MARKETING COMMUNICATION AS A VECTOR OF THE ROMANIAN SMALL BUSINESSES SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Taking into account that sustainable development of organization’s business depends largely on the quality of the relationships it builds on long-term and marketing communication plays a key role in this process, the purpose of this article is to give a perception of SMEs customers regarding their way to communicate. The results of the research conducted for this purpose may be considered by consultants and decision makers in small and medium enterprises to set up communication programs likely to produce favorable results in the light of sustainable development. Considered to have an important role in generating a prosperous economy, SMEs should be encouraged in the process of increasing competitiveness in a sustainable manner, including by providing leverage to enable them to make better use specific tools of marketing communication. The study shows that the most used tools are not necessarily the most appropriate, in terms of customers. Therefore, in order to promote sustainable development of business, small and medium enterprises must learn to choose the most appropriate ways of marketing communication, ensuring strengthen relationships with customers and gain competitive advantage.

Keywords: Marketing communication, sustainable development, sustainable business, promotional tools, SMEs, Romania

JEL Classification: M31

Introduction

Small and medium enterprises play a major role in both the development and developed world, being regarded as the engine of economic growth globally (Amin and Banerjee, 2007).

Given the importance of SMEs for the world economy and the sector’s impact on social and environmental issues, the SMEs role and the potential benefits from sustainable business has to be actively acknowledged and promoted.

In the case of SMEs, which play an important role in economic growth, the main objective

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of meeting the demands of society can be achieved only through an integrated approach to sustainable development values (Olaru et al., 2010). Sustainable development is a complex attribute of strategy development, being a multidimensional concept that involves all aspects of human activity and interest all nations of the world, requiring action at both national and global level (Zaharia et al, 2010). At the same time, sustainable development is crucial for economic success and commercial advantage through improving organization's reputation among stakeholders (Dinu, 2010).

SMEs are customer oriented organizations. They are possess strong resources and technical skills but often do not have high degrees of financial resources and marketing abilities necessary to create and transmit value to the firm’s stakeholders (Cioppi and Pencarelli, 2009). In this context, the marketing communications mix plays a critical role in getting SMEs products and services to the market and making the potential customers aware of them. Therefore, the development and expansion of the SME sector depending on the ability of the entrepreneurs to ensure the market is educated about the existence of their product or service, its quality attributes and benefits. Marketing communications can cover practice across a wide range of market contexts from large companies to small ones, but SMEs use marketing communications tools in ways more specific to their sector than do large organizations (Eng and Spickett-Jones, 2011).

Marketing communication supports the relational activities of the company and it is a key element of survival and development for SMEs because it is able to emphasize the specific features of their offer, after which they can sustain and strengthen customized relations with current and potential customers (Cioppi and Buratti, 2009).

As a part of marketing mix, promotional policy has a considerable contribution to sustainable marketing, as we may use the term sustainable communication. According to this concept, the promotional activities have to be oriented to an integrated communication, through which all the categories of stakeholders be correctly informed about product’s characteristics and about company’s activities. The design of campaigns takes into consideration the characteristics of the target market, its sensitivity to environmental problems, the motivations in purchasing green products (Popescu et al., 2010).

However, given that most SMEs do not have the necessary marketing skills, communication efforts do not always generate the desired results. The organization must analyze the way in which the target market has answered to previous communication and identify the channels to which the stakeholder groups had the most effective reactions (Moise, 2011). Knowledge of customer opinion about the usefulness of the techniques and tools used by SMEs to promote their offer is important. The results of such investigations can be used to develop and implement effective communication approaches, able to contribute to the sustainable growth of the business.

An obvious link between marketing (and the marketing communication) and sustainability is represented by the emphasis many companies put on their commitment to sustainability, in the attempt of differentiating themselves from their competitors and to enhance their corporate brand and reputation (Jones et al., 2008). The promotional messages should outline honestly and accurately the environmental benefits of products, with a focus on product’s attributes, and the company’s interest in developing corporate socially responsible programs, including enough information used by the customers in their buying decision making process (Popescu et al., 2010).
So communication plays a strategically role in SMEs. On one hand, on the side of the entrepreneur, sales personnel and the front-office communication favors relational marketing through highly customized actions of communication that are interactive and based on reciprocal and continuous learning. On the other hand, the lack of marketing skills leads the company to ineffective actions of communication and to a certain difficulty in reaching and controlling the market segment (Cioppi and Buratti, 2009).

1. Encouraging the enhancement of the SMEs sector in the European Union and Romania in the context of sustainable development

The European Union’s official definition given to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) fall into this category all firms having less than 250 employees and operating independently of the major companies in the market, with an annual turnover of less than EUR 50 million or volume of the total assets of less than EUR 43 million. The SMEs sector includes three types of enterprises: (1) microenterprises, defined as enterprises employing less than 10 persons and generating annual turnovers and/or annual balance sheet totals not exceeding EUR 2 million; (2) small enterprises, defined as enterprises employing between 11 to 49 persons and generating annual turnovers and/or annual balance sheet totals not exceeding EUR 10 million; and (3) medium-sized enterprises, defined as enterprises employing 50 to 249 persons, generating annual turnovers of less than EUR 50 millions and/or annual balance sheet totals not exceeding EUR 43 million.

A rapid assessment of the SMEs development in the European Union shows that: (a) in 2012, there were 20727627 SMEs, representing 99.8% of all businesses operating in the EU; (b) the SMEs sector has created 87477311 jobs and the specific weight of jobs created by SMEs exceeded 75% in several fields; (c) the average number of employees of an SME active in the non-financial business sector was 4.22. SMEs employed almost 90% of total workforce in the recycling sectors, motor vehicles trade and construction; (d) SMEs sector generated EUR 3587540 million, representing 58.1% of total value added in the European Union and contributed with over 80% to the value added economic in sectors such as real estate transactions, recycling and construction.

In this context, The Europe 2020 Strategy set out the foundations for future growth and competitiveness of the SMEs sector considering a renewed vision and a number of actions to be taken at both EU and Member States' level to support entrepreneurship in Europe, based on three pillars: (1) developing entrepreneurial education and training to support growth and business creation (through increasing the prevalence and quality of entrepreneurial learning and higher education for entrepreneurship), (2) creating a right business environment through better access to finance, supporting new businesses in crucial phases of their lifecycle and help them grow, unleashing new business opportunities in the digital age, easier business transfers, turning failure into success: second chances for honest bankrupts, clarify and simplify the regulatory burden) and (3) role models and reaching out to specific groups (by seeing entrepreneurs as role models and reaching out to women, seniors, migrants, the unemployed, young people). Undoubtedly, all these lines of action must be based on sustainable development principles.

The limited resources determine such an approach of production processes, so as to harmonize the pecuniary interests of organizations, interests of customers / consumers and long-term interests of society. Therefore, companies need to consider that it is important,
equally be concerned with value creation at present and the possibility of supporting sustainable business in the future.

Adopting specific policies for sustainable development is more difficult for SMEs because some tools used for this purpose are not adapted to their resources and capabilities. Therefore, in developed countries in Europe there are concerns about encouraging SMEs towards sustainable business. It is a favorable legal framework, as well as promoting the importance of organizational culture values, of business principles oriented to satisfy organization needs by controlling economic, social, environmental risks and ensure a long-term support for human, productive and financial capital. Moreover, specific tools have been developed for monitoring the effects of business activity on the economic, social and natural, that will help them contribute to sustainable development principles. Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), non-profit organization that promotes sustainability, proposed a model of sustainable development report, accepted worldwide, which contains analysis and strategy of the organization, organizational profile, specific parameters for reporting, governance, involvement and employment, specific performance indicators in the environment (materials, energy, biodiversity, emissions and wastes, products and services), the economic (economic performance, actual markets, indirect economic impact), the social (freedom of association and negotiation) and the working practices (employment, labor relations, occupational safety, training and education, diversity and equal opportunities). Adoption of such a report by SMEs could provide new opportunities in brand management, reputation and relationship with customers.

As regarding Romanian SMEs, data provided by the Report of the Post-Privatization Foundation regarding the Romania’s SMEs (Barta et al., 2013) allow formation of an image of the current level of development. A total number of 437042 SMEs were active in the Romanian market at the end of 2011, up to only 0.12% compared to 2008, when the economic crisis has begun in Romania. According to the actual reports, 88% of the SMEs are classified as micro, 10% as small and only 2% as medium-sized enterprises. The SMEs sector has succeeded to maintain its weight of 99.6% in the total number of economic actively enterprises in Romania, representing the real backbone of the Romanian economy.

The main fields of activity covered by the SMEs sector (Barta et al., 2013) are the services (39%; mainly professional, technical and scientific, transportation, IT and telecom, and real estate services) and the wholesaling, retailing and car and motorcycle repairing (37%). The contribution of the SMEs sector to the sustainable development of the economy is revealed by the specific weights held in terms of the number of the workplaces, turnover, productivity and profitability (Barta et al., 2013).

From a macroeconomic perspective, the SMEs sector has been the main provider of workplaces at the level of the entire economy, with a total of 2524290. The comparative analysis with the year 2008 reveals that SMEs sector has lost 372000 workplaces under the impact of economic crisis, remaining yet in the same position and weighting for 65.7% in the total number of workplaces in the economic actively enterprises. The average number of employees per SME was 5.8, higher than the European Union’s average (of 4.2), with significant differences between the micro (2.1), small (19.6) and medium-sized (101.7) enterprises.

The turnover generated by the small and medium-sized enterprises has accounted for 589.256 billions lei, higher by 2% by comparison to the previous year, and weighting for
58.01% in the total turnover generated by the non-financial sector of the entire economy. The SMEs categories have contributed relatively similarly to the total turnover generated by the sector (micro – 30.8%, small – 34.2% and medium-sized enterprises – 34.9%).

The average productivity of the SMEs sector has been of 233434.20 lei per employee, representing 72.22% in the productivity of the large enterprises’ sector. Medium-sized enterprises were more effective in this respect, with an average productivity of 249956.10 lei per employee, while micro and small enterprises registered lower levels, all of them being situated within the limits characteristic to the European Union’s SMEs sector.

More than a half (54.51%) of the Romanian SMEs has reported profits at the end of the year 2011, which have accounted for 29.240 billions lei, representing an average profitability rate of 4.96%, respectively an average profitability per employee of 11583.50 lei. The mass of generated profits has varied from a SME category to another, higher amounts of profit being generated by the micro and small enterprises.

A study conducted by the National Council of Privates Small and Medium-sized Enterprises from Romania at the level of a sample including 1716 entrepreneurs from all development regions, categories of legal status, fields of activity, businesses’ size and experience, has revealed (Nicolescu et al., 2013) that the business environment has registered a rather challenging evolution for more than a half of the investigated entrepreneurs, slightly more than one tenth of them appreciating it as a favorable one. It is still remarkable the slight improvement of the overall perception regarding the business environment, the context of doing business in Romania appearing slightly more better in 2012 by comparison to the previous year.

Major business opportunities of the Romanian small businesses in 2012, as identified by the CNIPMMR study, were: the expected increase of the sales in the domestic market (mentioned by 64.34% of the respondents), the assimilation of new products and services (45.16%) and the possibility to penetrate market segments (44.99%). Other significant opportunities have been setting up of the business partnerships (30.89%) and the implementation of the new technologies (30.01%), while other less important opportunities were getting a financial support (12.65%) and the potential expansion of the exports (11.77%).

The CNIPMMR study has identified 18 major difficulties or threats encountered by the Romanian small businesses in 2012. From these, the most significant were: the decrease of the internal demand (mentioned by 60.55% of the investigated entrepreneurs), the high level of bureaucracy (52.86%), the excessive tax burden (51.69%), inflation (49.59%), corruption (41.14%), and the excessive controls exerted by the public authorities (50.56%). In a smaller extent, are mentioned as difficulties those related to the decrease in the foreign demand (7.17%), limited access to the necessary consulting and training services (5.24%), the poor quality of the infrastructure (4.90%) and low level of knowledge and adoption of the acquis communautaire (2.27%).

Although only three of the identified difficulties – the decrease of the domestic demand, the competition with the imported products and services and the decrease of the foreign demand – have a direct connection with the market, their impact on the overall functioning and the performances of the Romanian small business was a more than significant one. The CNIPMMR study revealed that between October 2008 and March 2012, the dynamics of the small businesses’ activities has registered a slight decrease in spite of the fact that a half
of the investigated entrepreneurs have assessed that their businesses succeeded to function at the same level during the period. Particularly in 2011 by comparison to the previous year, the economic performances of the small businesses registered a decline: although around of 40% have succeeded to maintain their level of performance, other 40% have registered a more or less significant decline, while only one fifth of them reported better or far more better economic performances.

The Romanian entrepreneurs are still to be admired for their prudent passion of growing their business: almost a half of them plan to expand moderately, while the other almost half hopes to maintain the current course of their business. The weight of the pessimistic or, maybe, tired entrepreneurs ready to decrease, sell or close their business is quite the same to those intending a fast expansion of the business (6.12%).

The lack of innovation represents, certainly, one of the explanations for the current state of the Romanian small businesses’ sector. More than one-third of the investigated sample does not innovate at all, while the rest are focusing their specific efforts on designing new products and services (mentioned by 31.76% of the respondents), adopting and/or employing new technologies (16.26%), improving their information system (11.83%), implementing a new managerial and marketing approach (11.60%) and developing their human resources (9.27%).

As a consequence, the marketing communication should be more present within the overall marketing activities of the small businesses. To get the expected market success, new products and services demand, beside the particular research & development efforts and the making of the appropriate pricing and distribution related decisions, it is needed a marketing communication capable to draw consumers’ attention, to raise their interest for the organization’s offer, to stimulate their desire to discover and try it, and, finally, to determine consumers to buy the promoted products and services. The implementation of the new technologies should be reflected in increased consideration of the Internet as a mean of communication capable of providing the support for conducting marketing communication campaigns using specific tools such as direct e-mailing, online advertising, social networking and marketing search engine. Finally, the new marketing approach could and should include the philosophy of the relationship marketing, i.e. focusing on the creation, development and maintaining of profitable long-term relationships with consumers capable to generate overall customer satisfaction and allowing the small and medium-sized enterprises to accomplish their business and marketing mission and objectives.

The lack of planning represents another explanation for the current state of the Romanian small businesses’ sector. A half of the investigated sample does not plan at all, while slightly more than one-third is limited to an annual planning effort. Only slightly more than one-tenth of the investigated entrepreneurs design plans on three up to five years. The rather poor concern for planning, which may be the expression of a diminished strategic capacity and a certain poor business and marketing vision, is reflected in the marketing communication through a rather low quality of the campaigns conducted in the market and a pronounced orientation toward tactical, isolated and even incoherent attempts of addressing consumers aiming strictly or mostly sales-related objectives. Hence, the need for a strategic approach of the marketing communication focused more on the relational than on transactional aspects.
Depending on how it is approached, communication can be both an obstacle or an opportunity in the local sustainable development (Mannberg and Wihlborg, 2008). Since the visions in sustainable development at global, national and local level can sometimes be different and unrelated marketing communication SME customers is extremely important. Sustainable development necessitated reconsideration of the role of SMEs in national and international policies and their inclusion in value chains of large corporations, marketing communications being essential in this process.

2. The research methodology

Knowledge of customer perception on how SMEs communicate, as business partners is crucial in strengthening their long-term relationships. As shown from the perspective of sustainable development, quality of relationships between SMEs and customers is essential. Thus, in order to support decision makers in developing and implementing communication programs with the overall impact on the organization's long-term activity, has been conducted a research aiming to assess client perceptions of corporate marketing communication of SMEs on the Romanian market collaborate with.

This research aimed to assess in an exploratory manner the perception of the client – legal person regarding the marketing communication of the small and medium-sized enterprises which collaborate with.

The main research objectives have been the following:

O1. to determine the way the marketing activity is organized within the SMEs;
O2. to identify the sources of information used by the SMEs client-companies regarding SMEs collaborate with;
O3. to identify the instruments and techniques used by SMEs in their communication with the clients in order to promote their products and/or services;
O4. to assess the communication and techniques employed by the SMEs in terms of their perceived utility for the clients;
O5. to identify the interactive media used by the SMEs in their communication campaigns aiming to promote different products and/or services;
O6. to assess the interactive media employed by the SMEs in terms of their perceived utility for the clients.

The hypotheses associated to the above-mentioned research objectives stated that:

H1. the majority of the investigated SMEs does not have a dedicated marketing structure;
H2. the Internet is the most used source of information by the SMEs clients;
H3. traditional marketing communication instruments are the most frequently used by the SMEs to communicate with the clients in order to promote their products and/or services;
H4. the marketing communication instruments and techniques based on the interaction between the SMEs and their clients are the most appreciated by the last ones in terms of their utility;
H5. the Internet represents the interactive media most frequently used by the SMEs in their communication campaigns aiming to promote different products and/or services;
H6. the Internet represents the most useful interactive media used by the SMEs from the clients perspective.
The research sample included client companies of SMEs in Romania, the observation unit being represented by the company that works in the market in Romania and has buyer-seller relationships with the Romanian small and medium enterprises. Information was collected through direct research type survey by interviewing that person in company management responsible for the relationship with business partners. The research instrument employed to collect data was the structured questionnaire containing five sections corresponding to each major research objectives.

The sample included a total of 460 observation units structured according to the number of employees, annual turnover and type of ownership. Thus, in terms of the number of employees, the structure of the sample included was: microenterprises (less than 9 employees) – 44%; small enterprises (between 10-49 employees) – 39%; medium-sized enterprises (between 50-249 employees) – 13%; large enterprises (250 employees and over) – 4%. The sample structure in terms of the annual turnover included: microenterprises (with an annual turnover lower than or equal with EUR 2 million) – 83%; small enterprises (with an annual turnover between EUR 2 and 10 million) – 11%; medium-sized enterprises (with an annual turnover between EUR 10 and 50 million) – 3%; and large enterprises (with an annual turnover higher than EUR 50 million) – 3%. Finally, in terms of the type of ownership, the sample included companies with Romanian capital – 88%; companies with foreign capital – 6%; and joint-ventures companies – 6%.

The research has been conducted in the same time with another study among the SMEs in Romania within which was analyzed their marketing communication. Each SME included in this sample was asked to name five client-companies having the current status of customers collaborating with these companies and forming the research sample.

3. Main findings of the research

In order to describe with higher accuracy the perception of the client-companies on the marketing communications of the small and medium enterprises in the Romanian market they are collaborating with, a more detailed knowledge of the respondents has been required, not only in the terms of the classical features used in statistics (turnover, number of employees, ownership, type of capital and so on), but also in terms of their marketing activities.

Asked, in this respect, if they have a dedicated marketing structure, the majority of the respondents (72%) answered they do not have such a structure (department, office or at least a person in-charge). This variable affected the answers given within the research as will be demonstrated during the data analysis, basically there is an appropriate marketing department outlines some experience in the marketing of the company and the evaluation of such activities of the business partners. The research results have confirmed the related hypothesis.

A second objective of the research focused on the sources of information used by the client-companies searching for collaboration with the SMEs, respondents being asked from where they heard about them. As it is shown in the Figure 1, the main source of information is the offer (proposal) of cooperation received from the SMEs (53.9%), followed by the participation in special events (such as fairs, exhibitions, shows) having a relatively low percentage (14.5%). The result comes somewhat in contrast to the marketing theory which
recommends attending such events for companies targeting business to business market. The research results have confirmed the related hypothesis, that the Internet is the most important source of information used by SME customers. According to respondents, it ranks third after offers of cooperation and personal contacts. Place it occupies contacts in the list of sources of information, from a customer perspective, showing the importance to be given to building and maintaining quality relationships in the long run, with all audiences. This is both a condition and consequence of sustainable development, research results represent an argument for the development of consistent communication steps in this direction.

The modalities of contacting customers were analyzed in detail (Fig.1), in particular those relating to offers of cooperation and information from the Internet, in order to find the methods most commonly used by SMEs in establishing relationships with their client-companies. The respondents answered they had received offers of cooperation from SMEs through catalogs and presentation materials (61.8%) or through the Internet (52.7%).

In terms of information on the Internet, this is done most often by consulting websites (83%), followed by access databases (23.9%) and social networks (7.8%).

![Figure no. 1. Sources of information used by the client-companies regarding the collaboration with the SMEs (in percentages)](source: Authors)

The next objective of the research was to identify the marketing techniques used by SMEs in communication with the client-companies to promote products and/or services they offer. As the Figure 2 reveals, although it is a business-to-business market, advertising is the most commonly used (by 87.2% of the client-companies), public relations being the less used (by only one-third of the investigated sample).

The results obtained have allowed to confirm the hypothesis stating that the traditional marketing communication instruments are the most frequently used by the SMEs to communicate with the clients in order to promote their products and/or services.
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Figure no. 2. Communication techniques used by SMEs in relationships with their client-companies (in percentages)
Source: Authors

Using of each communication technique involves a set of specific tools, so the results have allowed a breakdown in terms of the tools used for advertising, sales promotion and public relations. Figure 3 shows the corresponding advertising tools, which are presented according to the frequency with which they were mentioned by respondents: first were the printed advertising catalogs, flyers and brochures, followed at a significant distance by the rest of the tools (outdoor and indoor advertising, daily and periodical press advertising, radio, television and cinema advertising). Somehow surprisingly in the context of communication described by the penetration of the Internet at the level of all the market segments, the prevalence of the printed advertising materials is motivated mainly by the characteristics of the business-to-business market and market players, still paying attention to the formal and „technical” (which in this context should be translated through „non-commercial”) aspects of the marketing communication.

Figure no. 3. Advertising tools used by SMEs in relationships with their client-companies (in percentages)
Source: Authors

Regarding specific sales promotion techniques, there was a tool significantly distanced from the others: discounts (mentioned by 81.2% of the respondents). The main explanation of this difference lies in the frequency of use of the price reductions compared to other tools motivated by the elasticity of demand in terms of the price, particularly considered during these times of economic crisis. Other sales promotion techniques were the promotional gifts.
(29.2%), point-of-sales advertising (27.3%), sampling, demonstrations and free trials (21.6%), merchandising (4.4%) and promotional contests or lotteries (2.2%).

As regarding the public relations techniques, SMEs use more often the participation to the fairs, exhibitions or specialized salons (referred by 75% of the client-companies) and the special events (33.6%). A rather peripheral position is held by the media relations (27.3%), the main explanation being that this tool is more effective, so it is often used in relation to SMEs media and the sponsorship (21.6%), which is the ultimate target audience rather customers – individuals, not companies.

The research aimed further to identify the utility perceived by the client-companies related to the communication techniques used by the SMEs. The research participants were asked to grant a mark, on a scale from 1 to 10 (where 10 means “extremely useful” and 1 means “not-at-all useful”) to the marketing communication techniques used by the SMEs of whose customers they are. The most appreciated communication technique in terms of the utility perceived by the client-companies is the sales force (with an average score of 8.99), the main explanation being that the business-to-business market emphasizes the direct relationships and dialogue between the participants to the transactions.

Given the fact that the professionalism and involvement of salespeople to the objectives of the organization is a key factor in their implementation, the decision-makers of SMEs should consider this category as the target audience of communication approaches. Therefore, business sustainability depends also from this perspective, on the organizations know how to communicate.

The lowest average score was obtained by advertising (7.69), quite natural if is to take into consideration the fact that marketing theory recommends advertising as being more suitable for the business-to- consumer markets, while its utility in the business-to-business market is, obviously, lower.

The results of the research – the higher average scores registered by the sales forces and direct marketing, have confirmed the hypothesis stating that marketing communication instruments and techniques based on the interaction between the SMEs and their clients are the most appreciated by the last ones in terms of their utility.

![Figure no. 4. Utility of the marketing communications techniques used by SMEs (average scores)](source: Authors)

The research - higher average scores recorded by sales forces and direct marketing have confirmed the hypothesis that marketing communication tools and techniques based on the
direct interaction between SMEs and their customers are the most valued by the latter, in terms of view of the usefulness.

Average scores have been determined for each of the communication sub-tools of each technique in terms of their perceived utility by the client-companies.

Advertising through printed materials (catalogues, brochures and flyers) has obtained the highest average score for utility (8.51), followed at a relatively significant distance by the indoor (8.20) and outdoor advertising (7.96). Lower but still enough important average scores have been determined for the daily press (7.49), television (7.33), radio (7.30) and periodical press advertising. From the perspective of sustainable development, it requires social responsibility in advertising, both with regard to customers and to competitors. It is important that advertising messages disseminated through printed material not be misleading and to present actual characteristics of the product.

As the marketing theory mentions, the most useful form of advertising for business-to-business market is the printed one conducted through catalogs, flyers and brochures including messages sent directly to the target audiences. These communication sub-tools allow a more detailed presentation of the companies, their products and/or services, prices and tariffs demanded in the market, and distribution-related details. Television, radio and press advertising are holding the last positions: they are mass-media used rather on the business-to-consumer markets and targeting larger number of individual customers.

The discounts were regarded as the most useful sub-tool of the sales promotion aimed to the SMEs’ client-companies. The elasticity of the demand in terms of the price and the major concern of the companies to diminish the costs in times of crisis are the main motivators of this situation. Other sales promotional sub-tools perceived as useful or even very useful by the client-companies are the sampling, testing and free trials, the merchandising, promotional gifts and point-of-sale advertising, while the promotional contests and lotteries were the least appreciated in terms of their utility. It is interesting to observe that average scores of the sales promotion sub-tools have been slightly higher by comparison to those of the advertising ones, which is again natural given to the investigated market (a business-to-business one). From the perspective of sustainable development, the use of sales promotion techniques is governed by the principles of free and fair competition, giving evidence of honesty and truthfulness. Also, in the case of free trials do not have to use products with an improved quality compared with the actually existing on the market.

An overall assessment of the perception of the SMEs marketing communication from the perspective of the client-companies leads to the conclusion that the most popular techniques are the sales forces, price reductions and distribution of free samples. At the opposite position are the advertising (on television, radio and print media), promotional contests and lotteries.

In order to design an effective marketing communication, besides establishing the techniques and tools to be employed, it is necessary to determine the appropriate communication means considering the both parties involved in the communication process – the sender of the message and its receiver. Another objective of the research has been to identify the interactive media used by the SMEs in their communication campaigns conducted for the promotion of their products and/or services. The specific analysis of the most relevant interactive media has been done separately on the types of campaigns –
advertising, public relations and direct marketing (Table 1).

Table no. 1. Interactive media used by SMEs in their relationships with the client-companies (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactive media</th>
<th>Advertising</th>
<th>Public relations</th>
<th>Direct marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video-conferences</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive TV</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>83.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors

The Internet is the most widely used interactive media, the difference from the other means of communication being significant in the case of the advertising campaigns. However, within the public relations campaigns, the mobile communications were mentioned with a highly enough frequency by respondents. As about the communication through the social networks, it can be observed that these are best suited for the public relations campaigns (18.5%), which apply also to blogging (13.1%).

Further correlations made with the main characteristics of the client companies led to the following information:

(a) in advertising companies: the choice of the media used by SMEs in their relationships with client-companies is influenced by the size of the client; the mobile phone is used more for approaching the small businesses, while the share of the Internet usage and blogging increases with the size of the client-company (from 82.3% to 100% in the case of the small businesses to large companies using Internet, respectively from 4.4% to 14.3% using blogs). In advertising campaigns, the social networks are more often used in relationships with the client-companies that own a dedicated marketing structure of marketing (15.5%), by comparison to the companies not having a marketing structure (7.1%);

(b) in public relations campaigns: although the mobile telephony was used in the advertising campaigns mostly in the relationships with smaller clients, the situation becomes quite opposite in the public relations campaigns where with increasing size of the client company grows the share of employment of this means of communication (from 55.4%, for small businesses, to 80% in the case of the large companies). The Internet and blogging retain the same increasing trend with the increasing size of the client-company also;

(c) in direct marketing campaigns: the mobile phone is more often used in relations with public client-companies, while the Internet is more used in relationships to the private than public companies (75%, respectively 54.4% for the mobile phone; 75%, respectively 84.5% for the Internet). Regarding the correlation with the size of the client-company, in direct marketing campaigns appears to apply the same rule as it was identified for the public relations campaigns -- with increasing size of the company, increases the percentage of those who are using Internet and blogs.

Another objective of the research took into account the assessment made by the client-
companies in terms of the utility of the interactive media used by the Romanian SMEs. The respondents were asked to assess the utility on a scale from 1-10 (where 10 means “extremely useful” and 1 means “not-at-all useful”) to the interactive media used by the SMEs of whose customers they are. A relevant analysis of these media has been made separately for each type of communication campaign, in order to identify the most appropriate interactive media for each of the communication techniques implemented.

Table no. 2. Evaluation of interactive media utility depending on communication campaign type (on a 1-10 scale, 10 representing maximum utility)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactive media</th>
<th>Advertising</th>
<th>Public relations</th>
<th>Direct marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video-conferences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive TV</td>
<td>8.88</td>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone</td>
<td>8.50</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>8.47</td>
<td>8.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>8.24</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>8.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networks</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>7.86</td>
<td>8.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors

As the data presented in the Table 2 reveal, the most useful, from the client-companies’ perspective, interactive media to be used in the communication campaigns are: the interactive television (8.88) and the Internet (in the case of the advertising campaigns), the interactive television (9.00) and the mobile phone (in the case of the public relations campaigns) and the mobile phones and the blogging (in the case of the direct marketing campaigns). Focusing the specific issues of sustainable development at the economic, social and especially environmental level have generated changes regards the choice of marketing communication channels. It pays more attention to internet marketing communication, new techniques and communication channels showing the benefits for all parties involved in the communication process.

Conclusions

The research results reveal that there are some differences between communication techniques used by SMEs and utility perceived by client-companies. Thus, although advertising is used mostly as a way of communicating to SME client companies, these rank last the advertising in terms of utility, considering as the most efficient communication through sales forces. In terms of sales promotion, its usefulness is assessed differently, depending on the instruments used. While the discounts and samples are considered useful, promotional contest and lotteries are perceived as having a low utility. Also, analyzing interactive media used by SMEs in dealing with client companies reveals that the Internet is used predominantly, although in terms of client companies a high utility of interactive television is provided, followed (depending on type of campaign communication), by Internet, mobile phone or blogs.

Therefore, the choice of marketing communication techniques and tools used by SMEs should take into account the specific of business-to-business market and should be based on the knowledge of the opinions and perceptions of client-companies regarding the utility of
different communication ways. Given that marketing communications is one of the vectors to creating and developing relationships with client companies, SMEs need to increase their integrating communication efforts in order to maintain themselves on a market driven by information and oriented to interactive customers.

Marketing communication has therefore all the necessary tools to raise awareness, valuing, mobilize and persuade, in order to accomplish specific objectives of sustainable development. It is found that, especially in large companies, marketers increasingly given more time and resources to understanding and obtaining consumers' / customers. Client affinity is closely linked to the idea of sustainable development, as it focuses on long-term involvement, so the decision-makers of SMEs should be encouraged to look at business development from this perspective.

References


