

PRESENT STATE AND THE PERSPECTIVES OF SMS MARKETING IN ROMANIA

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Abstract:

The SMS (Short Message Service), which emerged at the beginning of the 90s as a result of the telephone services' need for diversification, it is now used in the communication campaigns involving customized messaging, but also in general messaging campaigns sent both to the existing clients and to the potential ones. Thus, the SMS became widely used, turning into one of the most popular instruments of Mobile marketing and, soon becoming a separate concept named the SMS Marketing.

Although there is the preconception that the mobile marketing and, namely, the SMS marketing is intended to be used primarily by the big corporations, which have the power and also the availability to invest substantial amounts of money in this sort of programs, the present paper intends precisely to debunk these preconceptions and, hence, to present the advantage of such marketing campaigns for the segment consisting of small and middle companies in Romania.

Key words: SMS marketing; mobile marketing; SMS advertising; Short Message Service (SMS); SMS marketing agencies.

JEL classification: M15, M31, M37, M39.

INTRODUCTION

The mobile telephone service allows access in a matter of few seconds to consumers, thus both the brands and the consumers can interact one with each other and may remain connected both by simple text messages, or by more elaborated instruments like applications or mobile sites. This is happening because the mobile telephone allows the access to the largest possible audience at the moment. On a global level, there are over 4,7 billion connections, much above the access to internet, television and written press, and in 2017 it is estimated that their number will reach 5,1 billion (Fox, 2013). Considering this, but also the relatively low cost of communication, for the brand and the consumer as well, the mobile phone changed and will continue to change the marketing horizon in the world, and, implicitly, in Romania.

The SMS - short message service or, also known among the specialists as the service of short messages, represents an application available on every mobile phone which allows us to send short text messages to a certain recipient and, at the same time, one of the most used services around the world.

The SMS concept emerged at the beginning of the 80s when, in many communities of mobile communication, was wanted a development of GSM services in the text messaging field. A series of experts have then participated to debates regarding the appearance of the short message service as we know it and, as in any debate, the opinions were very different. Interesting is the fact that very few would consider a service which should allow the transmission of text messages from one mobile phone to another.

It took a while until the SMS switched from the theory phase to the practical one, because the first SMS with the text “Merry Christmas” was sent using the Vodafone network in Great Britain, only on the 3rd of December 1992, but its forwarding was made from a computer to a mobile

phone. But the first SMS transmitted from one mobile phone to another was actually sent in 1993 by Riku Pihkonen, a Nokia engineer.

Meanwhile, the SMS grew, becoming today one of the most popular instruments of Mobile Marketing, in Europe being sent over 100 million of SMS with advertising characteristics on monthly basis. The SMS became to be used especially in the communication campaigns with customized messaging, but also in the campaigns with general messaging, both to the existing clients, but mostly to the potential clients, therefore belonging to the wider field of direct marketing, as a type of promotion which reaches a well-defined set of targets, with the scope of generating a measurable result, by using different media instruments with addressable characteristics. The direct marketing and, namely, the mobile marketing, have a significant advantage compared to other forms of promotion, because their efficiency can be calculated up to the last money invested, with the help of the ROI indicator- Return of Investment – which must answer the question: how much money resulted from the investment made?

The marketing through mobile phones (the mobile marketing) has become, at the beginning of 2000, more and more popular in Europe and in a few regions of Asia, when the companies began to collect mobile phone numbers, and today, the market of mobile marketing has already become one of the most rapidly developed markets worldwide because it benefits from an unseeingly power and, implicitly, form the potential to reach the customers by the call for action.

Both for the marketing professionals and for the business people as well, the SMS has represented an opportunity to control the communication environment and to treat much better their customers and collaborators. The improved customer services, the communication and the value delivered will determine spectacular results regarding the customers' opinions and the success of the business.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the number of the articles written on the topic of mobile marketing knew significant growths beginning with 2000, Shankar and Balasubramanian (2009, p.128) consider that there are still many aspects to be analyzed regarding this field.

The mobile marketing emerged as a new instrument of marketing communication and the new technologies which appeared determined the evolution of the last one (Balan, Zegreanu, 2012, p.787). The major entity in this field is represented by the Mobile Marketing Association, which defines the mobile marketing as a set of practices which give the organizations the possibility to communicate, to get in touch with the target market in an interactive manner, but mostly relevant, through the instrumentality of a mobile device (MMA Association, 2009).

The international expert Tomi Ahonen (2008) has identified 7 unique characteristics of the mobile phone with direct applicability to marketing:

1. The mobile phone is personal, even intimate – it contains all our contacts, all our personal messages that we send and receive from the others, in it we keep important data, photos, etc.;
2. The mobile phone is always with the bearer – people take the phone with them wherever they go, together with the keys and the wallet;
3. The mobile phone is always open;
4. The mobile phone has a taxation system already embedded;
5. The mobile phone became an instrument to facilitate the creativity – the new smartphones allow us to take pictures at a spotless quality, materials editing, etc.;
6. The mobile phone allows the exact measurement – any action made on the mobile phone can be exactly measured (call number/duration, the number of sent/received SMS, etc.);
7. The mobile phone allows us to identify the social context of the media consumer – aside from the fact that the mobile phone caches the information from the user, but it also allows the identification of the context in which the user interacts with the brand or with other users.

The mobile marketing gives huge opportunities to the companies. The marketing specific activities integrated in the mobile devices allow companies to directly communicate with their customers, actual or potential, without facing the barriers of time and space. The possibilities for the marketers are numerous, but many of the mobile marketing aspects require a detailed investigation (Haghirian, Madlberger and Tanuskova, 2005).

In Romania, the agencies of Mobile Marketing provide a diversity of services, but most of them are specialized on what we are referring to as SMS Marketing, because this is the most popular service and which brings the highest receipts (Balan, Zegreanu, 2012, p.793).

The marketing through SMS has a positive impact in relation to brand awareness and the quality perceived by the consumers (Smutkupt, Krairit and Khang, 2012, p. 539). Some scientists consider that the marketing through SMS has a limited value in convincing the potential clients, but, nevertheless, it has a significant impact on the actual consumers (Aamir, Ikream et al., 2013, p. 67).

The success of the SMS as a marketing instrument depends, to a great extent on the consumers' degree of acceptance regarding the mobile phone services (Bauer, Barnes et al., 2005, p. 182). In 2005 a conceptual model was developed regarding the efficiency of the SMS advertising campaigns, which puts the emphasis on the written message and the media characteristics as factors which can influence the attention, intention and, as a consequence, the consumer's behavior (Scharl, Dickinger and Murphy, 2005).

During time, the factors which influence the response of the consumers of mobile telephone services to the mobile marketing campaigns were also studied, from a purely theoretical perspective. Thus, it has been established the fact that the acceptance of the SMS having a commercial character comes from the day-to-day activities of the mobile phone users: information services, registration of the personal telephone number in different online campaigns, etc. (Sultan, Rhom and Gao, 2009).

On the European market, the most important factor which influences the intention of the great companies to invest in the SMS Marketing is the ability to create a brand. The desire of "intimacy"/security negatively influences the intention (Okazaki and Taylor, 2008).

Wei, Xiaoming and Pan consider that the previous agreement and the tangible benefices are factors which can influence in their turn the attitude and response of the mobile phone users, which belong to a target market of a SMS Marketing campaign (Wei, Xiamong and Pan, 2010). The more the number of commercial text messages is larger, the more the level of tolerance of the users decreases.

The most important thing to consider is still the fact that the SMS will remain the prevailing environment of mobile marketing and, in the following years, because of the decreased costs compared to other communication environments (Rader et al., 2010, p.37).

PRESENT STATE AND THE PERSPECTIVES OF SMS MARKETING IN ROMANIA

In Romania, the SMS Marketing is regarded as being the main element of the mobile Marketing and, at the same time, the most advanced service of available Bulk SMS by which the companies can promote their products and services, can send news or launch SMS campaigns to clients, collaborators and partners, minimizing the costs, efforts and time. The marketing by SMS is advantaged by the fact that it has certain tools in order to sort and group the campaign recipients, flexible instruments for SMS customization, instant detailed reports regarding the status of the initiated marketing campaigns (smslink.ro).

In Romania, the mobile marketing starts from the assumption that people have the tendency to read all the SMS they receive, unlike the email or the banners where the advertising can be ignored by the recipient. Thus, starting from here and considering the potential audience, one can tell that one of the aspects which turn the SMS Marketing into a strong instrument is the personal characteristics of the mobile phones. According to sms2go.ro, one of the biggest online agencies of

mobile marketing from Romania, over 90% of the SMS messages are read by the users, thus generating high rates of response.

Here there are some of the advantages of the marketing by SMS:

- *simplicity and efficiency in use* - the SMS Marketing is a service which is easy to use, intuitive, but mostly efficiently because one can send equally simple 1 or 100.000 SMS, everything being online;
- *the SMS reaches instantly the customer/recipient*, hence in a relevant time for the campaign's initiators;
- *the SMS "acquired" form the specialized companies will never expire*, so they can be used at any moment;
- *detailed graphic reports in real time* - the beneficiaries of the SMS campaigns receive regularly reports on the messages sent, the messages' statute, the most used operators or the most frequent message categories;
- in general, *the messages which reach the client/the recipient are not charged*, from objective reasons (non-existent number, closed telephone, etc.);
- *the unitary cost of a SMS sent is unique* no matter the mobile network of the client/recipient;
- *the easiness to create, develop and manage the subscribers databases*;
- *the possibility to schedule and customize the text messages* – the beneficiary of the campaign can send messages at a certain date and hour, can send customized messages to recipients, the message comprising up to 25 variables, which will change with each message sent (for instance, the name of the recipient, the number of invoice, due date, etc.);
- *the easiness to segment* – the beneficiary of the campaign of SMS marketing can have at his disposal an advanced interface for the recipients management, which helps to organize and segment the target public into different groups, everything being based on the available segmenting criteria.

In the last few years, the SMS became an advertising channel which must be considered, especially because, according to statistics, the messages sent within the SMS campaigns, are read within the first 4 minutes from their transmission, compared to the email marketing campaigns (advertising emails, newsletters), in which the messages can go into the spam folder or are read much latter (remarca-te.ro).

On the market of mobile marketing in Romania there are two types of campaigns which can be successfully performed:

- Push-type campaigns, by which it can be sent text messages of products or services launch/promotion, special offers or promotions, customized offers for different types of potential clients, greetings and cards transmission on different special occasions, etc.
- Pull-type campaigns, which consist in the stimulation of the target respondents by different promotion campaigns and by different incentive mechanisms (awards, discounts) to communicate certain required data. The main objective is to transform the data sent into the databases, which will be used afterwards in other push-type campaigns.

In other words, the push-type campaigns are the most used in the marketing from Romania for: promotion (transmission of information regarding the promotions, new products/services, stock alerts/price), reminding (alerts until the starting or ending date of an event), loyalty and new customer attraction (transmission of vouchers to the existing clients on the condition to send them also to their friends), sales increase (by offering discounts, coupons), etc.

The main resource in the direct marketing based on the use of SMS is, similar to email marketing case, the recipients' database. The database represents a collection of data about the natural persons (B2C) or legal persons (B2B-companies), permanently updated and used as the main resource in the direct marketing activities (Institute of Direct Marketing, UK).

For instance, Results.ro – an advertising agency specialized in integrated solutions of direct marketing, provides to those interested, access to the databases with the natural persons, which

include complex data about hundreds of thousands of persons at the national level. In this particular case, the segmenting is done based on demographic criteria (gender, age, geographic area, profession and estimated income) and on psychological criteria (assets held, subscription to different magazines, sites). In what the legal person database is concerned (Business to Business), this incorporates data on all active companies in Romania. In all, one can access 680 000 companies at the national level, amongst which 160.000 only in Bucharest. The segmenting is done based on criteria like: the identification data of the companies (name, tax identification number, creation date/year, county/locality), the financial data (turnover, profit, number of employees, foreign equity) etc.

When choosing a data base, it is very important to verify if it fulfills the following conditions:

- it is a recently updated database;
- it has a high degree of data accuracy;
- provides the opportunity to apply certain multiple criteria of segmenting;
- the data is collected in a correct manner.

In Romania there is the preconceived idea that the mobile marketing and namely the SMS marketing is destined especially to big corporations, which have the power and the availability to invest large amounts of money in this type of programs. For this reason, the small and middle companies segment is largely overseen and under-served in the mobile marketing industry. Today, with almost 3000 lei per year, a small or middle company can benefit from the same type of campaigns which normally would cost a big company around 25.000 lei per year. This opportunity is owed mainly to the large agencies of mobile marketing from Romania, whose programs share the costs of the campaigns to a wide range of customers, thus bringing smaller costs to everyone. This way, the balance for the small and middle companies is being equilibrated.

Compared to other countries, in Romania the mobile marketing can be characterized as being at a relatively low stage, but, nevertheless, it has a high growth rate. For the moment, there are almost 23 billion active mobile telephone cards, used mainly for voice calls and SMS, which shows the high potential of this market.

According to the Mobile Marketing Association (mma-romania.ro), Romanians use around 5 billion smart-phones, of a total market of 22,8 billion of mobile phones, and these numbers increase as the price of the mobile phones is decreasing (wall-street.ro). Evidently, the same ascending trend will be also followed by the mobile applications, thus creating a mobile marketing platform with rapid development. The advertisers which sponsor this type of applications or create applications specially dedicated to the promotion of a brand or a campaign are amongst the first beneficiaries of this increase (Vartopeanu, 2013).

In Romania, almost 46% of the people who own a mobile phone use the internet, and the utilization rate presents evidently positive tendencies, according to the data issued by the Mobile Marketing association in Romania (MMA Romania). Moreover, almost 60% of the mobile internet users in the country use mobile devices for daily connection to the internet, environment in which they spend almost 18 minutes, quite a bit if we make a comparison with countries like England where the average time spent on the internet is of 40 minutes or like USA, where the number of minutes reach to 65 (curierulnational.ro).

“The users of mobile internet are less opened to the use of the service at its maximum potential. Most of the users use the Internet in order to check their email and to search for information. At the same time, in Romania there are still many sites which are not adapted for the mobile phone format which makes that not even will the advertisers be convinced in what extent the Romanian consumer would be prepared for an ample campaign of “new mobile” type. We can now draw the conclusion that Romania will still remain a market of the SMS” (Novolan, 2013).

Although the SMS will continue to represent the basis for the mobile marketing campaigns in Romania, significant increases will have also the mobile applications, namely the mobile advertising, taking into account the important potential in what the volume of smart-phones on the market is concerned.

“The applications for smart-phones will reach this year almost 10% of the value of 10 billion Euro of the market of mobile marketing, including also the productions costs and the communication costs for this type of applications”(Viropeanu, 2013).

At the present moment, in Romania there is an important number of agencies which provide complete services starting with the mobile marketing, and continuing with SMS marketing. At a simple search on Google, we can see that the pages are filled with this type of agencies which, mostly, provide nearly the same promotion services using SMS campaigns (either Push-type or Pull-type). From a technical point of view, an SMS sent to a recipient can have up to 160 characters. If the message is longer, it will be split in two or three separate messages which will be concatenated (united) on the recipient’s phone, but within the limits of 612 characters, namely 4 standard messages. For the concatenated messages, few of the characters at the beginning of the each SMS are used to show that this particular message is part of a longer one. Most of the modern phones recognize this header and automatically reassembles the separated parts in one single text message. For the longer messages, because of the reassembling header, the maximum number of characters allowed in a message is of 153. Thus, two text messages: $2 \times 153 = 306$ characters, three text messages $3 \times 153 = 612$ characters. To be specified that the initiator of the campaign is charged individually for each message sent.

The tariff grids for the SMS marketing services vary from one agency to another. Generally, the prices for a campaign up to 1000 messages sent are somewhere between 0,045 euro (whosms.ro) and 0,05 euro (webstage.ro, smslink.ro). The more the number of messages written by the campaign increases, the more substantial decreases in the tariffs one can notice (Table.1).

Table no 1. - SMS marketing tariff plans for Romania

Tariff plan	Text message volume	Estimated tariff/SMS
1.	0-1000	0,045-0,05 euro
2.	1001-5000	0,04-0,045 euro
3.	5001-10000	0,037-0,04 euro
4.	10001-20000	0,033-0,037 euro
5.	> 20000	0,029-0,033 euro

Generally, the tariff plans distinguish themselves not only by the number of SMS sent and their prices, but also by other characteristics like: the validity of the SMS (the higher the number of text messages, the longer their validity, which means that the campaign initiator could use those SMS for a long period of time, starting from 90 days up to 1 year), supplemental fees for account activation (for certain campaigns which involve a low number of messages transmitted it is necessary to activate the account online which involves an activation charge from 5 to 20 euro/campaign) (sms2go.ro). Also, the tariffs can vary depending on the mobile phone operator to which most of the recipients of the campaign messages are subscribed to.

An analysis undertaken by web2sms, the leader of the market of mobile marketing in Romania, shows that the response rate for an SMS campaign (those clients who, following an SMS call a telephone number or answer positively to that message) has had an average of 1,7% in 2011. But, the response rates vary very much at the industry level and depend on the expertise of the company which undergoes the SMS marketing campaign. For instance, in Fashion retail the response rate was of 8%, and in tourism (on the segment of tourism agencies and ticketing) reached up to 12%, which means that 12% of the target persons (which received an SMS), went to the tourism agencies in order to benefit from certain promotional tourism packages (Constantinescu, 2012).

Assuming that in such a campaign, 10.000 persons address with 0.04Eur/SMS it results costs of 400 EUR for the tourism agency. With a minimum conversion rate of 1% (100 persons go to the agency and buy at least one tourism package) and an average profit per product (commission) of 15

EUR, it results that it will generate sales of 1500Eur, thus a profit of 1400 Eur for this kind of initiative.

The efficiency of the campaigns of SMS Marketing can be done based on the analysis systems and the reports made available by the mobile marketing agencies. These systems provide numerous monitoring possibilities for the optimal carrying out and finalization of the campaigns, thus, all types of messages can be sent based on the analysis of the supplied statistics.

One of the benefits represented by the use of the SMS as a marketing instrument is that not always it is necessary the existence of a database or a list of customers. There are also solutions for the companies which didn't define a database comprising telephone numbers. For this purpose, the great operators of mobile phones from Romania, in partnership with the mobile marketing campaigns, have defined special packages of SMS advertising services for the companies who did not possess a database or who would like to attract new clients. For instance, Orange Romania transmits the campaigns of SMS Marketing (offer, promotion or other information) to the database including the clients of Orange Romania (which contains over 2,5 billion subscribers), segmented and filtered based on the following criteria: age, gender, the minimum value of the phone invoice (credit worthiness), localization (county, locality), type of client (natural person, legal entity, etc.).

The actual forwarding of SMS will be done directly by Orange Romania after the agreement of the mobile users' database on which the transmission will be made, the database being confidential. After the transmission of the campaign, an explanatory report and statistics regarding the campaign will be returned.

Vodafone Romania, another important mobile phone operator from Romania, also established its own SMS services packages, making available two types of packages:

- SMS Marketing – represent the campaigns of Push SMS mobile marketing which can be transmitted to the clients' database of Vodafone Romania, reaching an audience of over 4 billion users which can be targeted by 12 criteria in order to reach a maximum ROI (Return of Investment).

- SMS Insert – it is an SMS with positive characteristics, sent to the users having prepaid cards with the purpose to confirm the card recharge or a bonus. Regarding the SMS which is received from Vodafone, it has 100 available characters which can be used in advertising purposes. Because there are sent over 150.000 SMS of this kind, Vodafone makes available 10 segmenting criteria for this type of campaigns.

Amongst the segmenting criteria used by Vodafone, we mention: age, gender, type of client (natural persons, legal entity), behavioral criteria (based on the studies undertaken by Vodafone), the address used for sending the bills to the client or the county in which the Vodafone card was activated, geographic lifestyle (the clients with higher probability to live, work, to go shopping or to be just passing through a certain area), the possible monthly income (depending on the average of expenses)/ the value of the subscription, type of the phone used (type, value), etc.

Regarding the third great mobile phone operator – Cosmote, this diversified its range of services entering also on the market of mobile marketing even since 2006, when Cosmote signed a collaboration contract with Voxline Communication, a company specialized in supplying SMS marketing services in Romania.

The SMS Marketing to the customers' databases of Orange, Vodafone and Cosmote Romania is a permission based service, thus the SMS are transmitted exclusively to the recipients who approved receiving advertising SMS from Orange/Vodafone/Cosmote Romania and their partners. For instance, in the Vodafone's case, following a research undertaken by the campaign, they've reached to the conclusion that almost 58% amongst the Romanian users of mobile phone consider that it would be nice to receive advertising messages by SMS on their mobile phones and more than 30% consider that they would be useful (Figure 1).

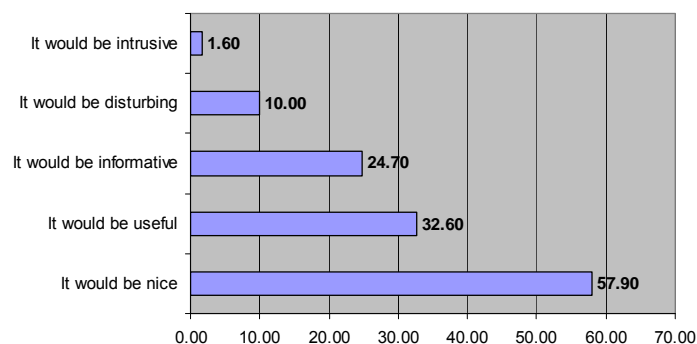


Figure no 1. – The opinions of the subscribers of Vodafone Romania regarding the possibility to receive advertising messages on their personal phones

CONCLUSION

Currently, the SMS is having a consumption rate relatively high in the case of consumers of mobile phone services, but it is less used in the commercial environment. In other words, while billions of SMS are daily sent between the individual consumers, their use as an instrument of marketing by the companies is still reduced compared to its huge potential.

Nevertheless, the trend is about to change during the last period, because more and more organizations acknowledge the benefits provided by the SMS, by integrating it in the communication strategies and marketing. The reason for this increase in the business environment is very simple: the SMS campaigns assume low costs, they have a high response rate compared to other promotion instruments and the delivery time of the advertising message is extremely short. These advantages, together with those mentioned in this paper allow both to the big companies and to the small and middle ones to gain and to keep their clients through loyalty programs, but especially through the consolidation of the brands in all the activity domains.

The advertising services by SMS puts the initiator in direct and immediate contact with the potential clients for which the advertising campaign is created, the efficiency of this type of advertising is ensured by the fact that the commercial message reaches to 100% of the potential customers and in the shortest time possible.

Thus, if the target market is well chosen, the marketing strategy well-built and the message sent has a non-aggressive character, the SMS marketing campaigns can represent an efficient communication instrument, and a data collection instrument.

The SMS as an instrument and a communication environment must be treated with maximum of attention by keeping in mind the extremely personal nature for the recipient. While the SMS is one of the most penetrating inventions, if we relate to the utilization rate, we are under the necessity to raise the following question: how do we exploit this communication environment, without making the same mistakes as, for instance, in the case, of email marketing, and by fructifying to the maximum the lessons learned from the use of traditional communication instruments?

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