

Marketing Apps in Small Businesses in the Context of Digitization

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Abstract

Small businesses are gradually digitizing. Although they may not have the budget required to digitize all marketing processes, they make incremental investments in marketing apps aiming to improve their market positions. The frequently communicated benefits of marketing apps by companies that develop and offer them contributes to the demand for ready-made solutions and the development of apps targeted at specific business sectors. Familiarity with the potential of app-based marketing is integral to their acceptance as a means of exploring new opportunities and resolving specific problems.

Keywords: apps, digitization, marketing automation, awareness, and use of apps

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Introduction¹

Interest in using new technologies in marketing has increased over the past decade. Companies strive for growth through technological and process change. Consumers' interest in experimenting with new marketing technologies in the process of purchase and consumption is also growing. While initially the interest of companies was focused on the possibility of using new technologies to attract customers, now all stages are covered, including the stage of consumption of the product. Small companies that have a limited resource for hiring staff are persistently interested in implementing new technologies in their business, including marketing digitalization and automation. Interest in marketing innovation among small businesses is expected to grow, a trend currently emerging from official EU national statistics data. The increase in the relative share of the population that uses smartphones and the increase in the share of individuals using free and paid apps are driving the development and use of apps for marketing purposes. Another favorable influence is played by the high interest of companies and consumers in online sales and purchases through mobile applications. In recent years, companies that have invested in marketing automation have shared indisputable facts about the higher effectiveness of implementing marketing innovations. Companies using the latter report significant business progress.

The activity of small enterprises in the application of innovations and new technologies in the last decade has also increased. The 2020 data of the National Statistical Institute show that 31.1% of small enterprises are defined as innovatively active enterprises. The relative share of small enterprises that are defined as enterprises with product innovations is 20.4%, and those with business process innovations have a 21.5% share. There is a trend towards an increase in the relative share of innovatively active small enterprises, with their share increasing from 22.7% in 2012 to 31.1% in 2020.

1. New technologies and the digitalisation of SMEs

Research shows that the level of digitalisation of SMEs has increased, especially in recent years due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions (Roman et al., 2022). It has been asserted that Covid-19 has forced SMEs to adopt technologies that they did not feel the need for before (Zamani, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has forced companies to look for alternative forms of communication and distribution to their consumers and to find new opportunities for survival and

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growth. UNIDO has pointed out that awareness plays a crucial role in the diffusion of digitalization among small firms and discusses the degree to which potential adopters are knowledgeable about the existence of digital technologies and their potential benefits (UNIDO, 2023). Researchers' attention is focused on three main areas of the SMEs digitalization, comprising: communication and information access, market access, platforms and e-commerce and digital financial services (ILO et al. 2021) According to OECD the entry point for the digital transition for most SMEs is in general administration or marketing functions (OECD, 2020). Research shows that many SMEs are willing to adopt technology applications, primarily social media, as part of their marketing strategy to sustain their businesses and engage with customers (Juniarti et al., 2021). Researchers also focus on the three forms of digitalisation of SMEs and their effectiveness in contributing to product and process innovations: big data analytics, digital interconnection in the production and logistics, and digital value chains (Radicic et al., 2023). A study on the impact of technologies on small businesses claims that small business owners must customize technology to the needs of their businesses (C_TEC, 2018). The ambition to get reimbursement in the form of better performance is defined as a key driver of innovation practices in enterprises (Adam et al., 2021).

Marketing activities in small businesses do not remain aloof from technological and process innovations. Trends in marketing automation adoption have been studied with a focus on small and medium enterprises that are characterized by slower innovation activity than large companies (Semerádová et al., 2020). An Adobe report summarizes that industries of all kinds use marketing automation, whether they're B2B, B2C, or a hybrid of both (Adobe, 2021). It is clarified that early adopters of marketing automation were primarily in B2B industries and there is growing interest in adaptation in B2C industries as well.

According to the results of a study by Constant Contact in collaboration with Ascend on the use of marketing automation and artificial intelligence (AI) larger small businesses have been able to grow their business faster and compete with bigger companies as a result of using AI, while smaller companies are saving time and working more efficiently (Constant Contact et al., 2023).

2. Trends in the use of apps for marketing purposes

Over the past decade, two trends have stood out regarding mobile apps. The first one is related to the growing interest of businesses in developing various apps intended for the market. The second one shows a clear growing interest in the use of apps by enterprises and end users. A significant part of the registered apps are related to marketing functions and are intended to facilitate, improve and accelerate communications, sales and use of products/services.

Weather-based marketing (WBM) apps are applications that take into account weather parameters and make it possible for those to be used in marketing decisions. The results of studies show that the weather is an extremely important factor that determines consumer behavior. Different businesses are affected by the weather in different ways. For some, such as tourism, the clothing business, outdoor sports, F&B establishments, etc. the current weather conditions and forecasts will determine their sales. Other businesses, on the other hand, focus on what the weather was like before, such as agriculture, insurance, etc. From a marketing perspective, it is of interest how exactly the weather can be tied to a specific marketing decision affecting the company's offer. Revenue-generating opportunities through tailored weather information products for the retail sector are presented, which enable the use of weather information for marketing strategies and in distribution of weather-sensitive items (UNDP, 2016).

Table 1. Areas and characteristics of the use of WBM

| Areas of WBM | Characteristics |
|--|---|
| Updating the product range display. Forming a product assortment. | It is a priority for online retailers to offer products based on the current weather or the forecast for the next period. |

| Areas of WBM | Characteristics |
|--|--|
| Automated pricing of products from the product range | Tying price to weather parameters. The variable temperature is most often used. |
| Ads display | Displaying ads only in favorable weather conditions for the purchase and/or consumption of the product/service. |
| Recommending distribution channels. Redirecting users from one channel to another for purchase. | For businesses whose channel sales are significantly affected by the weather. Also in capacity management at increased demand on a certain channel under certain weather conditions (e.g., catering establishments). |
| Automated messages and/or emails containing offers that are suitable for specific weather conditions. | Targeting users according to different criteria and offering a product range according to the current weather or based on the weather forecast for the coming days. |
| Forming outcome expectations | Using weather-based technologies to forecast agricultural yields, clothing sales, etc. |

WBM apps offer opportunities to update the marketing offer, created from many variables and to increase the probability of purchase under specific weather conditions. In addition to businesses, WBM apps can also be successfully used by municipal enterprises as a reliable channel for danger warnings, action instructions, prescriptions, etc. A specific aspect of using WBM is presented in a study (Čreslovník et al., 2020), which highlights a different applied aspect – informing consumers about a peak in demand for a given product category, reducing available quantities and the probability that the price will be increased due to the weather forecast for a certain period.

Location-based marketing (LBM) apps are increasingly embracing new applications in micro and small businesses. Two main locations are considered: the business location and the consumer’s location. Some of the LBM apps most preferred by small businesses are Foursquare, Google My Business and Facebook Places. Apart from the possibility of absorbing benefits by attracting users, there is another aspect which is related to geo-restrictions regarding the purchase and consumption of certain products and services in some countries. The use of location-based mobile marketing (LBMM) has grown over the past decade. Research based on specific examples summarizes that information technologies including sensors, indoor positioning, augmented reality, vision, and interactive systems should be utilized by retailers in order to improve operational efficiency and customer experience (Yim, 2017).

Table 2. Areas and characteristics of the use of LBM

| Areas of LBM | Characteristics |
|---|--|
| Attracting users who are close to a retail outlet | Targeting users based on location. |
| Sending an offer to users who are in the location by targeting according to certain criteria | Personalization of offers based on location and user profile. |
| Offering incentives to users who are in the location | Offering various promotional incentives to motivate users to purchase. |
| Identifying users who have visited a site or website | Identifying customers who have visited retail outlets and carrying out future communication with them. |

| Areas of LBM | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Geotargeting through differentiated offers | Designing offers according to the geographical location of the potential customer. |
| Georestrictions according to local law | Placing restrictions on advertising, offering, etc. in relation to legal restrictions, etc. |

In addition to the positive aspects of location-based marketing, criticisms are often voiced related to the protection of personal data and privacy in various aspects. Small businesses must comply with local legislation in the market country and adapt their marketing policies in accordance with the legal norms and ethical codes.

Search-based marketing (SBM) apps are based on registered search by users, which can be done by searching for keywords in the search engine box or searching by voice message or image. The advantages of this type of apps are expressed in the possibility of using an already started process of making a purchase decision, which will significantly improve the relevance of the offered information/offer and increase the effectiveness of communication. Some of the apps are based on AI-based search technology. The scope of SBM can be divided into two areas. The first one includes registered searches of users and their personal characteristics and historical data. The second area of interest includes specific searches on the company's website that does not result in sales. Both scope areas are of interest to small businesses from the point of view of exploiting market opportunities through speedy and adequate offers. Some apps provide functionality that is based on both search and location (maps).

Table 3. Areas and characteristics of the use of SBM

| Areas of SBM | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Making a specific offer | Automated offer design relevant to a specific search. For example, messages like "we have information that you searched for exactly this..." |
| Offers ranking | Placing different offers with ranking by specific criteria. |
| Offering complete solutions based on registered user demand | This is applied to products that have a high potential for generating additional income for the company. |
| Recommendations for product offerings based on demand | Emphasis is placed on referrals to specific product offerings and sharing positive experiences of users who have already purchased and used them. |
| Registering sudden changes in demand and reactions to product supply | Based on the search frequency, the volume of demand is predicted, which can lead to updating prices, terms of sale, etc. |

Interest in usage-based marketing (UBM) apps is also gaining momentum. Large companies selling electronics and home appliances offer their customers to activate special apps that facilitate the use of the product by navigating the process of use. The use of this type of apps is beneficial both for companies that collect the information they need and monitor the usage process, and for users who are assisted in learning the full functionality of the product and taking care of it during the consumption phase. Of course, here again, users and companies face problems related to personal data protection, tracking, and the leakage of sensitive user information.

Event-based marketing (EBM) apps have a very high potential to capture new opportunities for small businesses. All events that take place in the territory could be considered as a potential source of additional income for the businesses that operate in the territory. The positive effects can

be seen in two aspects. The first aspect is related to the opportunity to increase sales revenue during events, and the second one is related to the opportunity to improve the results of the conduct of the particular event.

There is a growing interest in developing and using mobile apps for sales. The arguments are related to an increase in the number of consumers using mobile devices for convenient shopping and information search. Positive effects are also registered in improving access, speed and updating of offers.

Small businesses are showing interest in mobile booking apps. Above all, the interest is on the part of hotels, catering establishments, sports facilities, health services facilities, etc. The advantage of using reservations apps is primarily expressed in the adequate management of capacities and the coordination between the different channels of the enterprise, as well as between the different platforms used by the business.

Automated mailing apps have been around for decades, but interest in their application is growing. The positive effects shared by businesses that have enough experience working with them provoke interest in all the other businesses that have stayed away from this technology. They are used in various directions: B2B, B2C, G2B, G2C, etc. with clear policies and rules to protect the interests of different parties. Among the indisputable advantages of automated mailing apps are: access to an up-to-date customer base, access to information about the specific user, sending relevant information, adequate offers, stimulating marketing, test marketing and many others. The benefits listed are at the heart of the success of small businesses that have accepted the challenge of using marketing automation for the purposes of more effective communication and distribution.

The list of apps for deploying marketing functionality can be continued. In addition to popular apps that are available and can be used by businesses for a fee or for free, businesses can develop specific apps that meet their requirements according to their purpose and provide the necessary multi-functionality for the specific business.

3. Study on the use of apps for marketing purposes by small companies

The study was conducted among small and micro enterprises in Bulgaria using the method of polling through an online survey. A volunteer method of sampling design was used. The study was carried out in the period from 13.11.2023 until 30.11.2023. The profile of the companies that participated in the study as respondents is presented in table 4. The achieved sample size is 60 companies.

Table 4. Profile of the companies that took part in the study

| Criteria | Profile of the respondents |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Prevailing specialization | Production and sale of services – 49% Production and sale of products – 37.3% Production and sale of products and services – 13.7% |
| Company size | Micro enterprise – 58% Small enterprise – 42% |
| Core activity of the company | Manufacturing – 39.6% Wholesale trade – 10.4% Retail trade – 39.6% |
| Distribution channels used | Own commercial network of sites – 39.2% Retail outlets through intermediaries – 21.6% Own website or app – 56.9% Web intermediaries – 17.6% Automated data exchange – 3.9% Vending machines – 2% Phone Channel/Call Center/Chat – 11.8% |

| Criteria | Profile of the respondents |
|--|---|
| | Personal sales – 41.2% Sales during events – 11.8% Other channel – 5.9% |
| Priority target market of the company | Local – 33.3% Regional – 21.6% National – 27.5% International – 17.6% |
| Type of users | End users – 27.5% Corporate users – 21.6% End and corporate users – 51% |
| Years of operation | 1 - 5 years – 25.5% 6 – 10 years – 11.8% 11 – 15 years – 31.4% 16 – 20 years – 11.8% Over 20 years – 19.6% |
| Markets in which the company operates as a priority | Offline markets – 49% Online markets – 15.7% Equally placed in offline and online markets – 27.5% Unable to determine - 7.8% |

4. Results and discussion

The results of the conducted study show that one third of the companies use new technologies in their online marketing. The share of companies that use new technologies online and offline is significant (21.6%). It is noteworthy that 9.8% of companies use new technologies offline.

Table 5. Using new technologies in the company's marketing

| Application of new technologies | Relative share (%) |
|--|---------------------------|
| Yes, online | 33.3 |
| Yes, offline and online | 21.6 |
| Yes, offline | 9.8 |
| Not used | 27.5 |
| Cannot define | 7.8 |

The study includes a question related to the assessment of the state of demand for the products/services offered by the companies. The distribution of respondents regarding the assessment of the state of demand is presented in table 6. The results show that for the majority of companies, the demand for products/services they offer is sustainable over time. For nearly a quarter of the companies, their demand is defined as growing. For 15.7% of the enterprises in the survey, demand for products/services has declined.

Table 6. Characteristics of the demand for the majority of the products/services offered by the company

| Demand characteristics | Relative share (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Demand is sustainable | 62.7 |
| Demand is growing | 23.5 |
| Demand is down | 15.7 |
| Cannot define | 3.9 |

Most business managers identify "content that consumers are searching for" as being important to their business (56.9%). This is followed by "user location" (51%), "maintaining constant communication with users through the possibility of feedback" (39.2%) and "maintaining communication with users for the purpose of placing adequate offers" (39.2%). The fewest company managers identified how "consumers use the products and services they offer" (13.7%) as being important for their business.

Table 7. Conditions which are defined as important for the business by company managers

| Conditions which are defined as important for the business | Relative share (%) |
|--|---------------------------|
| The weather, such as temperature, humidity, etc. | 17.6 |
| The location of users relative to the location of the business | 51 |
| The content that users are looking for | 56.9 |
| How users use the offered products and services | 13.7 |
| Making shopping easy | 17.6 |
| Maintaining constant communication with users through the possibility of feedback | 39.2 |
| Maintaining communication with users for the purpose of adequate bidding | 39.2 |

It can be concluded from the results, presented in table 8, that some of the apps that businesses are most familiar with are mobile sales applications (40.8%), apps for search-based marketing (36.7%) and apps for location-based marketing (30.6%). The least known among the companies in the survey are apps for weather-based marketing (with only 8.2%).

Table 8. Awareness of apps used by companies for marketing purposes

| Apps | Relative share (%) |
|---|---------------------------|
| Weather-based marketing apps (WBM) | 8.2 |
| Location-based marketing apps (LBM) | 30.6 |
| Search-based marketing apps (SBM) | 36.7 |
| Product-use-based marketing apps (UBM) | 14.3 |
| Event-based marketing apps (EBM) | 12.2 |
| Mobile sales application | 40.8 |
| Mobile booking application | 22.4 |
| Automated mailing | 22.4 |

Among the business apps most used by the small businesses surveyed are mobile sales apps (33.3%), search-based marketing apps (29.2%) and location-based marketing apps (29.2%). The least known among the companies in the survey are apps for weather-based marketing (with only 8.2%).

Table 9. Use of apps for marketing purposes by the companies covered in the study

| Apps | Relative share (%) |
|---|---------------------------|
| Weather-based marketing apps (WBM) | 8.3 |
| Location-based marketing apps (LBM) | 29.2 |
| Search-based marketing apps (SBM) | 29.2 |
| Product-use-based marketing apps (UBM) | 20.8 |

| Apps | Relative share (%) |
|---|---------------------------|
| Event-based marketing apps (EBM) | 8.3 |
| Mobile sales application | 33.3 |
| Mobile booking application | 10.4 |
| Automated mailing | 18.8 |

The majority of enterprises that use apps use off-the-shelf applications (61.7%), 19.1% use applications that are specially developed for their needs and the remaining 19.1% use both off-the-shelf and custom-made applications.

Most often, the managers of the researched enterprises indicated the attraction of new customers (45.8%) as a positive effect of the use of apps, followed by an increase in the number of customers (43.8%) and the achievement of higher marketing efficiency (31.3%). The least mentioned effect of using apps for marketing purposes is the increase in the average purchase value (6.3%) and the increase in the average number of items purchased (10.4%).

Table 10. Positive effects of the application of apps for marketing purposes in the companies that participated in the study

| Effects of using apps for marketing purposes | Relative share (%) |
|--|---------------------------|
| Increased revenue | 25.0 |
| Increased profitability | 16.7 |
| Higher average price of the products/services offered | 12.5 |
| Higher marketing efficiency | 31.3 |
| Better utilization of the company's capacity | 18.8 |
| Attracting competitors' customers | 20.8 |
| Attracting new clients | 45.8 |
| Increased number of customers | 43.8 |
| Increased average purchase value | 6.3 |
| Increased average number of items purchased | 10.4 |
| Increased frequency of purchase | 12.5 |
| Speeding up sales processes | 14.6 |
| Other, specify what | 4.2 |

The results of the survey show that social media networks (79.2%) have the highest relative share of use among new technologies, followed by automated marketing platforms (27.1%) and Messenger (25%).

Table 11. Technologies used for marketing purposes by the companies that participated in the study

| Used technologies | Relative share (%) |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Automated Marketing Platforms | 27.1 |
| Social media | 79.2 |
| Big Data Marketing | 4.2 |
| Vertical information systems | 4.2 |
| Horizontal information systems | 2.1 |
| Sales platforms | 22.9 |
| AI | 4.2 |

| Used technologies | Relative share (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| VoIP smartphone app (Viber) | 20.8 |
| WhatsApp | 20.8 |
| Messenger | 25.0 |
| Telegram | 12.5 |

Most often, managers in the surveyed enterprises indicated the attraction of new customers (55.3%) as a positive effect of the use of new technologies, followed by an increase in revenues (48.9%) and the increase in the number of customers (42.6%). The least mentioned effect of using apps for marketing purposes was the increase in the average number of items purchased (4.3%) and the increase in the average purchase value (6.4%).

Table 12. Positive effects of the application of new technologies for marketing purposes in the companies that participated in the study

| Effects of the application of new technologies for marketing purposes | Relative share (%) |
|--|---------------------------|
| Increased revenue | 48.9 |
| Increased profitability | 17.0 |
| Higher average price of the products/services offered | 10.6 |
| Higher marketing efficiency | 29.8 |
| Better utilization of company capacity | 21.3 |
| Attracting competitors' customers | 23.4 |
| Attracting new clients | 55.3 |
| Increased number of customers | 42.6 |
| Increased average purchase value | 6.4 |
| Increased average number of items purchased | 4.3 |
| Increased frequency of purchase | 10.6 |
| Speeding up sales processes | 14.9 |

Over a third of the companies that have applied new technologies in their marketing have registered positive effects of their application such as: attracting new customers, increasing revenues, and increasing the number of customers.

Conclusion

The study, although not representative, shows encouraging results in terms of the awareness of managers of micro and small enterprises of the various apps that can be applied for marketing purposes. Awareness ranges from 40.8% for mobile sales apps to a low of 8.2% for weather-based marketing apps.

Mobile sales apps, location-based marketing apps, and search-based marketing apps have the highest relative share of app usage among the businesses surveyed. Weather-based marketing apps and event-based marketing apps have the lowest relative share.

More than a third of the managers of the surveyed enterprises indicated the attraction of new customers as the most positive effect of the use of apps, followed by an increase in the number of customers and the achievement of higher marketing efficiency.

In summary, it can be concluded that the use of different apps and technologies in the marketing of micro and small businesses varies. Differences in the relative share are also found in the registered positive effects of their use. It is the shared positive effects of the use of apps and technologies by companies and satisfied users that will emerge as a driver for promoting them among small businesses and for investing funds to automate marketing activities.

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