

Empowering customers through education-based videos in e-commerce

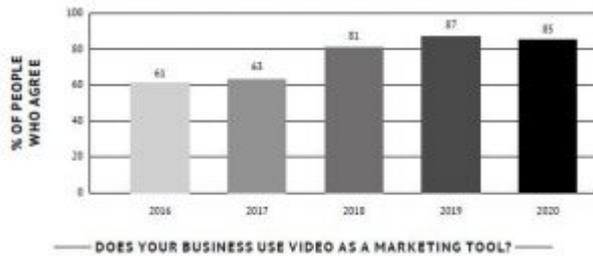
Empowering customers through education-based videos in e-commerce

Digital marketing is a fascinating discipline. It is getting matured before our eyes and surprises us every day as it is expanding fast into various sub-disciplines. Video marketing is one of them. The objective of this paper is to examine the different marketing functions of video promotion with a special focus on the e-commerce environment. There, it traditionally served customer education, focusing exclusively on products and their features. However, the current practice demonstrates that marketing managers have quickly realized the potentials of content marketing in general, and education-based content specifically. As a result, they started to prepare video sessions designed to educate their customers in the whole context of their products and brands, not just explaining a product and its features. While processing the data of prominent e-shops from the Czech Republic and Austria, examples of video sales promotion and branding in the e-commerce environment have been analysed both from the viewpoint of their content focus and added value to customers. The comparative analysis proved a much higher interest in video promotion of the Czech e-retailer than in the case of the Austrian counterpart. Managerial implications and proposals for further research have been suggested.

Introduction

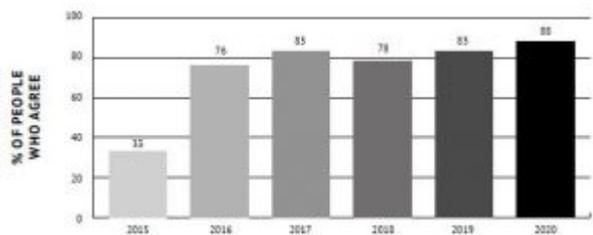
The popularity of video as a communication tool is truly enormous. Training Zone, the UK company specializing in corporate education, reported in its research that over one billion YouTube learning-related videos are viewed every day on the YouTube platform. Simultaneously, video as a communication tool was named on the top of 10 learning technologies (TrainingZone 2019). The popularity of video as a preferred way of consuming information is a strong reason for its use in the field of customer education as well. With the help of carefully crafted education-based content aiming at prospects and customers, different video formats can serve various educational goals. Therefore, the implementation of video marketing in e-commerce is just another extension of the already well-functioning approach.

In its sixth annual survey, Wyzowl (2020), a leading specialist in the explainer video industry, published the data proving the ever-growing trend of different video formats' implementation in marketing. The representative sample of 656 unique respondents surveyed in December 2019 included both marketing professionals and online consumers. According to the survey results, the number of businesses using video as a marketing tool, overall, has increased from 61% to 85% since 2016 - see Graph 1.



Graph 1: The number of businesses using video as a marketing tool in the period 2016-2020
 Source: Own elaboration based on Wyzowl Video Survey (Wyzowl 2020)

According to this survey, the perceived importance of video as a marketing tool has significantly increased, i.e. from around 78% in 2015 to 92% of video marketers expressed their opinion that video was an important part of their marketing strategy. Finally, the video marketers expressed their opinion on ROI generated from video - see Graph 2.



Graph 2: The role of video in ROI in the period from 2015-2020
 Source: Own elaboration based on Wyzowl Video Survey (Wyzowl 2020)

The authors of the survey are quite optimistic in their interpretation of the respondents' opinions on ROI from the video: „There has been an almost unfaltering rise in the number of marketers reporting a positive ROI from video. Back in 2015, only a third said they got a good ROI. That number more than doubled in the following 12 months, and has since seen further increases, peaking this year at 88%.“ (Wyzowl, 2020)

Besides the persuading statistics, it is important to examine the latest theoretical works and researchers' approaches towards digital content marketing (DCM) as a sub-category of digital marketing. Education-based content is another significant phenomenon, currently paving the way for another sub-category of digital marketing, i.e. education-based marketing.

Theoretical framework

Already in 1996, in an iconic essay entitled „Content is king“, Bill Gates compared the content posted on the Internet to radio or television. In this essay, Bill Gates writes: „One of the exciting things about the Internet is that anyone with a PC and a modem can publish whatever content they can create“ (Gates 1996, 2014).

Among the entities actively sharing digital content on the Internet, there are brands. They are becoming ever better informed and far-sighted players in the media market, whether they work with owned media, paid media or acquired media. Brands strive to be unique in their communications, always offering their customers valuable insight into the issue and original content. This is far from being easy, however, an endless source of inspiration can be found in the publications of the world-renowned author Joe Pulizzi, founder of Content Marketing Institute (CMI), who is considered by many to be 'the father of content marketing'. In his publication „Epic Content Marketing“, the author predicts success to brands if they „develop stories that inform and entertain and compel customers to act - without actually telling them to. Epic content distributed to the right person at

the right time is the way to truly capture the hearts and minds of customers. It's how to position your business as a trusted expert in its industry. It's what customers share and talk about" (Pulizzi 2014).

Despite numerous activities of CMI, the ideas of content marketing still need to be actively promoted, explained and shared. With the objective to carry the flag of content marketing further and being concerned for the generally poor understanding of DCM, in their recent research article, the global team of researchers conceptualized the digital content marketing as „the creation and dissemination of relevant, valuable brand-related content to current or prospective customers on digital platforms to develop their favourable brand engagement, trust, and relationships (vs. directly persuading consumers to purchase)" (Hollebeek and Macky 2019). Based on an extensive literature review and applying a holistic approach to the analysed topical theme, the team of researchers highlighted that the content's nature and execution are pivotal to DCM success.

Owing to the fact that the comparative analysis focuses on the education-based content as the storyboard of video promotion, it is important to highlight that education-based content is a sub-category of DCM. Unlike the traditional product-related videos which focus on the product itself and explanation of its features and use, the goals of education-based videos are different. They offer valuable insight into the whole context of a particular area, e.g. in their educational labs, Apple company offers courses of digital photography for free on the premises of their stores instead of just teaching their customers how to use the camera inbuilt in their iPhones. These marketing activities focused on customer education in the broad sense represent an added value to customers who appreciate and welcome them (Knihová 2019). With their focus on sales promotion, product-related videos, or „how-to-videos" don't share the fundamental ideas of content marketing that never directly persuades customers to purchase.

Applying the concept of DCM to e-commerce environment as one of the digital platforms, the content's nature of the video marketing message may serve different purposes, from the classical approach of product-related video to a more sophisticated approach of contextual video, pursuing at the same time different marketing and business goals. These goals may include, for example, the company's efforts to become a brand leader in a particular sector, foster lasting customer relationships or enhance the brand trustworthiness and brand image. Whatever the goal, video marketing with the plethora of various video types with different content focus may serve well each particular situation. Among the most common, there are the following: (1) product introduction (product properties and the context in which it is used); (2) brand promotion video; (3) video from the corporate event; (4) expert interview video; (5) educational videos and tutorials; (4) how-to-video/explainer video; (5) video customer references; (6) live video/streaming video; (7) panoramic video; (8) virtual reality video; (9) augmented reality video; (10) video recording of a press conference, (11) customer support video; (12) behind the scenes video and (13) F&Q video for frequently asked questions and the like.

Apart from the video content focus, also video hosting platforms need to be mentioned. The most common platforms for sharing video content are YouTube, Vimeo, Wistia (WPBeginner. 2019); furthermore, the video content can be uploaded on the website of a company or of a third party, and ultimately inherently belongs to social networks, where, according to the rules of the provider, there may be various restrictions, especially in terms of video length or concerning the preconditions of placing an ad before, during or after broadcasting a particular video. The latest video sharing tool can be chat applications like Messenger or WhatsApp.

Customer education through education-based content distributed both in an e-commerce environment or elsewhere appertains to a wide portfolio of specific customer activities and domains. The idea and potentials of education-based content were highlighted already in 2015 when Forbes magazine focused on building customer confidence in brands and at the same time, it offered a new perspective on the content focus of corporate communication, namely on educational content (Olenski 2015). Among other valuable insight, the author examined the topic from a customer perspective and also from the viewpoint of brands' ability to provide added value at every touchpoint

(Olenski 2015). The concept of education-based content (EBC) has also been examined by other marketing professionals: (1) in terms of customization of educational content (EBC), and dovetailing it with the individual learning styles of customers, (2) the EBC's potential to generate ROI, (3) the EBC's role in customer navigation through the purchasing process, which is characterized by an ever-expanding supply, and (4) the potential of EBC to act as the marketer's differentiation agent adding value to the product (Talbot 2017). Customer training has also been examined in terms of quality of service as a brand's ability to provide added value: „Customer education or the extent to which firms are seen as providing customers with the skills and abilities to utilize critical information is often considered a valuable augmentation to a firm's service offerings” (Bell et al. 2017). A study examining consumer learning behaviour in social networking environments from a social learning perspective provides valuable insight into what really affects customer attitudes in both the cognitive and affective dimensions, including the impact on customer intentions to make purchases. At the same time, it is an important extension of the proactive use of educational content in the social business environment (Chen et al. 2017).

The scientific literature brings many research papers and expert studies focused on the customers and the process of their education. The point of view of individual researchers is always somewhat different, but systematically arranged valuable findings of individual researchers bring greater insight into the whole issue and the interaction of individual elements can then be perceived in all their synergy.

Methodology

This paper seeks to address the question of customer education through the implementation of video marketing in e-commerce. Previous research work has focused predominantly on customer education with the help of product-related videos. The brands started to offer multimedia content in the form of product-related educational videos usually when a new product was launched and its features, assembly tips and/or accessories needed to be communicated to prospects and customers. However, current marketing practice has changed a lot, and the traditional imagination about video-marketing is oversimplistic in relation to the dynamics of implementation of video as a communication tool in companies. With this in mind, the author of this paper aims to shed new light on this topical issue and help to close the gap between marketing theory and practice.

In order to achieve these objectives, a comparative approach that allows analytical comparisons has been given priority and chosen in devising the research structure. In the core of the research, the methods of empirical, content and comparative analyses play the key role. The data sets collected will be analysed, critically evaluated and interpreted. As a result, managerial implications will be formulated. Thus, anybody who is seriously interested in the topic may start building his/her e-commerce solutions based on these findings, saving a lot of time, money and efforts, and benefiting from the best practice.

Two business entities selected to be subjects of these analyses can be both justly characterized by Jeff Bezos's „The Everything Store”. They are the following: Alza.cz (www.alza.cz), a Czech business entity that is the leading e-shop in the Czech Republic, and Universal.at (www.universal.at), the third biggest e-shop in Austria. Both of these business entities are very popular and respected for their professional services.

While processing the data of these two prominent e-shops from the Czech Republic and Austria, hundreds of examples of video sales promotion and branding in the e-commerce environment will be analysed both from the viewpoint of their content focus and added value for customers. Then, the content focus of video marketing will be examined separately according to its character, i.e. (1) non-education-based content and (2) education-based content (typically advertising) - see Fig. 2.

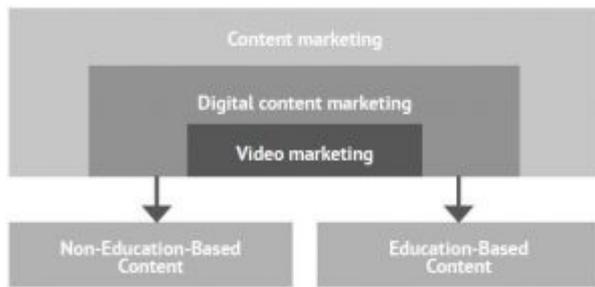


Figure 2: Content analysis model

Source: Author

Owing to the fact that the attitude towards education-based content might vary, from being welcomed to being rejected, not only at the level of an individual but also taking into account socio-cultural differences, habits and traditions, the two business entities under investigation come from different countries, i.e. Austria and the Czech Republic. Thus, more objective empirical data will be analysed.

The research structure reflects the fact that different but related data sets will be analysed so that the results of these analyses may then be compared in harmony with the research objectives.

The current trend in the Czech Republic is video marketing with the use of videos either in the context of a particular brand or its product portfolio in the whole context of its use and applicability. Many companies cater for their clients through their corporate video channels mostly on YouTube.

Alza - a Czech online retailer: general characteristics

Alza, a prosperous Czech e-shop with a wide range of products, can be described as the leader in the PC and electronics sector, however, they continuously expand both in term of their commodities and geographically. For the purpose of this research, only operations on the territory of the Czech Republic are analysed.

A detailed empirical analysis shows that Alza is very active in video marketing and runs its videos on three video broadcasting channels on YouTube (Alza Tube, Alza Ads and Alza Power). This gives the customers quick access to the content they need. The creators of the Alza Tube channel characterize it as a „lifestyle channel” on which educational videos are waiting for you. In the „How to Choose” section, tens of explainer videos have been helping you make the right choice of what you need right now. In their promotional materials, they also remind customers that their videos are always impartial, which is a very important message from an e-shop message that offers hundreds of different brands. The videos on this channel objectively inform and educate customers in a broader context.

Universal - an Austrian online retailer: general characteristics

The Austrian Universal e-shop belongs among the most prosperous online retailers in Austria. It opted for a claim that specifies its product portfolio, i.e. Fashion Online Shop - Clothing - Shoes - Furniture - Universal Mail Order.

On their website, they encourage customers to enter: „Here you will find an extensive range from different product categories! Enjoy a special shopping experience and be inspired by the diverse ideas from the ranges: fashion, technology, furniture, shoes, garden, leisure and sporting goods. No matter whether you have specific wishes or just want to browse: With us, you can enjoy the advantages of modern home shopping” (Universal.at 2020).

As already mentioned above, Universal is Austria’s third largest online retailer. Thus, we can

associate the name Universal with tradition and experience. It was founded in 1968 and celebrated already its 50th birthday.

Universal is a source of shopping inspiration and an individual purchasing advisor for the whole family and their home (Universal.at 2020).

Content analysis and data comparison

Content analysis possesses several advantages: it is often referred to as an 'objective method of analysis', namely due to the coding scheme and sampling. It is also a highly flexible method which can be applied to a wide range of unstructured information (Bryman et al. 2019, p. 290).

The content analysis has been chosen as a relevant research method. „The key points are:

1. While traditionally associated with the analysis of mass-media content, content analysis is, in fact, a very flexible method that can be applied to a wide range of phenomena.
2. Content analysis is very much located within the quantitative research tradition of emphasizing measurement and the specification of clear rules that exhibit reliability” (Bryman et al. 2019, p. 291).

In order to achieve a clear arrangement of the collected data, they are presented in the form of a table – see Tab. 1.

Business entity / e-shop	Universal	Alza
Country	Austria	Czech Republic
Population	8 858 775	10 693 939
Company website	www.universal.at	www.alza.cz
Turnover in 2018 / EURD	129 512 451	972 000 000
Turnover in 2019 / EURD	125 000 000	1 140 000 000
Date of the company's registration on YouTube (company channel)	14th February 2011	27th July 2009
No. of YouTube channels	1	4
No. of videos uploaded/No. of subscribers of education-based content video	66/331	249/16 400
No. of videos uploaded /No. of subscribers non-education-based content video	0/0	1 677/84 521
Total No. of subscribers of education-based content video/non-education-based video	331/0	16 400/84 521
Hypertexts/links to videos on YouTube inside the company's e-shop	YES	YES
Total No. of videos uploaded	66	1 926
Total No. of non-education-based content videos	0	1 677
Total No. of education-based content videos	66	249
Total No. of subscribers	331	100 921

Table 1: Content analysis of video YouTube channels of Universal and Alza (date of data mining: April 29, 2020)

Source: Author

Author's comments

Taking into account some facts which might slightly influence the data comparability (e.g. the population of Austria of is 8 858 775 people while the population of the Czech Republic is 10 693 939), the differences in the two data sets are still rather striking. Video marketing on YouTube channel of Alza is followed by the total number of 100 921 subscribers while the number of education-based content subscribers has reached 16 400 subscribers. The Austrian e-shop Universal does not upload any videos of non-education-based content, i.e. for example, video advertising is not part of their YouTube content. All its 66 videos are based on educational topics, inspirational ideas or on the products' use in wider contexts. However, they are only 66, and the total number of subscribers is 331.

A typical example of education-based content produced by Alza would deal with a wider context of a product, e.g. How to choose wireless headsets (62 videos dealing with this topic; the videos are highly informative, and no hints to particular producers or brands of headsets are made by the moderators). Marketing experts from Universal Versand focus on DIY ideas, e.g. Christmas Decoration Design, Christmas Table Decoration Design, Home-made marmalade as a Christmas present Good Life Bowl Recipe, i.e. topics which appeal to all generations. In its video promotion, Alza demonstrates that it is a tech-savvy brand by uploading interesting videos „We are playing with applications” and „We are playing with virtual reality”, i.e. topics which are of genuine interests especially for young generations (Millennials and Gen Z). The topic of virtual reality has been elaborated further into sub-topics: (1) VR concept explanation, (2) History of VR and (3) VR expert interview. By timely thinking about our future and sharing education-based content, the Alza team is preparing its prospects for the time when the portfolio of VR products and customer solutions is much more sophisticated than today. However, due to the education-based video content, the client is already prepared for an unpredictable future.

Tabs. 2 and 3 show the structure of video promotion on YouTube channels of Alza and Universal Versand.

YouTube Channel	Description	Number of videos	Number of subscribers
AlzaTech	tech-savvy content	1 632	66 600
AlzaTube	customer education	249	16 400
AlzaReklamy	advertising	55	17 500
AlzaPower	electromobility & green future	10	421
Total		1 926	100 921

Table 2: Structure of YouTube channels operated by Alza (to the date of April 29, 2020)

Source: Author

The Czech nation can be justly proud of its craftsmanship. It has always been a nation fond of technologies, and this spirit is still embodied even in the youngest generations (Millennials and Gen Z), which had the privilege to grow up in a tech-savvy environment. The number of subscribers to AlzaTech is enormous, and it is a clear proof of the technological traditions passed on from one generation to the next.

YouTube Channel	Description	Number of videos	Number of subscribers
Universal Versand	living, fashion & technology	66	551

Table 3: Structure of YouTube channels operated by Universal (to the date of April 29, 2020)

Source: Author

Results, limitations and discussion

Due to the limited number of business entities investigated, the author is fully aware of the limitations of this research. Though the results cannot be considered a „trend”, certain implications of the analysis are worth taking into account. For researchers with direct access to internal corporate data, an interesting correlation between the number of education-based content videos/view count and the turnover achieved for the specific product portfolio addressed by this video might be a future research orientation beneficial for the business sector. The comparison between education-based and non-education-based video marketing demonstrates the genuine interest of YouTube video channels’ subscribers in obtaining information not only related to a particular brand and its product portfolio but also their interest in knowledge acquisition in the broader sense. Contextual videos and inspirational videos full of creative ideas are not only very popular but often shared by the brand fans, mostly in social media.

However, the integrative results of the empirical analysis revealed a significant difference between both analysed e-shops: in relation to the the total number of promotional videos Alza outperforms Universal by 2 918%; in the total number of education-based content videos Alza outperforms Universal by 377%, and in the total number of Alza's YouTube subscribers outperforms Universal by 30 490%. The ratio between education-based video content and non-education-based video content produced by Alza, i.e. exclusively the YouTube sub-channel Alza Tube which specializes in the promotion of education-based content only, can be calculated as the total number of its videos (249) in comparison with the total number of videos shared via the remaining three Alza video channels (1677), i.e. non-education based video content outperforms Alza Tube channel by 673%. It is necessary to point out once more that Alza Tube which describes itself as „a lifestyle channel with educational videos” and their videos don't consistently favour any brand. Thus, the education-based content videos are shared by Alza with no direct links to any companies or brands.

The research results opened new questions to be answered and implied new directions of research in social sciences. Some of these might deal with examining the phenomenon from inter-cultural perspectives and lifestyle differences, or, perhaps, economic reasons (the costs of video production or competitive pressure) which may lie behind the comparative analysis results. All these needs to be examined.

Managerial implications and recommendations

The author of this paper considers this study to be the first step towards our better understanding of video content marketing from the e-commerce perspective. The benefits of being seriously involved in video content production are numerous. It is not only about SEO, which is by no means insignificant. All multimedia has the power to engage and entertain the audience, be it a narrative, products in the context of their use, or video branding. Thanks to the appealing video content, customers will be able to evaluate the products from a different perspective.

The first investigations into the topic of education-based and non-education-based video content, as well as the findings outlined in the literature review partly verified the research data through the comparative analysis, could be applied to any e-commerce solution, disregarding the business sector. A few managerial recommendations can be drawn upon these findings: (1) video marketing within an e-shop can help to enhance customer empowerment, shorten customer journey and give a powerful reason to a customer to remain in touch with the brand; (2) a video published on YouTube offers the possibility to use a purchase URL, i.e. a link redirecting the customer to the company website and/or to the e-commerce environment; (3) description boxes on YouTube channel offer the possibility for a detailed company/product/brand introduction; (4) encouraging the audience to express their opinions in the discussion board under the video on YouTube is worth doing to get more feedback; (5) the use of different video types is a strategy welcomed by the brand fans; (6) to educate customers through video content about „the future world” means to prepare them for the state-of-the-art products and services already today, and (7) promotion and cross-promotion of corporate videos published on YouTube, including links to social media is an important pre-condition for the success of video marketing in e-commerce.

Conclusions

Generally, people appreciate 'educational nuggets' in any form, especially when these are of high-quality, funny, free of charge, and in the form of a video „on-demand”. Both the e-commerce shoppers and brand fans and followers want to have relevant, interesting and helpful just-in-time

information. Customer education with the help of educational videos respecting the content marketing principles should not be viewed as marketing costs but rather smart investments into future profits. If brands want to stay competitive, they must invest funds into video marketing, trying to make every effort and mission their best people to create stunning video content. If a picture is worth a thousand words, if a metaphor is worth a thousand pictures, what is the equivalent to a well-crafted marketing video?

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Klíčové slová/Key Words

customer empowerment, digital content marketing, education-based content, explainer video, non-education-based content, video marketing

posílení postavení zákazníka, marketing digitálního obsahu, vzdělávací obsah, vysvětlující video, obsah nezaložený na vzdělávání, video marketing

JEL klasifikácia/JEL Classification

M31, M37

Résumé

Posílení postavení zákazníků prostřednictvím videí založených na vzdělávání v elektronickém obchodování

Digitální marketing je fascinující disciplína. Dozrává nám před očima jako dobré víno a stále překvapuje inspirativními ukázkami implementace do marketingové praxe. Video marketing je toho příkladem. Cílem této studie je prozkoumat a kriticky zhodnotit marketingové funkce video propagace se zvláštním zřetelem na prostředí elektronického obchodování. Video formát již dříve tradičně sloužil pro účely vzdělávání zákazníků, avšak zaměřoval se převážně na produkty a jejich vlastnosti. Současná praxe však ukazuje, že marketingoví manažeři si rychle uvědomili potenciál obsahového marketingu celkově, a konkrétně pak i potenciál vyplývající z obsahu zaměřeného na vzdělávání zákazníků. Výsledkem bylo, že firmy začaly sdílet videonahrávky s cílem vzdělávat své zákazníky v celém kontextu nabízených produktů a značek. Při zpracování dat významných e-shopů z ČR a Rakouska byly analyzovány příklady podpory prodeje a brandingu pomocí videí, a to jak z hlediska jejich obsahového zaměření, tak i z hlediska přidané hodnoty pro zákazníky. Komparativní analýza prokázala signifikantně větší zájem českého e-shopu Alza o video marketing, než je tomu v případě rakouského e-shopu Universal Versand. V závěru příspěvku jsou formulovány manažerské implikace i náměty na zaměření dalšího výzkumu.

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