructions on how to survive school years – targeting the main clients of the brand. This blog functions as a place in the net where you can have fun. Such connotations enable image transfer by extending positive values associated with the blog onto the company.

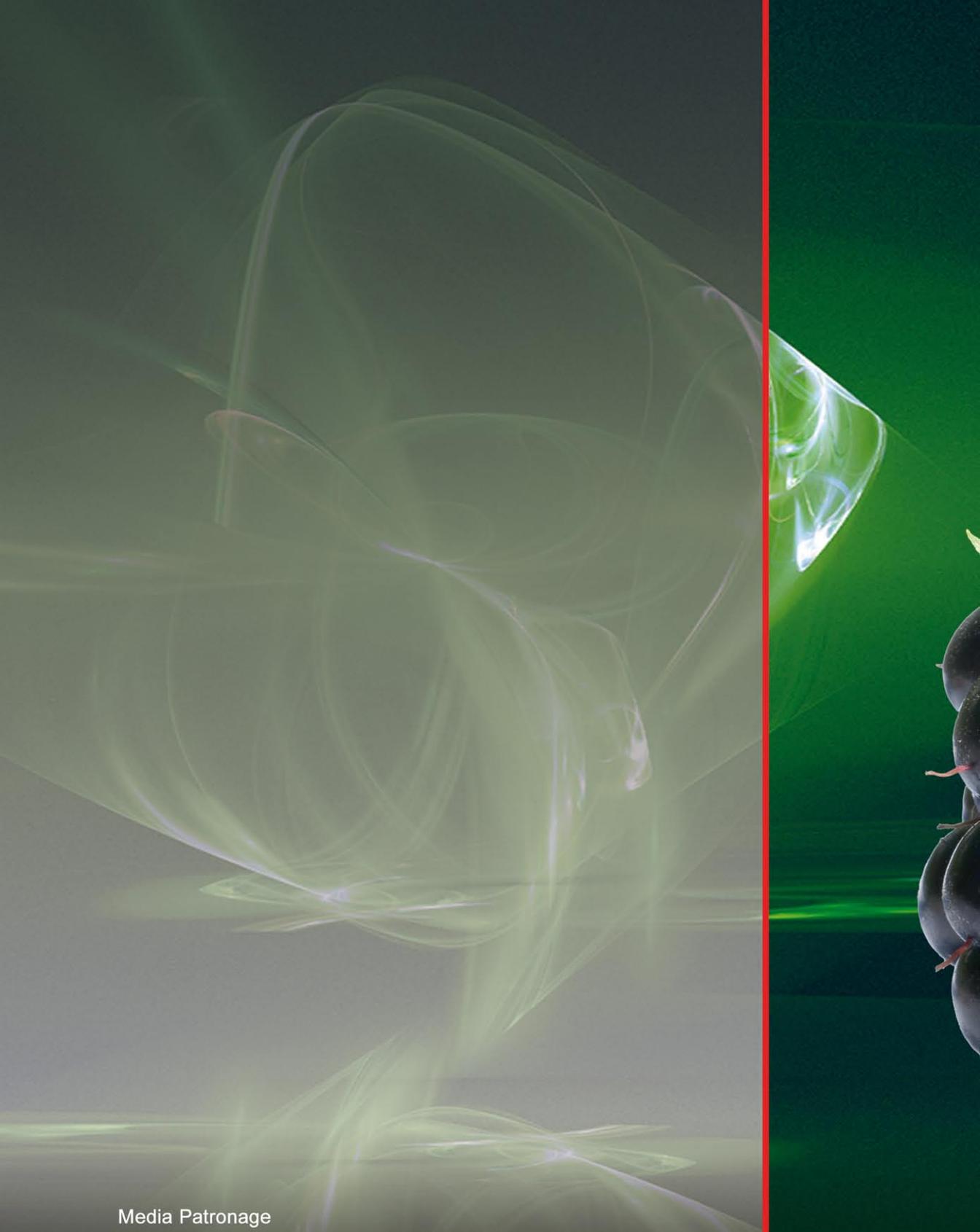
Not only have the blogs discussed above been appreciated by internet users as their most important addressees but they also won recognition at the prestigious competition for the best company blog in 2011.

Conclusion

Some time ago marketers started to claim that “if you don’t exist in the Internet, you don’t exist at all.” What used to be a catchphrase is now gaining a new currency. Today, as evidenced by abundant research and reports concerning the Internet, using the world web for building an image as well as the very presence in the virtual world is so natural that its lack is often interpreted by users as a cause for alarm. A company without a website is suspicious and becomes an object of scrutiny. It is now very common to begin searching for information about a company or an organization by typing its name in the search engine or via Google. On the other hand, being aware of all the possibilities offered by the Internet and not taking advantage of them may amount to the sin of not acting. At the same time it is important to note that in every following year there is an increase in the number of people who have access to the Internet, including those searching for information about companies and their products and services.

Online reputation management is here to stay and there is hardly any need to convince anyone of the necessity to use internet tools for image building. Rather, attention should be devoted to skilful se-

lection of methods well adjusted to the company's position on the market and its stakeholders profiles. Most importantly, however, one needs to remember that the net, though offering a wealth of interesting possibilities, is only a medium where image building can take place while the rules governing this process as well as that of establishing good reputation have remained unchanged in that that first and foremost they require honesty.



Media Patronage

