

The Use of Social Media in Public Relations: A Case of Facebook in the Ghanaian Financial Services Industry

Lydia Andoh-Quainoo¹ Philip Annor-Antwi²

1. Faculty of Business Administration, Pentecost University College- Ghana, P. O. Box Kn 1739 Accra

2. University of International Business and Economic, Chaoyan District, Beijing-China

Abstract

The technological advancement of the 21st century has revolutionized the business environment in such a way that corporate communication has been migrated from offline into online. The use of social media in corporate communication has resulted in the use of Facebook as a Public relations (PR) tool for organizations. The purpose of this research is to find out how organizations use Facebook as a PR tool to foster relationship with current and potential customers as well as the general public. Purposive sampling is used to select four companies from the financial services sector of the Ghana club 100. Content analysis is used for data collection and both qualitative and quantitative analysis are utilised for data analysis. The results indicate that all the selected companies use Facebook often as PR tool; however there is more one way communication resulting in less interaction to increase the relationship and foster closer relationship between the organization and its public. The interaction is more from the organization to the customers and the public with few responses from the customers. There is a need for more two way interaction between the organizations and their publics.

Keywords: Public Relations, Social Media, Facebook, Technology, Publics, and communication

Background

The growing popularity of social media is becoming evident among users of the internet (Kim & Johnson, 2011). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) note that “according to a Forrester Research, 75% of internet surfers around the world used ‘Social Media’ in the second quarter of 2008 by joining social networks” (p. 59). This suggests that social media use has become a global phenomenon.

Social media involves the use mobile and web-based technologies to design highly interactive platforms by which individuals and communities share, create, converse, and adjust user-generated content (Kietzmann, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011). User-generated content (UGC) is enabled by Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) – a second generation of internet-based applications that can directly engage consumers in the creative process by both creating and disseminating information through cooperative writing, content sharing and social networking (Thackeray, Neiger, Hanson & McKenzie, 2008). Currently, there is a rich and deeply varied ecology of social media websites, such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter which differ in terms of scope and functionality, with Facebook being a major player (Kietzmann *et al*, 2011).

Facebook is a social networking site, which was founded in 2004 and is primarily owned by Mark Zuckerberg (Griffith & Liyanage, 2008). It was designed to make the world a more accessible and connected place. People use Facebook to stay in touch with friends and family, to explore what is going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.

In its statistics, Facebook (2013) claimed that 655 million internet surfers actively used Facebook on a daily average as of March 2013. In addition, 751 million also actively used Facebook mobile products on a monthly basis as of March 31, 2013. Overall, Facebook claimed 1.11 billion monthly active users as of March 2013. It appears that Facebook is experiencing exponential growth within the social media arena.

Public relations on the other hand is seen by Lattimore et al (2004) as a leadership and management role that aids the realisation of organisational goals, definition of corporate philosophy as well as the facilitation of organisational change. In essence, Public Relations ensure that the communication with both internal and external publics to ensure continuous harmony between organisational objectives and public expectation. Public relations practitioners formulate, implement and evaluate strategies that enhance positive relationships and favourable image with their key publics or stakeholders of the organization. The relationship that exists between an organisation and its public is called organisation-public relationship (OPR) in this study.

Public relations practitioners are shifting to social media as the lines between online and offline promotion becomes blurry. Social media afford public relations practitioners the opportunity of reaching out to and engaging with their publics in conversation (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011).

The increasing number of Facebook users also suggests that the potential for organisations to reach and communicate with a number of publics has also increased commensurately, thereby impacting public relations efforts.

Problem Statement

Social media can be deployed and applied in a variety of situations, particularly in the organisational setting. Indeed, organisations are embracing social media use for diverse activities including building brand awareness, promoting brand recognition, customer relationship management and market research (Chikandiwa, Contogiannis & Jembere, 2013). Consequently, various scholars, through research, have explored ways in which social media can be used for brand building and reputation management, customer relationship management and market research.

A case in point is Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer's (2012) online-survey of three distinct industries – tourism, telecommunication, and pharmaceuticals – examining the comparative effect of brand communication on brand equity through social media, in contrast to traditional media. Bruhn *et al.*, (2012) found that communication by organisations through social media affected brand perception significantly. Undoubtedly, branding has implications on customer relationship management, and scholars have endeavoured to explore how social media can be used in managing relationships with customers.

Regarding customer relationship management, Baird and Parasnis (2011) carried out two online surveys, firstly with 1,056 customers in America, Europe and Asia, and secondly to 351 business executives in similar locations. From their findings, they argued that organisations that embrace a more social form of customer relationship management are likely to create increasingly cooperative and valuable experiences with customers. Further studies have also explored the use social media in marketing research, Patino *et al.*, (2012).

Nevertheless, as social media continues to grow in usage, studies that explore the application of social media for organisational-public relations remain scanty (Briones, Kuch, Lui & Jin, 2011). Also, the use of social media websites, particularly Facebook as a tool for public relations and how these relationships are evaluated seem hazy, as most organisations underutilize the technology (Lovejoy, Waters & Saxton, 2012) especially in the African context. Hence, this study aims to contribute to this knowledge gap by investigating how organisations use Facebook as a public relations tool in the African context by examining some Ghanaian organisations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public Relations (PR)

Public relations, according to Theaker (2004), are quite challenging to define as it draws on concepts and practices from several distinct arenas including management, media, communication and psychology. In Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee's work (as cited in Theaker, 2004), public relations was defined as a separate management role which aids the establishment and maintenance of mutual communication channels, acceptance, concurrence and co-operation between an organisation and its publics. Public relations (PR) is seen as encompassing crisis management, keeping abreast with and better responding to public trends and opinions. It also emphasises the need for management to keep the public interests at heart, using research and ethical communication techniques as key aids.

Freitag and Stokes (2009) note that in defining public relations, three components become apparent. The first component is that of management and leadership; practitioners having access to top management and acting as though they were managers themselves. Stated another way, practitioners must have the support of top management, and public relations efforts must conform to corporate goals. The second component involves practitioners who must execute public relations responsibilities as well as keep in touch with the organisation's key publics. The final component includes the fundamental and practical competences of designing, conducting and analysing both qualitative and quantitative research.

The foregoing perspectives demonstrate the essence of public relations to organisations in their attempt to establish, maintain and enhance relationships with key publics. However, as new forms of communication develop and old forms evolve – especially with respect to the internet and social media – public relations practice seems to be headed for change.

The Internet and Public Relations

As opposed to the traditional communications paradigm, the elements of the promotional mix such as public relations, which were largely within the control of organisations, have now become democratized as internet users can now generate and adjust content (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). User-generated content has been facilitated by Web 2.0 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Web 2.0 is a term encompassing a second generation of internet-based and interactive applications that are developed around user-generated and user-adjusted content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts and social networking sites. Web 2.0 allows internet users to engage in the creative process by publishing and sharing creative content as well as disseminating information (Thackeray *et al.*, 2008).

With the broad range of new communication channels, public relations practitioners are faced with a daunting challenge as “internet-based social media tools such as blogs, podcasts, online video and social

networks are giving voice to the opinions of millions of consumers” (Carrabis, Cass, Gillin, Nacht & Peverill-Conti, 2008, pg. 11). Kim and Johnson (2011), drawing on Solis and Breakenridge’s (2009) work add that Web 2.0 and social media have widened the parameters of communication and has granted public relations practitioners various avenues for reaching publics.

From the forgoing views, public relations practitioners, such as organisations, may need to reconsider and augment their traditional approaches. The reason is that, building and maintaining relationships with key publics have paradoxically become both easier and difficult. It has become easier in the sense that more communication options are now available, but the difficulty arises from the fact that publics now have a significant amount of control over content, as opposed to traditional public relations.

2.4 Online Public Relations using Social Media

Previously in the 1980s, information channels could be split into two forms: mass communication and micro-communication. Mass communication included newspapers, magazines, television, radios and other information sources shared with large groups of people in an asymmetrical or unbalanced exchange. Micro-communication on the other hand tended to deal with exchanges between individual persons and thus, was more symmetrical in its exchange (Phillips & Young, 2009).

In this current online space, public relations practice has become more transparent because communication is handled in the spotlight (that is, on the internet where everyone has democratic access). This has been facilitated by the rise of social media (Breakenridge, 2012). As defined in Chapter One, social media includes mobile and web-based technologies that construct highly engaging arenas by which individuals and communities share, create, dialogue, and adjust user-generated content (Kietzmann *et al*, 2011).

Breakenridge (2012) notes that “when social media meets PR, communication unites with technology” (p. 1). Social media causes content to be democratized, and demands a change of attitude to unite communications with collaborative technology. Lovejoy, Waters and Saxton (2012) assert that social media or social networking, such as Facebook, has afforded organisations the opportunity of engaging their stakeholders in real-time communication and information exchange.

2.5 Facebook as a Public Relations Tool

Despite the surge in popularity of social media, studies that explore the usage of social media for public relations remain few (Briones *et al*, 2011). Public relations, defined by Grunig and Hunt (as cited in Kamerer & Morris, 2011), is an organisation’s attempt to manage the communication between itself and its publics. Communication by a single person or organisation to thousands of other individuals has been heightened by the advent of internet-based social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Waters, Burnett, Lamm and Lucas (2009) undertook a content analysis of 275 non-profit organisation profiles on Facebook to assess how they used social networking sites to promote their organisational mission and programmes. Among others, they sought to answer the question of how non-profit organisations incorporate relationship development strategies into their Facebook profiles. They found that the non-profits had not integrated most of the numerous interactive Facebook applications on their profile. They failed to capitalise on the interactivity of social networking, and consequently Facebook. They also rarely distributed organisational news.

McCorkindale (2010) also conducted a quantitative content analysis of 2008 Fortune 50 companies Facebook pages to assess how they used Facebook. The study analysed 55 Facebook pages to determine what was posted or published about the company. Among other results, the findings from the study indicated that few companies were using Facebook as a channel for disseminating information. Moreover, the communication on the Facebook page was generally one-sided, resembled a monologue and thus, neglected the two-way, relationship building potential of Facebook. McCorkindale (2010) concluded that companies in the Fortune 50 were not taking full advantage of Facebook and needed to incorporate relationship building strategies on their social networking sites.

Furthermore, Briones *et al* (2011) conducted a study by interviewing forty individuals from the American Red Cross to explore how social media is used in communication with key publics. The study sought to investigate how two-way dialogue had been accomplished primarily through Facebook and Twitter. The research showed evidence that the study’s participants were aware of the importance of social media, and how it could be used to build stronger relationships with publics such as volunteers and the community.

It seems that most studies recognise the relationship-building capacity of social media. This can also be applied to the four companies of this study, as they also communicate or dialogue with various key publics, using Facebook. In effect, dialogue is seemingly necessary in an organisation-public relation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted content analysis as a research method, and employed quantitative techniques such as frequencies and descriptive statistics. Neuendorf (2002) defines content analysis as “a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented” (p. 10). The quantitative section of the analysis dealt with frequencies as well as descriptive and inferential figures of companies’ Facebook homepages and Posts. On the other hand, Krippendorff (2004) views qualitative content analysis as more “interpretive”, paying close attention to comparatively small chunks of texts (p. 17). Qualitative content analysis is used to aid the identification of themes and patterns in the companies’ Facebook Posts, and make meaning as well as inferences from the quantitative section.

Content analysis is used in this study as a research method for one primary reason. Content analysis provides the versatility and structure to identify thematic patterns and explore relationships between variables through inferential statistics. Hence, content analysis is deemed most suitable in investigating how companies use Facebook as a public relations tool.

Sampling

Convenience sampling technique is used for this research. This is deemed the most suitable technique because of the study’s exploratory nature. The sample is taken from the financial services section of the 2011 Ghana Club 100 list – a yearly compilation by the Ghana Investment Promotion Centre (GIPC) of the 100 top performing organisations in Ghana.

Four organisations are selected namely: (1) GT Bank Ghana Limited, (2) Fidelity Bank Ghana Limited, (3) GLICO Life Insurance Company, and (4) Unibank Ghana Limited. The selection criteria included the number of Facebook likes (at least 300 Facebook likes) and activity in the year 2013. The companies’ Facebook Posts chosen were between 1st January, 2013 and 31st May, 2013, that is, the first five months of the year 2013.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument employed in this study is a coding scheme: a coding form, with a corresponding codebook. A coding form is an easy-to-use recording format and corresponds with a codebook, which operationally defines all variables on the coding form (Neuendorf, 2002). Stated in another way, the coding form is the research instrument by which the units of data are interrogated. A codebook is an attaching document that clearly defines all the constructs on the coding form – its categories and variables.

Data Collection

Data gathering for this study took place on 10th June, 2013. The tool used in gathering the data for this research is the Microsoft Snipper Tool. Microsoft Snipper Tool is software with options which allow screenshots to be captured from any part of the computer screen. With the Microsoft Snipper Tool, screenshots were cropped or cut out from the Facebook Pages of the companies under study. Screenshots were copied and pasted on the corresponding coding form with an appropriate serial code (FCode) to make data traceable to coding forms. This research focused on two key areas: Facebook homepages as well as the actual Facebook Posts of the companies under study.

Coding Scheme and Coding Methods

Neuendorf (2002) defines operationalization as the process of constructing solid measures and “for content analysis, this means the construction of a *coding scheme*... a set of measures in a codebook”. The second coding scheme for this study is formulated by adapting the research variables and coding techniques of Charbonnet (2012). The aforementioned researcher analysed universities’ Facebook Posts to measure organisation-public relationships.

Company Facebook Posts

Facebook Posts made by the companies under study appear on their Facebook Pages and the newsfeeds of other Facebook users who have “liked” (given positive feedback or endorsed) the companies on Facebook. Individual Posts could include texts, videos, images and hyperlinks. However, for the purpose of this study, attention was only given to text items (in the actual Post and in images) as well as images within Posts. Videos and hyperlinks were excluded as they would have prolonged the time for the study – a luxury that could not be afforded.

One these three categories of companies’ key publics: (a) current customers, (b) prospective customers and (c) the general society was chosen depending on whether a Post aligned closely with either of the categories. Posts aimed at current customers mentioned customers directly or provided information related to the current users of the company’s services. Posts directed at prospective customers were promotional in nature, attempting

to make the company and its services more desirable. Posts aimed at the general society were universal in nature, and did not specifically mention the company’s customers or prospective customers.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data was analysed and is presented using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative analysis included the number of likes, comments and shares pertaining to each Post. Also, the frequency of the companies’ Face book Posts were analysed in terms of: same day as previous Post, one day after previous Post, two days after previous Post, three days after previous Post as well as more than three days.

Table 1: Frequency of Posts per Company

Company	Number of Posts	Percentage	Number of Page Likes
GT Bank Ghana Limited	55	84.62	761
GLICO Life Insurance Company	3	4.62	636
Unibank Ghana Limited	6	9.23	340
Fidelity Bank Ghana Limited	1	1.53	1,413
Total	65	100	3,150

Table 1 shows that 65 Posts were analysed overall. Out of this number, GT Bank Ghana Limited Posted the most, forming 84.62% of the sample. Unibank Ghana Limited followed with 9.23%. Next was GLICO Life Insurance Company with 4.62 while Fidelity Bank Ghana Limited trailed with 1.53%. This shows that GT Bank Ghana Limited was the most active on Facebook. However, no correlation was found between a company’s Facebook activity and the number of page likes it garnered.

Feedback of Company Facebook Posts

Figure 1: Number of Likes of Facebook Posts

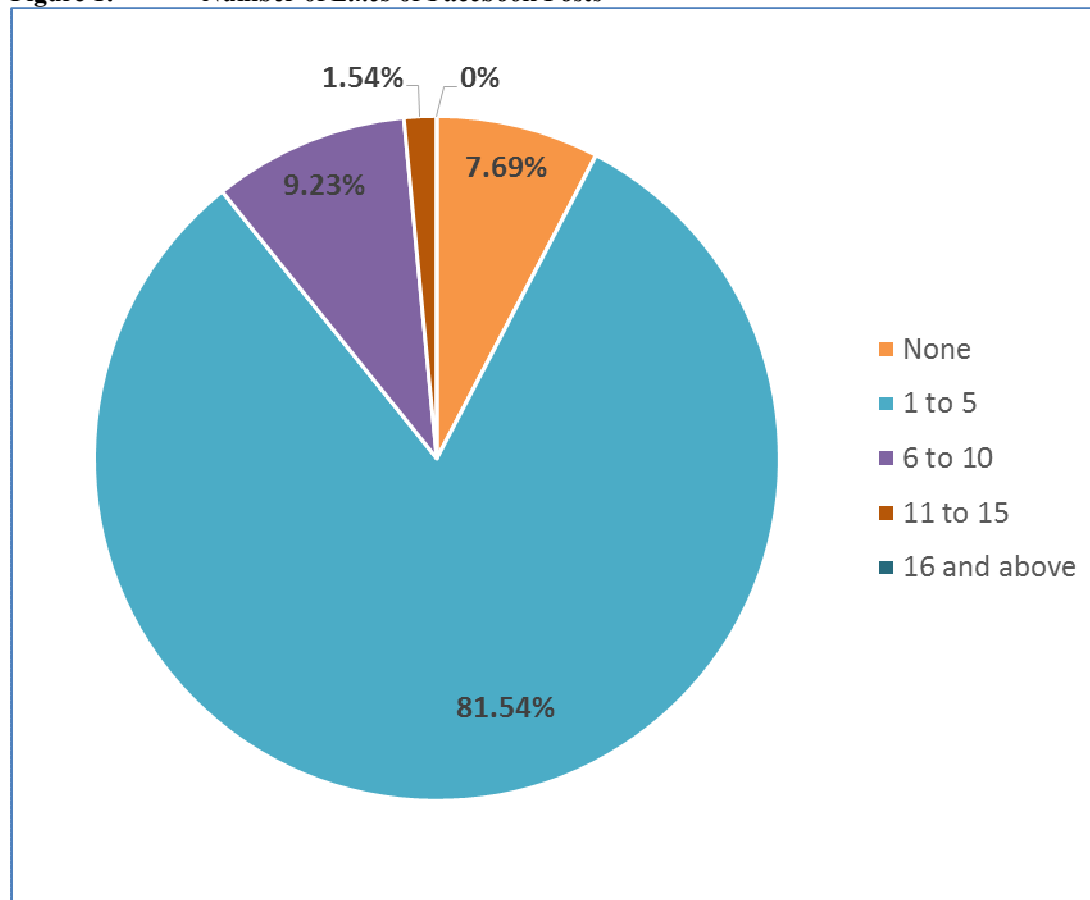
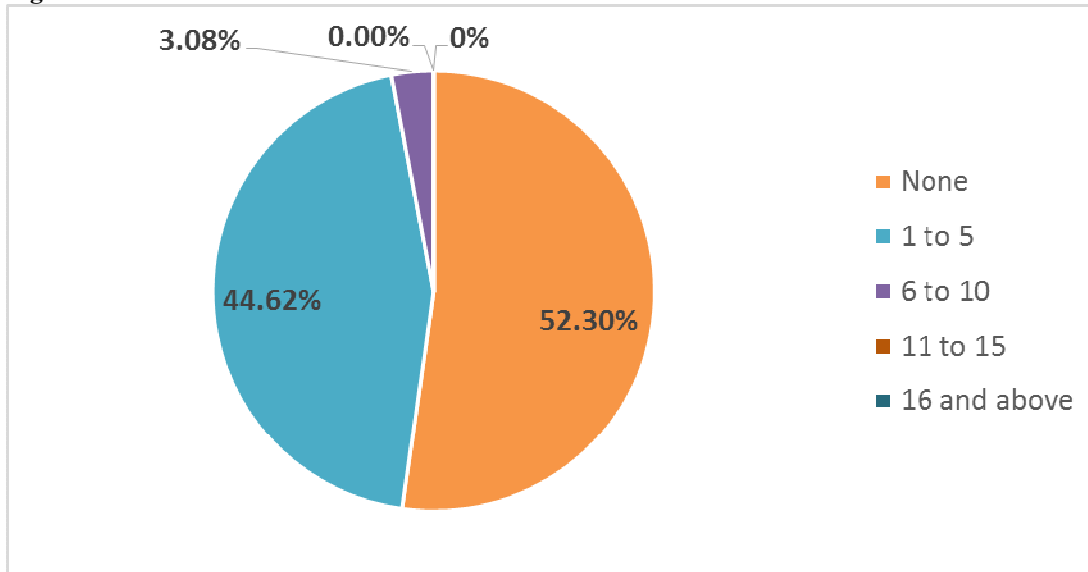


Figure 1 indicates that 7.69% of the Posts made by the companies were not *liked* by fans of the companies’ pages. *Likes* (of Posts) that ranged between 1 and 5 formed 81.54% of the entire sample. *Likes* (of Posts) between 6 and 10 totalled 9.23% of the 65 Posts analysed while *likes* (of Posts) from 11 to 15 had 1.54% share of the sample. There were no *likes* (of Posts) for the 16 and above range. A trend seems apparent; that most

of the companies' Posts were not liked by more than five people.

Figure 4.2: Number of Comments on Facebook Posts



In Figure 2, Posts with no *comments* at all constituted 52.3% of the entire sample. *Comments* (on Posts) ranging between 1 and 5 had the second highest frequency (44.62%). *Comments* (on Posts) ranging between 6 and 10 had a 3.08% share of the total sample. There were no *comments* (on Posts) for the 11 and above range.

Figure .3: Number of Shares of Facebook Posts

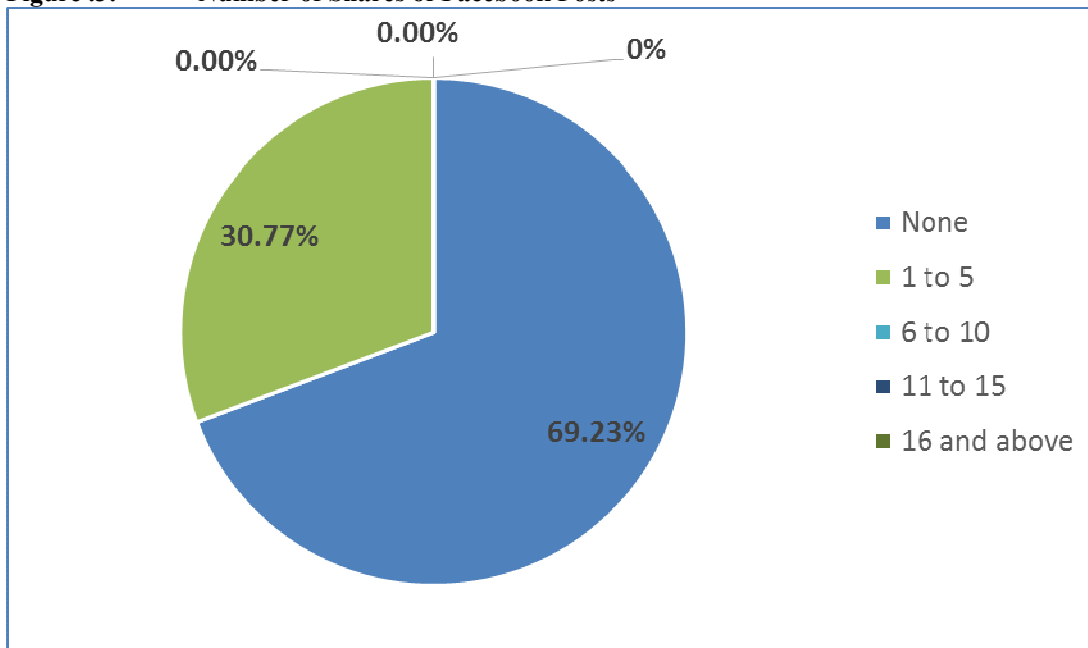


Figure 3 reflects the frequencies at which Facebook Posts were *shared* by fans of the companies. The number of fans who did not *share* the Posts totalled 69.23% of the sample. Less than a third (30.77%) of the *shares* of Posts ranged between 1 and 5. No results were recorded for *shares* ranging from 6 and above.

Frequency (day intervals) of Company Facebook Posts

Figure 4: Frequency of Facebook Posts: Day/Days after Previous Posts

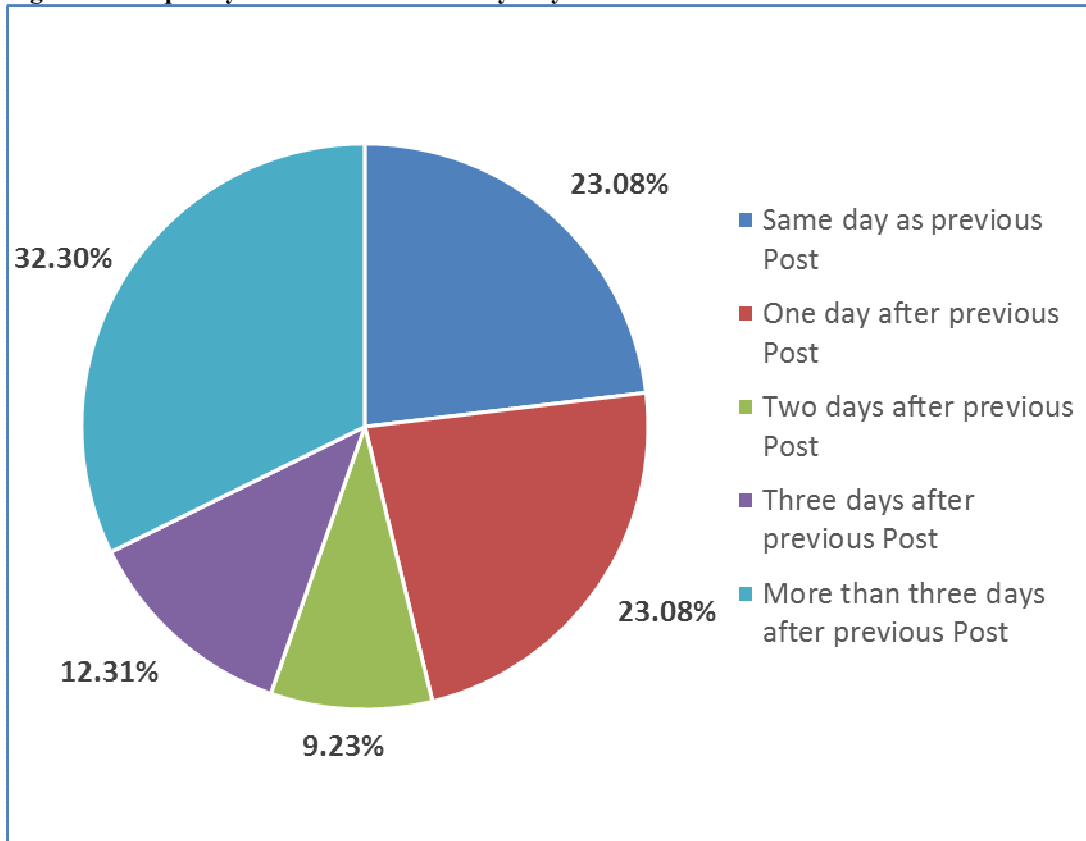


Figure 4 shows that 23.08% of the Posts made by the companies were on the *same day as the previous Post*. Similarly, 23.08% of Posts were made *one day after the previous Posts*. Posts made *two days after previous posts* formed 9.23% of the sample. Posts made *three days after previous Post* formed 12.31% of the sample while 32.3% were made *more than three days after the previous Posts*.

Intended Public

Figure 5: Intended Public of Facebook Posts

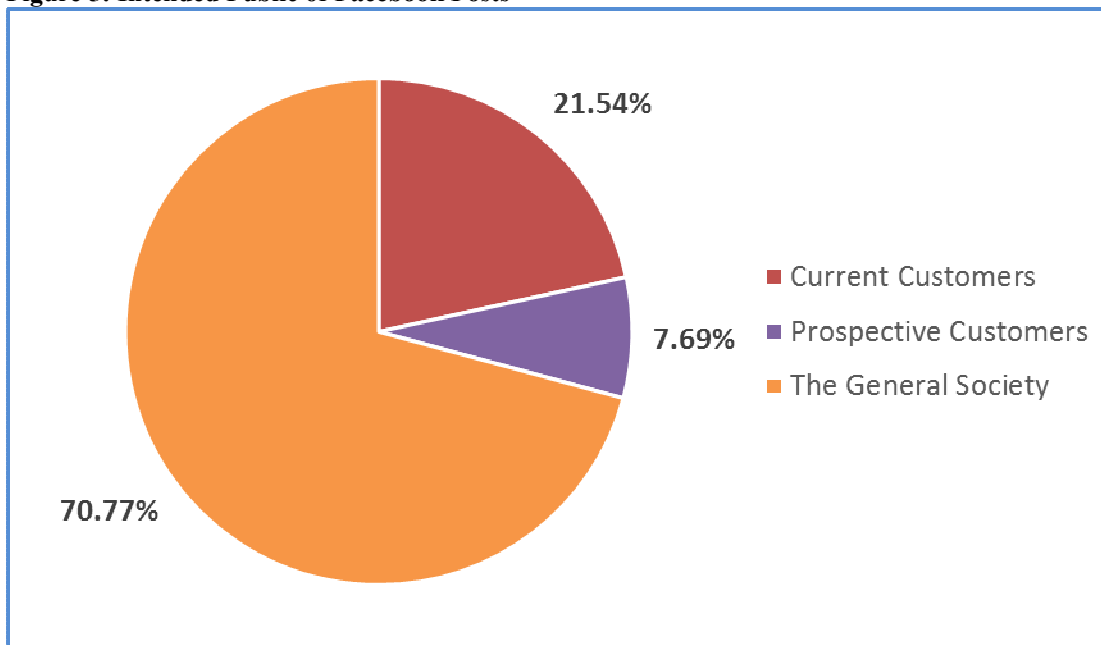


Figure 5 indicates that 70.77% of the Posts made were targeted at *the general society*, forming the

majority. Posts targeted at *current customers* formed 21.54% of the sample. Posts targeting *prospective customers* were the least with 7.69%

One-way versus Two-way Communication

Figure 6: One-way vs. Two-way communication

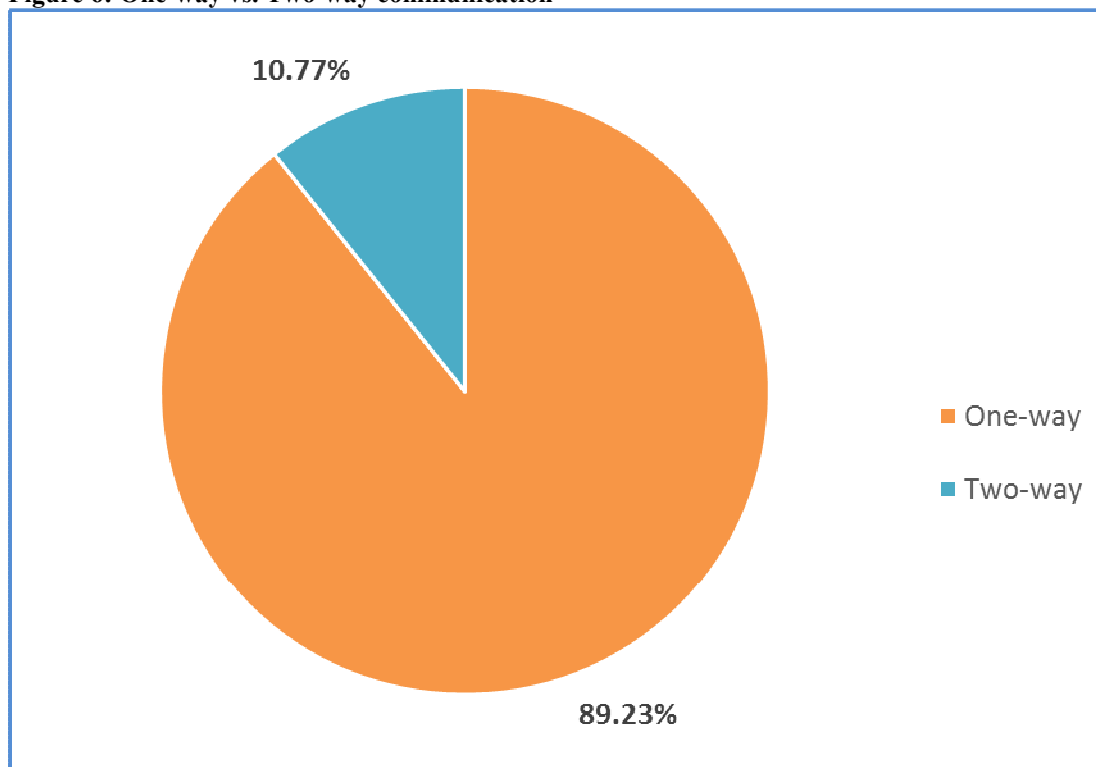


Figure 6 clearly shows that one-way communication dominated the Facebook Posts of the companies studied and constituted 89.22% of the total posts as compared to the 10.76% of two-way communication.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative examination was focused on the homepages of the four companies under study. Aspects of the homepages such as the presence and description of companies' cover photos (large photos at the top of Facebook timelines) were examined. In addition, information about the four companies such as short biographies and contacts, were taken into consideration.

The findings showed that all four companies under study provided some information on their Facebook homepages. For instance, companies provided background information, mission and description. Other basic information such as founding date, location, contact information and awards received were also provided. All, excluding Fidelity Bank provided cover photos, with either pictures or texts relating to the company.

All the four companies examined in this research had provided some information on their Facebook homepages. Typical information included company background information, mission and description of the company. Other basic information such as founding date, location and contact information were provided. One addition was Unibank Ghana Limited which gave information concerning the awards it has received over the years. A company's Facebook homepage is a significant aspect of its profile on Facebook. All, except Fidelity Bank Posted cover photos with either pictures or texts relating to the company.

Feedback and Frequency Company Facebook Posts

The findings showed that more than three-quarters (81.54%) of the Posts made by the companies under study generated *likes* ranging from one to five. Additionally, almost all (96.92%) of the Posts either had no *comments* or *comments* ranging from one to five. A similar situation was found with regard to how often Posts were *shared* by fans of the four companies studied on Facebook.

Moreover, the findings showed that the daily intervals between the Posts made by the companies were predominantly one (23.08%), three (12.31%) as well as three days and above (32.3%). These findings suggest an apparent inconsistency in the Posting intervals of the companies under study, which could have affected the feedback generated. The reason could be that members of the key publics did not know when Posts would be made by the companies under study, and could therefore not have responded accordingly.

Intended Public for Facebook Posts

As indicated in the codebook (see Appendix III), the intended publics for the study were categorised into three: (a) current customers, (b) prospective customers and (c) the general society. Posts directed at current customers mentioned customers directly or provided information relating or useful to current users of the company's services. Posts directed at prospective customers were promotional in nature, aimed at making the bank and its services more desirable. Posts meant for the general society were universal in nature, encompassing both current and prospective customers. Such Posts did not specifically mention current or prospective customers of the company but rather sought to address the mass public.

The findings (Figure 4.5) indicated that almost three-quarters (70.77%) of the total Facebook Posts made by the companies under study targeted the general society. For instance, some Posts stated: "Happy New Year! Welcome to 2013! Have a prosperous new year! ..." (FCode: GTB-11-01) and "Glico Life cushions Black Stars to go get gold for Ghana at the AFCON 2013" (FCode: GLICO-23-01). These statements indicate that the Posts lacked specificity and did not mention either current or prospective customers directly.

Following the general society, Posts targeted at current customers made up about a quarter (21.54%) of the total sample. Such Posts included statements such as: "Have a happy weekend! Remember to use your debit VISA card or MasterCard" (FCode: GTB-12-04) and "Happy New Year to all our cherished customers..." (FCode: GLICO-23-01). It is clear that the preceding statements either provided information relating to users of the companies services or mentioned customers directly.

Posts targeted at prospective customers trailed and formed far less than one-tenth (7.69%) of the total sample. An example included, "GTBank opens at Makola opposite Ghana Law School, Accra..." (FCode: GTB-29-05). The information provided in the preceding statement sought to promote a new offering of the company (GT Bank Ghana Limited) to prospective customers.

As indicated in the literature review, the American Red Cross study conducted by Briones *et al* (2011) concluded that using Facebook to communicate with key publics generated feedback to improve the services of the organisation. The findings of this study demonstrate that almost all (92.31%) of the Posts made by the companies studied were targeted at only current customers and the general society. These findings imply that the companies studied are likely to receive most of their feedback from only the general society and current customers, as they were the major publics targeted for communication.

Moreover, such communication targeting particular sections of key publics on Facebook appears limited, McCorkindale's (2010) asserts that companies must endeavour to understand Facebook, as it can be used to communicate with a wide variety of publics.

Suggested Recommendations

Regardless of the findings, the companies under study should strive to achieve a more balanced and interactive use of Facebook as a public relations tool. In light of this, the following suggested recommendations can be considered: (1) an assessment of their existing corporate social media strategy in order to identify actions which generate the most feedback; and (2) an application of established industry best practices that foster online relationship building.

Conclusion

Overall, the four companies sampled for this study seemed to recognize the potential of Facebook as an avenue for managing relationships with key publics, as evidenced by their Facebook presence and activities such as information updates. While the companies may be cognisant of the interactive opportunities Facebook can afford, they seem to underutilize the platform to its full capacity. It appears that the four companies under study were not taking full advantage of the two-way relationship building potential of Facebook. It is possible that the companies lack a good understanding of the interactive nature of Facebook and how it can be utilized effectively as a public relation tool for corporate public relations strategy.

Future Research

Future research into other sectors and industries in the use of other social media for public relations and other purposes can be helpful in bringing out more scholarly knowledge in the use of social media in business communication. For instance, Future researchers may conduct a content analysis of how companies use Twitter as a public relations tool.

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