Study: Customers engagement with user-generated-content: How do customers use the possibility to create content?

The study is based on the question how the customer use the possibility to create own content in times of Web 2.0. The online survey was based on a standardized questionnaire. The target group were end users who move in the social media and consume and create content. It was not possible to complete the questionnaire repeatedly and thus excluded a distortion of the results. A limitation is made via the IP address of the interviewee. With regard to answering the research question, the terms Web 2.0 and user-generated content are first defined for further understanding.

User-generated content stands for media content, which is not created by the provider of a web offer, but by its users. It is understood as a number of contributions which deal with a company or product and do not originate from a professional source. According to the media content available on the internet, these can be roughly classified into the four categories of contributions: text, image, audio and video. The aim of the study in the context of this article is to find out how users use the user-generated content.

If a customer is looking for a product and is not well informed about the subject, other customers are able to help. Not only are simple assessment figures important, but also experiences and impressions about the respective product. The term “user-generated content” refers to the content of a website created by its users and includes, for example, the comments in blogs, the contributions to forums or the reactions to social network pages.

1. Definition Web 2.0

Web 2.0, together with its novel publishing, interaction and communication facilities, has led to a fundamental change in user behavior on the internet. It has never been easier for an individual to make text, image, audio, or video content accessible to the public. Doing so the individual is becoming part of a living media landscape (Bauer 2011, p. 1).

Since the term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O’Reilly, it developed into a marketing keyword (Lammenett 2012, p. 239). For him, Web 2.0 is a further development of the internet, which is primarily characterized by the participation and involvement of the internet user (Bruhn 2014, p. 1037). The term does not refer to a particular technique or software version, but rather to the interaction of different methods and tools and a corresponding social and economic development (Lammenett 2012, p. 239). The World Wide Web is seen as an execution platform to connect with other internet users (Bruhn 2014, p. 1037). The difference is made by the users, who now have a completely different meaning: their participation becomes the purpose and goal of Web 2.0 (Langkamp and Köplin 2014, p. 68). Through the technical possibilities, users actively participate in
the design and content of the information on the internet (Ruisinger 2007, p. 193). The special significance of these technical possibilities arises mainly from network formation and the linking of people and groups. Decisive is Reed’s Law, according to which the value of a network grows enormously through new members, when groups can be formed in the network (Evans 2008, p. 52). Platforms such as Wikipedia, Facebook and Twitter would never have achieved such a great success without this basic idea (Langkamp and Köplin 2014, p. 68).

Web 2.0 describes the phenomenon that content and pages on the internet can no longer only be created and changed by selected specialists or companies, but by the community of internet users themselves (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 60). Thus content is no longer only issued and distributed centralized by major media companies over the internet, but also by a large number of individuals (Lammenett 2012, p. 239). The biggest change is social, because the Web 2.0 platforms are characterized by the fact that they encourage users to participate, get networked and generate user-generated content. These are all forms of content created by users themselves and published and exchanged in the Web 2.0 (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p. 61). The internet user, who has only been able to consume passive content on the internet in the past, is able to act as a producer of content in Web 2.0 and to communicate with the companies on the same level (Schiele, Hähner and Becker 2007, p. 6). He becomes an active participant, who actively participates in the internet and creates and distributes content himself (Kreutzer and Merkle 2008, p. 149). Information and exchange platforms become more attractive as more people join in (Langkamp and Köplin 2014, p. 68).

In summary, Web 2.0 includes internet applications and platforms that actively integrate users into value creation – whether through their own content, comments, tags, or even through their virtual presence. The main characteristics of value creation are interactivity, decentrality and dynamics (Walsh, Kilian and Hass 2011, p. 6).

1.1 Impact of social media on the media

Social media has a significant impact on the communication model of classical mass media. Conventional mass communication is characterized by a clear separation of transmitter (communicator) and receiver (recipient) (Rothe 2006, p. 80). A roll exchange is not provided. With the increasing spread of the internet and the establishment of social media, however, the strict distribution of roles between broadcasters and recipients has changed: previously separate communication technologies such as language, text, video and audio have merged. This leads, on the one hand, to the dissolution of the boundaries between mass and individual communication and, on the other hand, to an interlacing of the communication roles of the communicator and the recipient. The users are now able to create content themselves and bring them into circulation. The user can take over the broadcasting role, which so far has always been the medium itself. Thus, the transmitter-receiver model of the classical mass media is relativized. Above all, the elements of interaction and participation are at the forefront of communication and are expected by customers.

The Web 2.0 and social media thus allow the formerly passive recipient to create his own world by generating media content himself. These content, referred to as user-generated content, represent a mirror of society and are often in competition with the classic mass media. User-generated content can be divided definitively into the following criteria (Michelis 2009):

• Voluntary: The process of creating the content must take place outside of professional routines and be intrinsically motivated – voluntarily, without external incentives and out of the work itself.
• Creativity: A certain degree of creative self-performance and creativity should characterize the work result.
• Publicity: The work results must be accessible to the public.

User-generated content means that the visitors of a platform are involved in the structure of the content. Many people who do not know each other, or are only briefly acquainted, work on common statements, structures and appearances (Ebersbach, Glaser and Heigl 2011, p. 206). By combining
user-generated content and the direct response possibilities within social media, many-to-many communication becomes possible for the first time.

2. Definition user-generated content

User-generated content refers to the totality of all perceptible electronic media content generated by internet users. These are made available directly to the public via the internet, independently of any prior editorial selection. It is not a professionally created and published content for commercial purposes (Bauer 2011, p. 26). According to the media content available on the internet, these can be roughly classified into the four categories of contributions, text, image, audio and video. Within these categories a further differentiation can then be made regarding to the respective purpose of the contributions.

2.1 Text contributions

By far the most common and at the same time the oldest form of user-generated media content is the text written by the user himself. With the internet forum, the internet user was able to publish a text created by himself on the internet without any programming knowledge. Thanks to its integration into an existing website, the webforum offers the great advantage that it can be displayed and browsed with any popular internet browser, and therefore no special software is required for retrieving, reading or writing contributions. In the meantime, more and more commercial websites, such as product manufacturers, have so-called support forums, in which they offer their customers the opportunity to exchange information about the quality, handling and possible problems of their products. Another type of Internet forums are commercial, but also free-of-charge assessment communities for products and services. Users can, among other things, compile and publish their personal experience reports on specific products or services (reviews).

In parallel to the ever-growing number of internet forums, weblogs have created a new opportunity for internet users to participate in the internet through their own text contributions. A weblog is a regularly updated website which is mainly made up of inversely chronologically sorted entries, called posts, published under a clear, continuous internet address. In contrast to the webforum, where the initiator of a new thread regularly provides the basis for a discussion, which is then carried on by a wide range of users, the blog is a series of continuous contributions by an author, which can only be commented upon.

Another form of user-generated text contributions are complete user articles written by internet users on various topics, which can now be published on the internet via numerous web portals. In the mid-1990s, the first wikis were developed as information management tools as a further development of the web forums already used for web communication. They enable a certain number of people to access content contained in websites over the internet and to rework them in real time. A wiki is a collection of intranet or internet pages, written by several users in collaboration and subsequently read by anyone, but can also be updated online in real time (Bauer 2011, p. 29).

2.2 Image contributions

Only through the increased data transmission rates are many web applications and thus also the wide field of social media useful. With the introduction of DSL and affordable tariffs, the web became accessible to the general public. Internet usage costs have also declined considerably over the course of time and have thus increased the attractiveness of the web in the eyes of users (Bruhn 2014, p. 1038). Only the improved infrastructure allowed the rapid transfer of videos and photos. The image content created by users and published on the Internet in the form of photographs or graphical image files should be the second most common form of Internet users’ participation
according to the self-written texts. They thus form the second category of user-generated contributions. In addition to the photo upload via the respective website and via e-mail, some providers also support the reception of the image files directly from the mobile phone. Saved photos can then be tagged and rated by other users. It is also possible to limit access to certain users or user groups in most cases. Another very popular way to publish user-generated photographs is the above-mentioned weblogs, which also contain image files as well as texts. In addition, there are now a number of pure photo blogs (Bauer 2011, p. 37).

2.3 Audio contributions

The third medially differentiable form of user-generated content is the user-generated audio contributions in the form of regularly published podcasts and self-recorded music, which are distributed in different ways on the Internet. A podcast is an Audiobook created by an Internet user, similar to a radio broadcast, or a series of Audiobooks (episodes) that are dedicated to a specific topic and which can be obtained automatically after their publication over the internet. In order to achieve optimal distribution of the podcast, it is necessary to provide the podcast as an RSS feed, regardless of the pure provision of the audio file on an Internet server. It is also useful to register it in a podcast directory so that it can be found by interested listeners and can be subscribed and downloaded for the purpose of automatic access to them via podcatchers. Another user-generated audio contribution is the music, which has been composed or recorded by many users, which can be published by their creators in various ways on the Internet. A publication of self-produced music pieces can be made on the one hand via music podcasts, which are usually produced by the producing users themselves and then made available for free download. A further possibility is to use various online music platforms (Bauer 2011, p. 40).

2.4 Video posts

A driver for the Web 2.0 are the strongly falling prices for storage media. All data must be saved. The ever-increasing volumes of hard disk drives at ever-lower prices are particularly important for vendors such as YouTube because they can work with high and fast storage volumes on a low cost basis and offer the user free storage space. The declining prices for memory have favored the high and growing distribution of digital cameras. Just fifteen years ago analogue video cameras were the standard. These not only had the disadvantage that they were big and heavy, but the video cut was only reserved for experts. Today, modern smartphones already have integrated cameras that can capture HD-quality videos. Applications for image processing can be loaded directly onto the phone. Modern digital cameras offer a video function as well as better lenses than a smartphone camera. With these production resources, each user can become a producer and create high-quality content (Buhr and Tweraser 2010, p. 73).

3. Survey

As described above, the study is based on the question how the customer uses the user-generated content in times of Web 2.0. The studies were conducted in March 2017 using an online questionnaire. The target group were Internet users, who were asked to participate via the social media and e-mail.
Interview participants (n): 121
Survey: Online questionnaire
Period of investigation: March 2017

The participants’ responses to social media were deliberately chosen, since the use of user-
generated content is generated exclusively by interned users. This does not mean, however, that the term is also known to all users. This is the first question of the survey “Have you ever heard of the term user-generated content?”

Figure 1: Have you ever heard of the term user-generated content? Source: Author

Approximately 79% of respondents have not heard the term user-generated content before the survey. As this was foreseen, the study was launched with the following sentences: “User-generated content is a term for media content that is not created by the provider of a web offer, but by its users. It is understood as a number of contributions which deal with a company or product and do not originate from a professional source. According to the media content available on the Internet, these can be roughly classified into the four categories of contributions, text, image, audio and video. The study is to find out how these user contributions are used.” In the following questions, the term user contribution is used instead of user-generated content.

In the context of the question on which topic contributions have already been made on the Internet, the four categories of contributions are text, image, audio and video contributions. In addition, the answer option “never” is given.

Figure 2: On which topic have you already created user contributions on the Internet (multiple answers possible)? Source: Author

In the contribution category text contributions, the respondents most frequently wrote comments (66,12%), or assessed or recommended products (56,20%). Experience reports have written just under 36%. Blog contributions (10,74%) and wiki contributions (8,26%) play a subordinate role. Image contributions in the form of published photos use 52,07% of respondents. Published videos are relatively little used at 16,53% - but they are also the most expensive to create. Audio shares play a minor role at 4,96%.

19,01% of respondents have never posted a comment on the web. As viewers, they read blogs, online forums, and customer reviews. They watch videos of other users and listen to podcasts, but do not create their own contributions.

Figure 3: What kind of user contributions do you attach importance to, or what contributions are important to you in your opinion formation (Multiple answers possible)? Source: Author

It is noticeable that just under 66% of the interviewees write comments, but only 44,63% of them use comments on their opinion formation. This can happen because negative experiences from users tend to be expressed in the public rather than positive impressions. Experience reports, on the other hand, are seen as important by the opinion of over 86%, followed by product assessments. Wiki contributions with 26,45% are of lesser importance in opinion formation. In relation to the self-published Wiki contributions (8,26%) this number is however not to be despised. For many users, wikis and their meaning seem not to be known.

More than half of the respondents (52,07%) publish photos, but only about 35% feel that they are important to the public. Here, too, the manipulative influence of images that the users are aware of can be seen.
4. Summary and outlook

With the continuous increase of broadband connections, the handling of the internet has drastically changed. Within a very short time, the internet has evolved from technical toys into an indispensable work instrument. Websites with high-resolution graphics, but also with audio-/visual content, now belong to the same standard. This technical development has contributed significantly to the dissemination of user-generated content. The primary goal is also obvious on the surface: by using the product the presence is to be increased. By means of a positive report, supposedly independent of the actual producer, a reliable image is generated that radiates trust.

This reporting, however, about a blog post is rarely used. Product assessments or comments on products are at the forefront. These can be stored on the shop side directly in the product. In addition, photos are increasingly being generated, which can be uploaded to photo communities or can be attached to product reviews or comments. For their opinion formation, the interviewees use mainly experience reports and product assessments.

A important factor in user-generated content must be borne in mind: negative experiences are more likely to be expressed by users in the public rather than positive impressions. This makes it possible for them to be much more present and to have a greater influence – although in the theory more positive experiences were made, but these were not expressed. This distorts the image and the user-generated content misses its actual goal of recommending the product. In addition, there is another phenomenon in times of social media: through anonymity, the users lose their inhibitions and often leave their frustration out of everyday life, which has nothing to do with it at all.

Literatúra/List of References

Kľúčové slová/Key Words

social media marketing, web 2.0, user-generated-content
marketing sociálnych médií, web 2.0, obsah tvorený užívatelia

JEL klasifikácia/JEL Classification

M30

Résumé

Štúdia: Zapojenie zákazníkov s obsahom vytvoreným používateľmi: Ako používateľia využívajú možnosť vytvárať obsah?


Kontakt na autorov/Address

Dr. Marcus Diedrich, Diedrichs Creativ-Bad GmbH, Lehmbachstraße 1, 59969 Hallenberg, Germany, e-mail: info@marcusdiedrich.de
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