

Social Commerce and Marketing Strategy for “Made in Italy” Food Products

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Abstract. The ICTs have enabled the transformation of processes of production, access, transfer, use and, in recent years, the sharing of information (email, forums, and social networks), reducing the spatio-temporal barriers. However, despite the fact that investments in new technologies have increased in recent decades, Italian agri-food and agricultural enterprises have still not bridged the digital divide. Nevertheless there are interesting potentials for growth, with the advent of Web 2.0 (and the latest web 3.0) and with *social media*. The aim of this study is to provide a brief overview of the developments in the Digital Economy and of the changes that have occurred in business to consumer models. In particular, the state of the art for agri-food products in relation to the evolution from “*e-commerce*” to “*social commerce*” will be analysed, through a specific survey, consisting of two complementary phases, related both to online businesses and to the web consumers.

Keywords: agrifood, e-business, social media, glocal, 8P’s social marketing.

1 Introduction

In the ICTs sector, innovations follow each other swiftly, as it is a very dynamic market, where Web 3.0 represents the latest phenomenon, after Web 2.0 that had revolutionised the global world of *information* (Bethon *et al.*, 2012; Neison *et al.*, 2010). There has been an evolution of sites and services in the Web, such as wiki sites and social networks, where interaction and sharing of content by users are fundamental. The web has become a “web ecosystem” in which users create value by sharing and creating experiences in the Web (through e-mail, blogs, networking, forums, communities, chat, etc.). The Internet has become the global platform for exchange, the space where an economic force of global dimensions operates, which has radically modified social and economic behaviour (Brush *et al.*, 2010; Kumar *et al.*, 2012; Sturiale, 2000; Whang *et al.*, 2012)

In the European Union the digital economy is growing seven times faster than the rest of the economy, but its potential is currently hindered by an inconsistent strategic framework across European countries.

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With regard to the Italian food market, specific studies on the Digital Economy refer to surveys on the size of the phenomenon, on “e - commerce” in individual sectors, on web marketing, and on B2B¹).

The objective of this study is to provide a first contribution to the knowledge of the recent phenomenon of *social commerce* in the Italian agri-food economy, and to the analysis of the *social media marketing* used, following the 8 Ps approach (Dastak *et al.*, 2014), . To this end, a specific research has been carried out, involving two complementary phases, relating to Made in Italy food production companies that are present online, and to web consumers.

2 The Opportunities of the Digital Economy for Agri-food Enterprises

The size of the Digital Economy is particularly relevant given the growing importance of the ICTs as a policy tool. There is a high level of interest in measuring the Internet economy as a way to understand the effects of various investment strategies, regulatory rulings, and policy decisions.

In 2014 the world digital market continued its growth, registering a + 3.6% increase, with a global value of 4,538.6 billion dollars. (Assinform- NetConsulting, 2014). The phenomenon of social media is growing globally: there are 1.75 billion users of social networks.

ICTs are making companies’ business ever more efficient: enterprises are looking more and more to technology to reduce costs, creating an ever growing demand for technological services and products.

According to the OECD (2012), the American market is the most important in terms of number of employees, with a share of 30%, followed by Japan (16%) and Germany (9%). According to the Boston Consulting Group, in 2016 the net economy of the G20 countries will reach 4.2 trillion, 3 billion people will be connected to the Internet on various devices. For the G20 countries, an annual rate of growth of 10% is estimated, while that of the emerging markets will almost double (approximately 18%).

The EU is also focusing on ICTs as a strategic lever to relaunch the European economy through the economic advantages and social sustainability that are offered by a unified digital market²).

The main elements of the #ContinentoConnesso proposal are open Internet, strengthening the consumer rights, abolition of additional roaming costs in the EU, coordinated spectrum frequency allocation, adding certainty for investors.

¹ From among the various contributions to be found in the literature, we cite a few: Sturiale L., 2000; Sturiale and Scuderi, 2001; Bucca *et al.*, 2006; Canavari, Pignatti, and Spadoni, 2008, Brush and McIntosh, 2010; Neilson, Madill, and Haines, Jr., 2010).

² As reported by the Digital Agenda (2012), in the EU the digital economy is growing by 12% each year; employment in the field of ICTs is approximately 7 million, and it is estimated that this will increase to 16 million by 2020. It is estimated that half of the productivity growth results from investment in this sector.

In spite of the developments that have affected the ICTs and that are reflected in all areas of social and economic life, a digital divide still remains. In the “*Connectivity Scorecard*”³ ranking, which assesses the impact of the Web on national economies, in 2014 Italy was in 22nd out of 26 countries, which were considered as innovation-driven economies (Denmark, Sweden, and the United States were in the lead, while ranked behind Italy were Greece, Portugal, Hungary, and Poland).

At the same time, a study conducted by Google⁴ showed that online searches for Italian products in 2014 increased by 13% compared to 2013; amongst the most clicked categories of the “Made in Italy”, the top searches were in the fashion and car sectors, followed by tourism, agri-food, and furniture.

In the Italian agri-food economy, since the 90’s many companies have implemented new “*e-business*” and web marketing organisational models, to adapt to the new competitive environment. They have adopted new strategic tools for market knowledge, brand awareness of their product, and customer interaction (from one-to-one marketing, to social networking, to storytelling). The last frontiers are represented by *social commerce*, *Apps*⁵, and the developments of the mobile and content marketing, to name just a few.

Despite these developments, in Italy we are far from both the European average and from the goals set by the Digital Agenda. According to recent surveys, in Italy mistrust of online purchase still persists due to the following reasons (in decreasing order of importance): preference for physical contact with products; payment deemed unsafe; high shipping costs; long shipping times.

In 2012, 29% of Italian Internet users bought online, while the European average was 59%. With regard to the types of goods and services purchased, by far the largest part were for tourist services, books, and clothing, while only 1% was dedicated to food products (compared to a European average of 6%). Therefore there would be a lot of room to develop agri-food “*e-commerce*”, if that was supported by an adequate web marketing and by utilising the latest web technologies.

³The Connectivity Scorecard is the first index to examine quality and quantity of ICT usage and infrastructure, and to link it to a country’s social and economic prosperity. The research focuses on 52 countries. These have been divided into two scorecard groupings according to their economy type as defined by the World Economic Forum.

- Resource-driven economies: Resource and efficiency-driven economies are less well developed than the innovation-driven economies;

- Innovation-driven economies: Innovation-driven economies are more highly developed than resource and efficiency-driven economies. (<http://www.connectivityscorecard.org>).

⁴ Analysis by Google has evaluated the behaviour of users from 10 foreign countries, with different characteristics: from the United States to Germany, from the UAE to Brazil.

⁵ Start-up technologies are growing rapidly in Europe; the European *App* market generates revenues of €17.5 billion and boasts 1.8 million jobs (Digital Agenda, 2012).

3 *E-commerce Versus Social Commerce*

The spread of the Internet, whilst not changing the fundamental rules of the economy, has led to an amplification of the information revolution (Porter, Millar, 1985).

Information Systems are being enriched by tools and areas for interaction that are designed to respond to the emerging needs of businesses and of consumers, thanks to the tools of Web 2.0 and of the latest Web 3.0. Among them, social networks, a worldwide phenomenon that is changing the way of doing *e-business*, assume a very important role, fully considered as a valid support for corporate strategy through an *omni-channel* approach. This provides the synergy of different channels to obtain a widespread and pervasive presence, with the primary objective of listening to the customer and his needs.

Companies are internalising the new market culture and technologies, changing their business models passing through different phases, from “*e-trade*”, to “*e-commerce*”, then onto “*e-business*”⁶ and, the latest frontier of “*social commerce*”, following the development of Web 2.0 and the *social network* (Huang, Benyoucef, 2013).

Italian companies should seize the opportunities offered by *social networks*, using them as a primary instrument for relating with the customer (Tab. 1), considering the fact that more than 70% of Italian Internet users (more than 38 million in 2014) are *social network* users⁷.

⁶ In detail, “*e-trade*” is understood as the electronic channel complementary to the traditional ones, “*e-commerce*” allows the interaction with the market; “*e-business*” uses the integrated technological elements in the internal and external processes of the enterprise to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage (Scott, Murtula, Stecco (eds), 1999).

⁷ According to the Facebook Observatory, in 2014 Facebook had 1.39 billion subscribers worldwide, Italy ranked ninth in the world, with 28 million Italians enrolled, of whom 20 million were daily users. The other social media (Google, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Pinterest) reached a total of approximately 28 million enrolled users. This is a far-reaching social phenomenon that has led to the opening up of *social advertising* and *social commerce*.

Table 1. Enterprise websites and social media use in the EU 28 (2013)
(<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>)

Enterprise websites and social media use, 2013
(% of enterprises)

	Website	Use at least one type of social media	Formal policy for social media use	Social networks	Multimedia content-sharing websites	Blogs or micro blogs	Wiki-based knowledge-sharing tools
EU28	73	30	8	28	11	10	6
Belgium	78	35	9	31	16	10	5
Bulgaria	47	31	6	30	9	5	4
Czech Republic	80	16	5	15	6	3	2
Denmark	92	40	16	36	14	8	5
Germany	84	33	7	29	13	7	11
Estonia	76	27	4	24	7	5	2
Ireland	75	48	20	46	14	20	7
Greece	61	34	8	28	16	11	7
Spain	68	31	9	29	15	13	5
France	65	19	4	17	5	5	3
Croatia	68	37	7	30	14	6	13
Italy	67	25	5	21	10	6	4
Cyprus	66	38	17	37	13	13	4
Latvia	56	15	3	13	5	7	2
Lithuania	75	38	6	31	16	9	14
Luxembourg	79	30	6	26	12	8	7
Hungary	61	26	3	22	10	2	6
Malta	78	55	14	52	20	12	11
Netherlands	84	50	18	45	23	27	7
Austria	86	39	11	35	14	7	10
Poland	66	19	3	16	8	3	4
Portugal	59	36	9	33	12	6	4
Romania	42	19	5	17	6	3	2
Slovenia	80	37	9	34	13	8	2
Slovakia	80	26	8	21	11	4	6
Finland	94	37	13	34	14	8	6
Sweden	89	45	15	42	16	13	9
United Kingdom	82	42	15	40	15	23	6
Iceland	83	60	12	58	18	14	5
Norway	79	46	17	43	12	9	5
Former Yug. Rep. of Macedonia	54	36	8	33	15	6	7

Among them, *social commerce* is becoming ever more strategic. This is a new category of e-commerce activated through the use of social media platforms and social network services (Kumar, Rajan, 2011; Marsden, 2010). It was introduced for the first time by Yahoo in November 2005, and has grown rapidly in the past 5 years, giving rise to “*social media marketing*”. This involves a convergence between the online and offline environments.

Since social media have become readily accessible, more consumers use it as a source of information about companies, brands, products, and services by social networks and e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) (Sturiale, Scuderi, 2013; Scuderi, Sturiale, 2014; Wang, Zhang, 2012).

Today it is possible, to distinguish different types of social commerce (Indvik, 2015):

1. **Peer-to-peer sales platforms** ([eBay](#), [Etsy](#), Amazon Marketplace).
2. **Social network-driven sales** ([Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#), [Twitter](#)).
3. **Group buying** ([Groupon](#), [LivingSocial](#)).
4. **Peer recommendations** ([Amazon](#), [Yelp](#), [JustBoughtIt](#)).
5. **User-curated shopping** ([The Fancy](#), [Lyst](#), [Svpply](#)).
6. **Participatory commerce** ([Threadless](#), [Kickstarter](#), [CutOnYourBias](#)).
7. **Social shopping** ([Motilo](#), [Fashism](#), [GoTryItOn](#)).

4 Survey Method

In order to analyse the state of the art for agri-food products in relation to the evolution from e-commerce to social commerce, a specific survey was conducted in two complementary phases, relating to businesses and consumers.

The **first phase** provides a brief overview of the relationship between the agri-food economy, ICTs, customers, and marketing. This analysed and assessed the leading agri-food SMEs present on the Internet to understand, firstly, what the strategic goals of the business are and, secondly, to evaluate the effectiveness of their marketing strategies when applied to social media, following the framework of the recent 8 Ps approach (Dastak, Aligholi, 2014). The survey was conducted in 2014, and analysed no. 100 websites of agri-food companies selected on the Internet through the major search engines, as well as other information sources present on the Internet through specific and institutional links, selecting the sample based on a reasoned choice. The identification of the main parameters relating to the 8 Ps was performed through the use of a specific framework that has allowed information on different aspects that characterise the interactions between a company's marketing strategy and its social-commerce to be obtained in detail. In particular, the 8 Ps considered are the following: *product, place, price, promotion, people, process, physical evidence, productivity, and quality*; for each of these, a qualitative assessment using consolidated methods used in similar surveys was performed (Berthon *et al.*, 2012; Bucca *et al.*, 2006; Dastak *et al.*, 2014; Sturiale *et al.* 2001; 2011).

The **second phase** aims to assess the consumer's ability to convey their purchasing intention to the community and social media, as a strategic element of *social-commerce* (Stephen *et al.*, 2010; Scuderi *et al.*, 2014 (a); Zou *et al.*, 2013).

A specific questionnaire was used to interview 1,000 "followers" of the Facebook pages of the 100 agri-food enterprises that have been analysed. The questions given to the participating units, according to a specific experimental design, provide a number of scenarios that could generate three possible evaluations (of positive, negative, and neutral values) relating to consumer preferences and to the 8 Ps of companies' marketing strategies (that were previously assessed in the first phase).

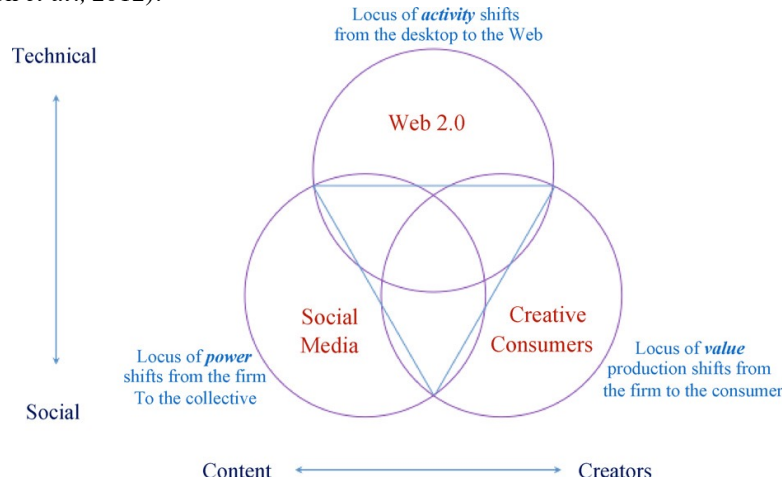
The collected data was processed by applying the technique of multiple regression analysis, in order to capture the influences from multiple independent variables on a dependent variable, according to the following base model in which all the variables analysed are contained:

$$\text{SOCIAL}_{probi} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{PRODUCT} + \beta_2 \text{POS} + \beta_3 \text{NEG} + \beta_4 \text{MED} + \beta_5 \text{GENDER} + \beta_6 \text{POST}_i + \beta_7 \text{WHY}_i + \beta_8 \text{AGE}_i + \beta_9 \text{EDU} + \beta_{10} \text{PERS.f} + \epsilon$$

In which the various elements indicate the following: “SOCIAL_{probi}” - the probability of transmitting the shopping experience to third parties; “i” - the individuals; “PRODUCT” - the type of product; “POS” - a positive experience; “NEG” - a negative experience; “MED” - a neutral experience; “GENDER” - the sex; “POST” - the activity of posting online by the participating entity; “WHY” - the motivation for posting online; “AGE” - the age; “EDU” - education; “PERS.f” represents the variable that recognises the individual characteristics of each respondent; and “ε” represents the forecast error/residue.

5 Results and Discussion

The results of the **first phase** of the research, following the 8 Ps marketing approach, has enabled the opportunities and limitations of the “e-business” models of in the agro-food system to be highlighted. Through the survey, some case histories of agri-food enterprises that have been able to maximise the opportunities offered by social media have emerged. In fact, they have adapted their methods of dealing with the customer, who, from being a simple content user, is becoming the author of content and experiences (a creative consumer), according to the interaction model between the web, social media, and consumer, as shown in the following image (Berthon *et al.*, 2012).

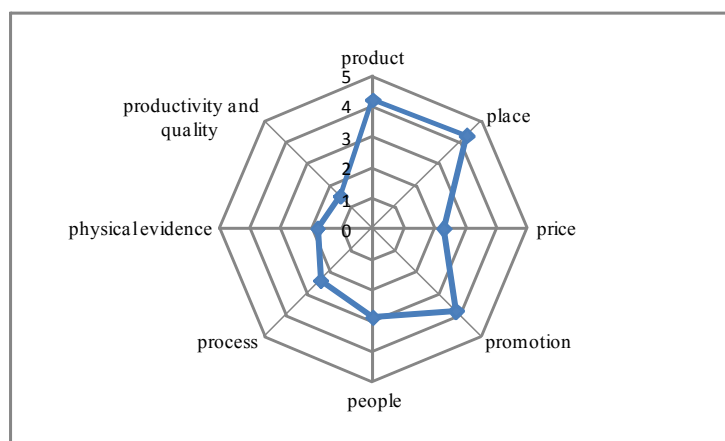


From the data obtained, it can be noted that marketing has transformed according to the characteristics of the new tool, and has focused its attention on “information” as a business asset, and on the business-client relationship in an integrated vision that can create value, transforming into *societing*. In this context, in the process of buying, the social media have become the most important instrument for directing both the online and off-line choices of buyers, also in the agri-food market (Scuderi, Sturiale, 2014(a); Sturiale, Scuderi, 2013).

In a competitive and highly dynamic environment, the essential sources of competitive advantage constituted by intangible factors are becoming increasingly important, since they allow companies to evolve, satisfy consumers, and anticipate change. For agri-food products, social media strategies have become an integral part of the development policies for the companies' products, with an additional attraction determined by the extent of investment, contact between the company and the consumer, and potential initiation of word of mouth in the community.

In summary, the objectives of the marketing strategies adopted by the companies analysed are to build, engage, and expand direct relationships with customers through the *social network*, to increase brand awareness, to gain more and more information in order to develop targeted communication, and to activate *social commerce*.

Fig. 1 The impact of marketing mix (8P's) for agrifood firms



However, the results highlight (Fig. 1) that businesses are open to the new “8 Ps” marketing approach in different ways. The majority of companies (63%) are still predominantly oriented to the original 4 Ps, even though they show an interest in the people element. On the other hand, the remaining Ps are largely unexplored or undervalued. There is, therefore, an interest in the new elements of the marketing model, but the process is still at its beginning. Therefore, both the actions and the results of the application of such elements are still to be assessed for “Made in Italy” agri-food products (Scuderi *et al*, 2014- b)..

Moving on to analyse the results of the **second phase**, that is the intention of transmitting the knowledge and the experience of purchasing through social media, it can be noted that the purchase of “Made in Italy” agri-food products generate a significant level of reporting. A positive experience generates more SOCIAL compared to a negative experience, and the latter induces, in turn, a greater desire to transfer such an experience than a mediocre one, for which, for both samples considered, all the statistically significant coefficients are negative. This means that the presence a mediocre experience has a negative effect on the desire to report information relating to the product or to the experience to a third party. The results are reported in detail in Tab. 2.

Tab. 2 Estimated structural parameters of opinions deriving from virtual and how they affect consumers on their intention to buy (buy_prob).

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr (> t)
(Intercept)	19.752	7.101	1.125	0,0351517
med_on	3.815	2.874	1.015	0,235897
pos_on	13.567	3.983	3.125	0,001125
no.rev	5.871	3.528	1.127	0,242931
post	4.285	1.584	2.985	0,000984
gender	- 904	2.154	- 858	0,115874
age	- 1.987	2.154	- 1.125	0,228754
edu	1.985	2.368	1.224	0,265287

The results obtained from the statistical analysis enable the following considerations to be singled out, for the products concerned:

- the perception of “Made in Italy” exceeds the value of the shopping experience, as it incorporates an intrinsic value of tradition, capable of generating emotion, which induce purchases that go beyond the purchase threshold of the individual;
- the intention to transfer their own buying experiences to third parties varies depending on whether it refers to products already known by the purchaser;
- the intention to refer their own buying experience to third parties varies depending on the origin of the message, in many cases preferring to spread the message in off-line channels as well, as this makes it possible to generate a comparison between infinite consumers.

These assessments confirm that word of mouth on the net (e-WOM) on agri-food products acts very effectively. *Social commerce*, which is based on communication, should therefore be included among the strategic elements of a *social media marketing* plan, integrated with the *omni-channel* strategy of companies, and assume a significant place in the sales strategy for agri-food products.

6 Conclusions

The environment created by the Internet has led to selection mechanisms for products that are very fast, with the elimination of competitors that do not have an appropriate business model.

To this end, it is essential to refer to an active and interactive model of web presence, which through analysis and review of business processes as a whole, takes into account the characteristics of the company, in this case the specificity of agri-food products and their local dimension, in order to generate a real source of competitive advantage in a global context. The ICTs offer great opportunities to the enterprises concerned, especially the tools of Web 2.0 and *social media*, as the survey reveals.

The *social commerce* for agri-food companies will become strategic for broadcasting the purchasing experience of “Made in Italy” foods, strongly anchored to territory, transforming into “*glocal social commerce*” (Scuderi *et al.*, 2015) .

On one hand, the EXPO 2015 global event , and on the other hand, the trend of the international media towards broadcasting a format that is focused on cooking and

food, which are becoming a global viral phenomenon, are establishing food as the challenge of the future.

This is a historic moment that offers great potential for “Made in Italy” food enterprises, both in terms of image and of the tools offered for the communication of products on a global level. Focusing on social media, networking, and appropriate marketing strategies (8 Ps) and on *societing* will enable them to be more competitive in the marketplace. To this end, it will be important to develop appropriate models of *omni-channel “e-business”*, in which constructing a targeted *social media marketing* will become strategic, to support “Made in Italy” agri-food products.

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