Social Media Marketing within Small and Medium-sized Tourist Enterprises

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Abstract:

Social media has in recent times become a popular marketing channel, especially within the tourism industry. The tourist of today wants to find easily accessible information about destinations, accommodation alternatives and service providers using the Internet and social media. Tourist businesses therefore need to be present on social media in order to serve their customers with up-to-date information. Social media is also a suitable way of maintaining relationships and communicating with both existing and potential customers. Small and medium-sized enterprises, characterized by fewer resources than larger firms, can benefit from the many advantages that social media marketing provides. However, previous literature consider these firms as less efficient in their marketing than larger ones and describe them as slower in adapting recent marketing channels. A previous study about small and medium-sized tourist enterprises in the Ostrobothnia region in Finland showed that although many of the respondents use social media in their marketing, they do not necessarily have the needed knowledge and proficiency for using it correctly. In order to be able to support these firms in their social media marketing, an in-depth study on how these firms perform marketing, how they utilize social media and on which platforms, as well as possible challenges regarding this was needed. In this current study, the theoretical framework and the empirical results were then used as a foundation for creating guidelines on how these types of firms successfully can use social media for marketing.

The empirical study was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews with six owner-managers and marketing managers of small and medium-sized tourist firms in Ostrobothnia. The results showed that traditional marketing channels, such as newspaper advertisements, posters and flyers, are still used amongst these firms. Between the firms that participated in the study, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are the only social media platforms used. The content that these firms use for marketing on social media mostly consists of pictures and information about e.g. timetables, opening hours and events. Challenges regarding social media marketing concerned e.g. difficulties of measuring marketing results, creating interesting and engaging content, as well as lack of time to spend on these activities. Based on this information, the study was able to create a set of guidelines for small and medium-sized tourist firms that use social media for marketing.

Keywords: marketing, social media, guidelines, SMTEs, small and medium-sized enterprises, tourist enterprises, Ostrobothnia, Finland
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1 INTRODUCTION

In recent times, social media has become one of the most effective, low-budget marketing tools that enable instant communication with millions of customers (VanRysdam 2010: 17-18; Dholakia & Durham 2010). It has also become an important part of the travel planning process for tourists, as it allows them to search for and share information and experiences (VanRysdam 2010: 19; Leung, Law, van Hoof & Buhalis 2013; Sigala 2016: 1, 7). This puts pressure on tourist enterprises, as it is essential to be present on these media in order to stay relevant these days. Additionally, the Internet and social media has changed the role of the customer, who is nowadays a co-producer of online content and has the power to openly state their opinions online (VanRysdam 2010: 19; Nakara, Benmoussa & Jaouen 2012).

A survey from 2015 by Statistics Finland shows that 68% of the Finnish population aged 16-89 used the Internet several times a day, and that 53% followed some social media in the past three months. According to the survey, the Internet is frequently used for communication, as well as for online purchase. In addition, tourism services are one of the most commonly purchased products online (Statistics Finland 2015; see also Statistics Finland 2014). These high percentages display that a large share of Finnish residents do use the Internet regularly, as the total size of the population currently is approximately 5.49 million (Statistics Finland 2016). Moreover, this can be proven by the fact that Finland had an Internet penetration rate of approximately 90% in 2013, and was ranked as the 10th highest Internet penetrated country in the world (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015).

Social media was defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Firms utilizing social media for marketing and communication purposes have a wide range of different platforms to choose between. Social media is, according to Juslén (2009), used as a general concept for various services on the Internet, such as social networking websites (e.g. Facebook), publishing services (e.g. YouTube) and reviewing websites (e.g. TripAdvisor). Other commonly used social media channels are blogs and discussion forums (Juslén 2009: 116-120). The most frequently used platforms amongst Finnish residents aged 15-55 in 2015 were YouTube (79.3%), Facebook (76.8%), WhatsApp (49.4%) and Instagram (17.5%) (MTV, Kurio & Laurea 2015).
According to Nakara et al. (2012), marketing is no longer simply focused on transactional accomplishments, but rather on relations with customers and other stakeholders. This means that the customer should be seen as the core for all marketing activities. Furthermore, social media has changed the way firms communicate with consumers; the company-consumer interaction is nowadays rather a two-way communication than a monologue from the firm. This makes the customer more involved than before (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015). Maintaining existing relationships and creating new ones are two necessary actions of a firm. Businesses today have the opportunity to use social media platforms in order to reach both existing and potential customers, as well as to receive increased visibility at a fairly low cost (Pesonen 2011; VanRysdam 2010: 20).

Karjula (2015) claims in his research that the overall activity on social media of Finnish SMEs is still on a fairly low level. Facebook seems to be the most commonly used media, whereas more recent media, such as Instagram and Pinterest, were not as popular amongst these companies. This research showed that the companies received most benefits from the increased visibility and the increase in sales as a result of their social media investments. While there are many benefits of social media that small firms can take advantage of, they also face some major challenges regarding this marketing method. One challenge is the lack of time to devote to these activities. It can often be demanding to decide who should spend their working hours on social media, especially in smaller firms with fewer human resources. Another challenge is the difficulty to measure the outcomes of the investments in social media, as it can take time to detect concrete results. (Karjula 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015)

The attitudes towards social media within companies also influence the usage of these media. Berg (2014) states some Finnish firms have a very positive approach towards social media, as well as the necessary resources, and thus they are using it actively. On the contrary, some other companies have a more cautious approach towards social media, and are more passive users. Active and passive corporate users of social media may also have different objectives for the usage. Passive users seem to desire results in form of increased sales, whilst active users have clear ambitions, strategies and multiple ideas of how and why they use social media. (Berg 2014)
Using new, innovative low-cost channels for marketing communication is especially suitable for SMEs, typically struggling with scarce resources (Nakara et al. 2012; VanRysdam 2010: 20). Furthermore, social networking is a commonly used strategy for marketing, and businesses can take advantage of social media to build new and sustain current networks. Businesses can also benefit from social media by means of the opportunity to become familiar with the customers on a more intimate level, through online, two-way interactions. Additionally, the information and opinions shared by customers on social media can be used by businesses in order to better understand and meet the customers’ needs and wants. (Nakara et al. 2012)

1.1. Research problem

According to Pesonen (2011), the differences in Facebook usage in marketing between SMEs and larger businesses within the field of tourism in Finland are reasonably large. Pesonen (2011) argues that larger tourism companies tend to be more active in their social media inputs, whilst smaller companies seem to not put as much effort into it. In this case, high activity on Facebook means posting updates frequently, adding pictures and videos, as well as encouraging interactions between their followers through these efforts, which generate online word-of-mouth (WOM), a.k.a. electronic word-of-mouth (hereafter eWOM). Pesonen’s (2011; see also Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015) study indicates that larger companies seem to have a clear strategy for their social media marketing activities, whereas SMEs do not necessarily have enough resources or knowledge about how to use it for marketing purposes. That being said, the issue of how SMEs should perform on social media and use this channel for marketing in a successful way is still one that needs additional research.

Although many Finnish tourist businesses have adopted social media, there are still many firms falling behind. According to Pesonen, Mikkonen, Makkonen and Honkanen (2013), there are some barriers for using social media, such as the lack of sufficient skills for implementing and utilizing it, lack of time and monetary resources, concerns about negative feedback and the perceived lack of need to use social media in order to reach desirable results regarding marketing investments. Solutions to these barriers might be providing companies, willing to adapt social media but lacking of resources, with financial support, as well as information, alternatively even education, on how to use it. Nevertheless, some tourism businesses have the impression that they are
succeeding without social media, even if they hold the required resources for adoption. (Pesonen et al. 2013; see also Nakara et al. 2012)

The Vaasa Region Development Company VASEK (2016) completed a survey, which included questions about social media usage. The respondents consisted of small and medium-sized tourist enterprises (hereafter SMTEs) in Ostrobothnia, Finland. Amongst other themes in the survey, the respondents were asked about which channels on social media they currently work actively with, and which type of information occasions they would like to participate in. The results show that the majority of these respondents (76%) already have a company Facebook page, along with a website. Still, a large part of them (72.7%) said they would like to learn more about how to use social media for marketing. The second most commonly adopted social media channel amongst the respondents was Instagram (23.8%). In addition, 19% of the firms were present on TripAdvisor (VASEK 2016). This demonstrates that although most of the respondent companies exist on social media, they are not completely certain of how it can, and should be used. This can be explained by Nakara’s et al. (2012; see also Taiparamarum & Karjaluoto 2015) claim that the social media marketing in SMEs typically is spontaneous and not planned in a necessary manner, and does not include any actual strategy.

In order to make successful decisions and clever marketing efforts on social media, firms need to select the right target group and communicate the right messages through the right channels. Considering what previous literature claims, some of the biggest challenges in this area seem to be the lack of knowledge about how social media is to be used for marketing, increasingly discerning and critical customers who have already become familiar with the different channels on the Internet and social media, and again, scarce resources. Additionally, social media may not yet be fully accepted as an appropriate marketing tool, and therefore not regarded with complete seriousness. Consequently, some firms may presume that investment in social media is the same as wasted time. However, Nakara et al. (2012) argue that ignoring social media as a marketing tool leads to lost opportunities to discover new customers. (Nakara et al. 2012)

Using social media as a marketing tool is especially relevant for SMTEs, as it is an excellent way of reaching larger scales of customers, faster than ever before (Hays, Page & Buhalis 2012; VanRysdam 2010: 20). Since it has begun to play a very significant role
in the way tourists search for information about destinations, activities and attractions, it is essential for SMTEs to follow the trend and be present to not become irrelevant (Milano, Baggio & Piattelli 2011; see also Nakara et al. 2012). Yet, it is as important for businesses to know how to use social media well as it is to be visible on these media. Additionally, it is crucial to understand the role of the customers and their power to openly share their opinions and evaluations about their experiences (Nakara et al. 2012; VanRysdam 2010: 19).

It is significant for SMTEs in Ostrobothnia to understand the many benefits that social media as part of a set of marketing tools can provide. As previously mentioned, the survey by VASEK (2016) revealed that a large part of the respondents, which to some extent already use social media, are interested in participating in information occasions about social media marketing. This information, as well as other previous studies, describes the social media landscape among SMTEs in Ostrobothnia quite well. However more detailed information explaining the social media marketing behaviour of SMTEs is still missing, giving reason to study how these firms perform their marketing on a deeper level. Accordingly, this thesis poses the following research questions, which will be answered by using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method:

1. How do SMTEs in Ostrobothnia perform marketing?
2. How do these firms use social media in their marketing and through which platforms?
3. What challenges do these firms face in their use of social media marketing?

1.2. Purpose of the study

This thesis aims to gather insight into social media marketing within SMTEs in Ostrobothnia by analysing how these firms do marketing, how they use social media for marketing activities, on which platforms and which challenges they face. Identifying the current situation of the social media marketing efforts in these firms would contribute to an indication of how these firms can be supported. The purpose of the thesis is to develop a set of guidelines, which aim to enable these SMTEs to improve their social media marketing skills and implement this marketing channel in a successful way.
1.3. **Delimitations of the study**

The geographical focus of this study is laid on firms positioned in the Ostrobothnia area in order to scale down the study. Moreover, these firms are limited to small and medium-sized tourism enterprises. A small-sized enterprise refers to a company with less than 50 employees, whereas a medium-sized enterprise refers to one with less than 250 employees, according to the European Commission (2016). Moreover, only SMTEs that perform marketing on at least one social media platform were chosen because of the main topic of this thesis. The interviewees of the empirical study consist of employees dealing with marketing in the respective firms, in which most of them are owner-managers since these firms are small and only have one to a few employees.

1.4. **Sequence of the study**

This thesis begins with an introduction presenting the main topic of the thesis, after which it continues with the problem discussion, the purpose of the study as well as the delimitations and a short explanation of the sequence of the study. The theoretical framework of this thesis is discussed in chapters 2-4: marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises, marketing communication and social media marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises. In order to practise marketing on social media, it is essential to any marketer to first understand the traditional principles of marketing and communications. These subjects are presented in chapters two and three, which focus on SMTEs and digital marketing. The theoretical framework is finalised by a summary of central theories that have most significance for the empirical part of the study.

The research method is described in chapter five. This chapter includes the research approach, choice of method, data collection method, sampling technique and sample size, practical information about the data collection, a description of the interview guide and the method for the analysis. Chapter six includes the results of the empirical study, the analysis of the results, as well as guidelines for SMTEs on how to use social media for marketing. The seventh and final chapter of this thesis consists of a summary of the thesis and concluding remarks.
2 MARKETING IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

This chapter aims to create an understanding of marketing in SMEs. First, some definitions of marketing are presented and the particular characteristics of marketing in smaller firms are explained. The focus of the chapter lies on relevant theories for marketing on social media within SMTEs. Additionally, this chapter compares traditional marketing principles with digital marketing, which is critical in order to understand the importance of technology in marketing and how traditional marketing can be used in more contemporary channels.

2.1. What marketing is all about

The meaning of marketing as a concept is still misinterpreted by many people as only selling and advertising. However, these activities are just a small part of marketing. According to Peter Drucker (1973, referred in Kotler & Keller 2012: 27), marketing is about making selling unneeded. Although selling plays an important role in the success of the firm, the aim of marketing should be knowing and understanding the customer in order to be able to offer a product or service that will fit the customer so well that it will “sell itself” (Kotler & Keller 2012: 27). In this way, improved customer relationships can be built and greater value can be offered to the customers, which are two of the main objectives of modern-day marketing (Kotler, Armstrong & Parment 2016: 10). Another, yet very short definition of marketing is to “meet needs profitably” (Kotler & Keller 2012: 27). This indicates that marketing is about recognizing and meeting human and social needs, and simultaneously transforming it into a profitable business (Kotler & Keller 2012: 27).

2.2. Service marketing, quality and value-in-use

The tourism industry is highly concentrated on services, and the customers’ satisfaction, personal experiences and attitudes towards the quality of the service are crucial. Hence, service-oriented SMTEs have greater possibilities of growing, gaining profit and achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty. (Zehrer 2009)

Vargo and Lusch (2004a: 326) define service as “the application of specialized competences (skills and knowledge), through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself (self-service)”. According to Grönroos
(2006), service marketing is about including interactions between the customer and the service provider during the consumption process. Without a successful interaction, the customer will most probably not use the same service again. Although the service provider and their ability to successfully interact with the customers is an essential part of the customer’s perception of the service, there are also other factors that influence it, which are explained in the following paragraphs. (Vargo & Lusch 2004a; Grönroos 2006)

A concept developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985), with the purpose of creating an understanding of how services are consumed, is the perceived service quality. The customer’s perception of the service quality is a result of the contrast between their expectations and the actual service performance. Moreover, the quality of a service is often more problematic for the customer to evaluate, in comparison with the evaluation of the quality of a product (Parasuraman et al. 1985; González, Comesaña & Brea 2007). Consequently, Lewis and Booms (1983), argue that delivering quality service requires the service provider to correspond to the customers’ expectations on a regular basis.

The service-dominant logic has its roots in 1977, when marketers started to detach themselves from the marketing of goods only. This has created a new perspective on marketing, shifting from a focus on the exchange of goods, to focusing on services, which create value. Service dominant logic refers to a perspective in which the product is simply a provider of the service to the customer. This can be exemplified by a computer, which is a product that provides the customer with the service of e.g. entertainment or communication, in which the customer co-creates the value by using it. In conclusion, value is created when customers use a product or a service, and this phenomenon is called value-in-use. (Kotler et al. 2016: 269-270; see also Gummesson 1995: 244-268; Vargo & Lusch 2004a; Vargo & Lusch 2004b; Woodruff & Gardial 1996)

2.3. Characteristics of marketing in SMEs

A general definition of marketing in small and medium-sized enterprises does not exist. Instead, it is often explained by traditional marketing models, which typically apply to marketing in larger firms (Simpson, Padmore, Taylor & Frecknall-Hughes 2006). Although it is generally accepted that basic marketing principles can be applied to both large and small and medium-sized firms, there are some factors that have an influence
on the marketing activities in smaller enterprises, which makes the marketing practices in these firms somewhat different than in large ones (Coviello, Brodie & Munro 2000; Reijonen 2010). In addition, several authors, e.g. Walsh and Lipinski (2009) suggest that the marketing in SMEs is typically not as well developed as in larger firms.

As a rule, small firms generally have fewer resources than larger ones, which leads to various limitations (Reijonen 2010; Walsh & Lipinski 2009). On the contrary, SMEs are also characterized by certain advantages, such as higher flexibility, higher levels of innovation and lower expenses (Walsh & Lipinski 2009). Competence in marketing is an essential factor for the success of the firm and the owner-managers’ attitude and knowledge of marketing play an important role for how marketing is taken care of (Reijonen 2010; Nakara et al. 2012). Owner-managers of SMEs are generally criticized for their restricted understanding and knowledge of marketing theory. Coviello et al. (2000) and Simpson et al. (2006) argue that many of these owner-managers simplify and misinterpret marketing. A reason for this might be that they are usually not marketing specialists, but instead educated in other fields (Nakara et al. 2012). It can have devastating consequences in case they do not even have a basic understanding of how marketing on social media works.

Gilmore, Carson and Grant (2001: 6), as well as several other authors, describe marketing in SMEs as disorganised, informal and spontaneous in contrast to marketing in large firms, in which marketing is considered to be more formal, structured and planned. Despite this, the use of traditional principles of marketing are still considered important for SMEs, as it offers focus and guidelines. Additionally, the traditional marketing principles can be modified and adjusted to a SME context (Reijonen 2010).

Romano and Ratnatunga (1995, referred in Simpson et al. 2006; see also Reijonen 2010) suggest that marketing in SMEs can be classified into three categories: marketing as a culture, marketing as a strategy and marketing as tactics. Marketing as a culture refers to the analysis of the customers’ needs and wants, as well as the evaluation of the competitiveness of SMEs. Marketing as a strategy refers to the strategy development for improving the firm’s existing and potential market position. Marketing as tactics is defined as an analysis of the four Ps of marketing to affect the functioning or growth of SMEs. Moreover, marketing in SMEs is, according to several studies, highly sales-focused, with a focus on marketing communication and building strong, long-term customer relationships. (Simpson et al. 2006; Reijonen 2010)
Walsh and Lipinski (2009) argue that SMEs need to focus on creating and maintaining a strong marketing strategy in order to be able to compete with larger firms. According to Simpson et al. (2006), SMEs with a well-planned marketing strategy are more likely to succeed and survive on the market. Despite the limitations, SMEs have a tendency of focusing more on customer relationships (Coviello et al. 2000), which will be explained in more detail in the following subchapter.

2.4. Customer relationship marketing

Managing customer relationships is an essential part of marketing, due to the fact that the customers are significant to the financial performance of the firm, and therefore a key success factor (Walsh & Lipinski 2009; Simpson et al. 2006). Coviello et al. (2000) reason that SMEs tend to focus on building personal and direct relationships with their customers and are more interpersonal in their marketing than larger firms. According to these authors, this is possible due to the typical characteristics of SMEs, naturally having a higher level of personal, direct contact with the customers sustained by most of the employees in the firm. Nevertheless, Coviello’s et al. (2000) study revealed that both SMEs and large firms emphasise maintaining existing customer relationships and focusing on the customer in their marketing planning. Social media is an effective way of both retaining current customer relationships and creating new ones. It enables personal, online dialogues with customers on a space that many of them nowadays spend a significant amount of time (Coviello et al. 2000; VanRysdam 2010: 37, 44; Castronovo & Huang 2012).

SMEs have excellent opportunities of creating genuine and intimate relationships with their customers, as they often are personal acquaintances, and the firms are local and easily accessible for customers. Furthermore, customer-oriented SMEs tend to have a higher profitability than less customer-focused firms (Reijonen 2010). Because marketing in SMEs tends to be highly relational in nature, Coviello et al. (2000) state that managers of these firms should emphasise understanding, creating and facilitating both customer and business relationships in order to establish networks, which are an important part of the growth of SMEs (Walsh & Lipinski 2009). According to Siu (2001, referred in Walsh & Lipinski 2009), SMEs tend to profoundly rely on their personal networks.
2.5. Value creation

One of the main objectives of marketing is to provide the customers with value. To successfully deliver great value for the more and more discerning and demanding customer, marketers must take into account that each customer have their own individual wants, needs, perceptions, preferences and criteria for purchasing. Creating and providing customer value in practise, requires marketers to consider a few aspects before the service even exists. These activities are segmenting the market, selecting the appropriate target groups and developing the value positioning for the offering. Second, the price, attributes and distribution of the product or service must be determined. The third and final activity is to communicate the value, through e.g. online advertising. (Kotler & Keller 2012: 55-56)

Value is often created together with customers. This is referred to as value co-creation. This is strongly related to social media, in which the customer is a co-creator of the content on it. Chapter four provides a thorough explanation of this. Service providers create added value by applying their skills, knowledge and capabilities into the service. Contrariwise, the customer adds value to the service by using it (Vargo, Maglio & Akaka 2008). Furthermore, the production and the consumption of services are processes that take place simultaneously. In the production of a service, the consumer is part of the production, which makes the process “open” (Grönroos 2006).

2.6. Characteristics of digital marketing and a brief summary

This subchapter focuses on online digital marketing channels. Digital channels are e.g. social media, websites, mobile applications, online advertisements, online videos, e-mail and blogs (Kotler & Armstrong 2016: 49). Digital marketing differs from traditional marketing in several ways. It enables firms to easily access customers all over the world, is highly cost-effective and suitable for SMTEs with the desire to reach both domestic and international customers at a low cost (VanRysdam 2010: 20). Moreover, digital marketing enables customers to access information effortlessly (Fill 2013: 646-647). The level of direct and personal interaction with customers reduces while using digital technologies but enables digital interaction (Fill 2013: 51; Nordin 2016).

Digital technologies allow firms to measure and trace the customer behaviour more efficiently than ever before. In contrast to conventional marketing, digital marketing
works on a *one-to-one* and *many-to-many* basis, and enables a greater dialogue between the firm and its customers. Communication on digital channels will be explained thoroughly in chapter three. Furthermore, as digital marketing provides customers with larger volumes of information, it builds greater awareness than traditional media can do (Fill 2013: 646-647). Digital marketing messages also offers the customers a higher sense of free will, as they are able to choose what content they want to be exposed to on the Internet (Nordin 2016).

The development of digital technologies has fundamentally changed human behaviour by ways of communicating, information sharing, forms of entertainment and purchase (Kotler & Armstrong 2016: 48; Yoo & Gretzel 2016: 189). In addition, such technologies are highly adopted in the field of tourism. Consumers today have a desire to read about, share and purchase experiences using technology (Yoo & Gretzel 2016: 189), which is the reason to why digital marketing and media are highly engaging. According to Kotler and Armstrong (2016: 50), it is essential to understand how new marketing methods can be combined with traditional, in order to create and implement a suitable integrated marketing strategy, which will be described in chapter three.

This chapter includes a description of what the marketing concept stands for and what it means for small and medium-sized firms within the tourism industry. The chapter also dealt with marketing theories that are crucial to recognise before stepping into social media marketing. The most essential lessons of chapter two are summarized below.

- Successful interactions, physical or online, are necessary in order to receive customer satisfaction and loyalty (Grönroos 2004)

- In order to be competitive, SMEs need a strong marketing strategy (Walsh & Lipinski 2009)

- The maintenance of customer relationships is an essential success factor in any business and social media is efficient for retaining existing customers and reaching new, potential ones (Coviello et al. 2000)

- Networks, which can be built by taking care of both business and customer relationships, are important for the growth of SMEs (Walsh & Lipinski 2009)
• Digital marketing enables digital interactions and widespread sharing of information at a fairly low cost (VanRysdam 2010: 20; Fill 2013: 51; Nordin 2016)
3 MARKETING COMMUNICATION

This chapter will describe marketing communication and the elements involved in it. The different categories of marketing communication in a digital context will be reviewed, along with four different types of marketing messages. Concepts that are particularly relevant for marketing communication on social media, such as eWOM and integrated marketing communication will be explained, together with a detailed explanation of the process of marketing communication illustrated by two different models.

3.1. Marketing communication – a brief description

The concept marketing communication involves all kinds of communication between the firm and its different stakeholders, such as employees, business partners and existing and potential customers (Bax & Woodhouse 2013: 12). Marketing communication occurs in the form of one-way (monologue) or two-way (dialogue) processes (Ottesen 2001: 35) and is categorised into business-to-consumer (B2C) or business-to-business (B2B) communication (Fill & Jamieson 2011).

Furthermore, marketing communication grasps all marketing communication tools that can be used by any of these actors in order to communicate and inform about the firm’s offerings (Parment 2015: 200). According to Reijonen (2010), many SME marketers view marketing mainly as a means of informing the customers about the firm and its offerings. Moreover, marketing communication requires the marketer to answer to three fundamental questions: Whom do we want to reach?, What do we want to tell them? and How will we tell it? (Parment 2015: 200). Nowadays, marketing communication is characterised by the fast technological development and a large volume of new marketing channels (Dahlen, Lange & Smith 2010: 451).

3.2. Marketing communication in a digital context

There are mainly four categories of marketing communication that occur between the company and its customers, which can be divided into impersonal mass communication, personal mass communication, impersonal individual communication and personal individual communication. (Ottesen 2001: 43)
Mass communication refers to communication directed to a larger audience and follows when the audience is exposed to the exact same communication symbols, e.g. text or pictures. Individual communication, on the other hand, refers to communication directed to one single person. It occurs when an individual is exposed to personalised communication symbols (Ottesen 2001: 43). In today’s world, the communication tends to be less directed to the mass and more individualised (Dahlen et al. 2010: 451). Both mass and individual communication are possible on social media. One message can be directed to the whole audience, enabling mass communication, or personalised messages can be sent using several different social media platforms, targeting different groups of customers. (Ottesen 2001: 43; Dahlen et al. 2010: 451)

Personal communication refers to communication that involves dialogue, i.e., two-way communication. In this case, the communication symbols are formed as the communication proceeds and the customer has the opportunity to respond and provide feedback instantly. Digital marketing and social media communication involves two-way communication between the firm and its customers (Dahlen et al. 2010: 444) since customers have the possibility to comment and respond to messages sent out by the firm. Contrariwise, impersonal communication takes place on media in which the customer does not have the possibility to respond, at least not immediately (Ottesen 2001:43; see also Fill 2009: 635-637). Impersonal communication does not commonly occur on social media. Coviello et al. (2000) claim that the marketing communication in SMEs is generally personal and individual. (Ottesen 2001: 43; Dahlen et al. 2010: 444; Fill 2009: 635-637; Coviello et al. 2000)

Marketing communication is about sending messages to a receiver. These messages can be divided into four different sources: planned, unplanned, product and service messages. The planned message is the most formal type of communication, with focus on the promises of the firm and what they offer to their customers. In case of planned communication, the customer is not involved in a dialogue and communication commonly occurs on traditional media, such as advertising (Lindberg-Repo & Grönroos 2004). Planned messages are usually seen as the least trustworthy ones, because of the general perception that these messages have the intention to persuade customers into purchasing something (Grönroos 2004). Unplanned messages include interaction between counterpart customers during their service experience and via eWOM. In addition, public opinions and comments of customers, on e.g. social media, can be seen
as unplanned messages. This type of communication is challenging to control and plan for and is therefore not part of the firm’s marketing strategy (Grönroos 2004).

*Product messages* are meant to communicate the firm and its offerings through a physical product. The message is underlined in the design of the physical product, its functions and attributes, as well as the production process. *Service messages* originate from service processes, i.e. the employees’ behaviour and attitudes, the service environment and the way the service systems and the technology work. All of these elements in the service process enable the customers to develop a perception of the firm and its service quality. Service messages are considered more trustworthy than a planned or a product message, as the customer is involved through direct interaction with the firm while using a service. (Grönroos 2004).

*Absence of communication* is often considered negative from the customers’ perspective. Providing customers with information gives the customer a sense of control, and is a token of respect. A firm that does not communicate and provide its customers with information about matters that affect them sends a message, which can be interpreted as a lack of care for the customers. This often has an undesirable impact on the firm, as it can lead to mistrust from the customers’ point of view. Not responding to customer reviews or comments on social media also counts as an absence of communication. Therefore, firms should create an effective communication strategy, in which all customers are acknowledged. (Grönroos 2004; Ye, Law, Gu & Chen 2011)

### 3.3. The digital communication process

In order to communicate efficiently, marketers need a correct understanding of how communication works. The actual communication is a process in which people share meaning that is built into messages delivered from a source to a receiver. The receiver of the message must be able to interpret the meaning built into it and be able to respond to it for interaction to take place. In order for the communication process to work correctly, information must be transmitted to and from all parties involved in it. Two different models on how communication function as a process are presented in the following subchapters. (Fill 2009: 41)
3.3.1. The linear model of communication

The linear model of communication, illustrated in Figure 1, was developed by Schramm in 1955, and is recognised as a fundamental model for mass communications (Fill 2009: 41). The model involves nine different elements, which consist of the parties, the tools and the functions in the communication process. The sender and the receiver are the main parties in this model. The message and the media are two main communication tools and the other elements are communication functions (Kotler et al. 2016: 357; see also Fill 2009: 41-42).

The linear process begins with the sender delivering a message to the receiver. Before the message is delivered, it is encoded by the sender, i.e., the message is transferred into symbols that can be transmitted. After being transferred into symbolic form, the message moves forward to the media through which the message is delivered to the receiver. The receiver then decodes the message, i.e. interprets the encoded symbols and assigns meaning to it. Response refers to the reaction of the receiver after receiving and decoding the message and feedback stands for the receiver's response to the message, which he or she communicates back to the sender. Furthermore, the receiver may not always fully pay attention to the message delivered to him or her. This is called noise, which means that the receiver does not recognise the symbols in the message the way the sender had expected him or her to do. (Fill 2009: 41-42; Kotler et al. 2016: 357-358)

The realms of understanding symbolise that the communication becomes more effective if the sender and the receiver have an understanding for each other. The realms also symbolise the desirable common ground of the sender and the receiver, in which both have an understanding of each other's attitudes, perceptions, behaviour and experience. The more the sender knows about the receivers, the more likely they are to understand them and can thereby successfully construct and transmit messages. (Fill 2013: 48)
In order for the message to be effective, its encoding process needs to be parallel with the receiver's decoding process. This indicates that an appropriate message must be encoded with symbols familiar to the receiver in order to be understood correctly. Messages tend to be more effective if the sender knows his or her target group well, and thus can anticipate how the receiver will decode the message delivered. Furthermore, the message should be sent through the right media, i.e. media in which the receiver can be reached. The sender should also develop feedback channels for measuring the receivers’ responses to the message. (Kotler et al. 2016: 358)

In a digital context, the linear model could be exemplified by an advertisement banner being showed to customers visiting a webpage on the top or the side of the page. How well the receiver can decode this message, in form of a banner, depends on the context, such as the fit between the message and the content on the webpage. In this case, noise can emerge in form of e.g. other banners and advertisements on the same webpage. The linear model of communication has received criticism for its simplification of the communication process. It does not provide a correct reflection of how communication works in reality, as it suggests that the role of the receiver is rather passive and social interaction between receivers and other parties is excluded from this model. (Fill 2013: 51; Kotler et al. 2016: 358)
3.3.2. The interactional model of communication

The interactional of communication, illustrated in Figure 2, takes all the different factors affecting the communication process into consideration and involves interaction between all the participants in the communication process (Fill 2013: 51). Furthermore, it does not only involve one receiver. Instead, it considers several different target audiences (T1-T4), with individual opinions, values and desires. The firm can tailor and vary the messages according to the nature of the target audience (Fill 2009: 49).

The opinion leaders and opinion formers are sources of information and guidance for the other members of the audience (Fill 2013: 57; Castronovo & Huang 2012). In the example in Figure 2, which illustrates the interactional communication process in a tourism context, these consist of travel bloggers, tourist organisations, such as Visit Vaasa, the local tourist organisation in Ostrobothnia, Visit Finland, as well as authors of online reviews on reviewing websites for tourism, such as TripAdvisor. As previously mentioned, tourists nowadays habitually search for online information about e.g. a destination themselves. This information search does not only involve information from the service providers’ or the tourist organisations’ websites, but also other tourists’ opinions and experiences on reviewing websites (Leung et al. 2013; Sigala 2016: 1, 7).

The interactional model is more complex than the linear one and suggests that the communication from the source leads to response. Moreover, it proposes that opinion leaders and opinion formers, as well as the members of the target audiences (T1-T4) have an impact on each other. It also involves the responses people give to communications they have received, both from other people and technology. Digital technologies (electronic sources, such as social media and the Internet overall) facilitate this process of interaction (Fill 2013: 51) by allowing receivers of communication to respond and give feedback directly. Digital technologies also allow the receivers to find more information from several different sources. (Fill 2013: 51)
3.4. Integrated marketing communication

Although firms send different kinds of messages through numerous channels, all of the firm’s communication should be managed in a unified way. It should not be forgotten that all sorts of communication influence customers and creates one single message about the firm in their minds. Consequently, it is essential to make the communication as little conflicting as possible in order to not contribute to confusion (Grönroos 2004; Kotler et al. 2016: 365; Sellahvarzi, Mirabi & Parizi 2014). Integrated marketing communication (IMC) occurs when all of the firm’s marketing communication channels and messages are integrated and clear and coherent messages about the firm are sent out to receivers (Kotler et al. 2016: 356).

IMC is considered crucial when building strong, resistant customer relationships (Grönroos & Lindberg-Repo 1998; Finne & Grönroos 2009; Sellahvarzi et al. 2014). When adapting social media as a marketing channel, marketers might choose several channels to combine with the rest of the firm’s marketing channels. Whichever media the marketing messages are sent through, they should be aligned, as illustrated in Figure 3.
The different sources of messages should all be aligned in order to form consistent marketing communication. From the customers’ perspective, planned messages have the lowest amount of credibility and are the costliest tools for marketing communication, whereas unplanned messages are the most credible and least expensive. The different levels of credibility of the different messages are illustrated in Figure 4. Integrating planned and unplanned marketing communication into a clear message requires analysing each source of messages and the potential effects of them. In this way, the firm can plan for as many communication situations as possible, and avoid unfavourable unplanned communication, such as negative WOM and unconstructive reviews. IMC is significant to take into account especially when new channels of communication, such as social media, are taken in use. (Grönroos 2004; Grönroos & Lindberg-Repo 1998)
Traditional marketing communication involves only one-way messages and has lately begun to be considered as ineffective and expensive by numerous researchers in marketing. Additionally, one-way communication can be perceived as a way of manipulating the customer. IMC has fundamentally changed the purpose of marketing. Involving the customers by asking, listening and sharing information instead of manipulating and using customer-driven strategies instead of sales-driven ones are two examples of how the customers’ needs are put first. (Grönroos & Lindberg-Repo 1998; Sellahvarzi et al. 2014; Duncan & Moriarty 1998)

Furthermore, two-way communication is more suitable for managing relationships with customers, as it enables the receiver of the message to have a conversation with the firm. This type of communication is usually perceived as more genuine and sincere and increases the firm’s trustworthiness. However, the receiver needs a motive to be engaged in a dialogue with the firm. Motive can be created if the listener senses that the speaker is interested in him or her and that the speaker is convincing and has proper knowledge and experience about the product or service offered. (Grönroos & Lindberg-Repo 1998; Duncan & Moriarty 1998; Sellahvarzi et al. 2014)

3.5. **Electronic word-of-mouth communication**

Traditionally, WOM refers to the customers’ discussions about a firm with one another. WOM is categorised as unplanned communication and is based on the customers’ experiences and subjective image and loyalty of a firm. A customer that has had a positive experience may talk about the firm in an optimistic way and recommend it to
friends and acquaintances (Grönroos 2004; Ladhari & Michaud 2015). Moreover, WOM is especially favourable for SMEs with limited resources and contributes to a gradual build-up of the attention to the firm (Reijonen 2010).

Although WOM is unplanned communication, it is strongly connected to the firm’s planned marketing communication. Negative WOM makes the planned marketing communication less effective, because customers might build up a resistance against it when the negative WOM reaches them. Naturally, the image of the firm suffers from negative WOM, which can be challenging to save (Grönroos 2004; Ladhari & Michaud 2015). Positive WOM, on the other hand, reduces the need of planned communication since the positive WOM takes care of it and makes both current and potential customers more curious about the firm (Grönroos 2004). Positive WOM increases the firm’s credibility and improves its image, since these messages come from an objective source. (Grönroos 2004; Ladhari & Michaud 2015)

WOM can also be generated through Internet-based technology. This type of informal, online communication, involving customer’s opinions, attitudes, discussions and reviews about a firm, can be referred to as eWOM (Litvin, Goldsmith & Pan 2008; Williams, Inversini, Ferdinand & Buhalis 2017). As mentioned earlier, online reviews have a large impact on the decision making process for customers; information, opinions and reviews posted online by others are nowadays considered more reliable than information coming from service providers. In addition, online content, such as content on social media that is produced by customers, is called user-generated content (Ye et al. 2011; Litvin et al. 2008; Ladhari & Michaud 2015; Castronovo & Huang 2012).
4 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

This chapter aims to describe how social media can be used as a marketing tool and channel for SMTEs. First, an explanation of how traditional marketing principles are relevant for social media marketing will be presented. Second, this chapter will describe how social media can be managed, as well as how firms successfully can take advantage of this relatively new tool in their marketing strategies. Additionally, this chapter reviews necessary resources, different social media platforms, content creation, as well as some techniques for measuring marketing outcome.

4.1. Marketing on social media using traditional marketing principles

Most firms today utilise social media in their marketing and new phrases, such as content marketing, have followed. Yet, according to an article by Scott (2016), many digital and social media marketers do not have sufficient knowledge about basic marketing principles. There is an obvious difference in how marketers operate today, after the extensive adoption of the Internet and new technologies, and how they used to operate earlier. Moreover, the focus of marketing departments and marketing managers seems to have transferred from the conventional marketing mix and communication strategies into acquiring followers and likes on social media. Scott (2016) claims that although new channels are adapted in today's marketing activities, nothing significant about marketing has changed to this day. (Scott 2016; see also VanRysdam 2010: 22)

Marketing communication is still about sending messages to the audience and transmitting it through a channel, in order to acquire attention, increase demand and to lead the customer through the purchase pathway (e.g. Grönroos 2004). The difference between marketing nowadays and before is mostly visible in the different channels through which the messages are sent. A service message, which was once transmitted only through television, can now be transmitted over the social media-publishing platform YouTube. In other words, the traditional principles of marketing are relevant to this day, but can be applied in more versatile ways than before. (Scott 2016; see also VanRysdam 2010: 22)

Taking IMC (e.g. Kotler et al. 2016: 356) into consideration, marketers should implement traditional marketing practises into their social media marketing (hereafter
SMM) strategy (Scott 2016). Social media as a marketing tool should not be used alone, but instead used together with the firm’s other, possibly more conventional, marketing methods. An example of a SMTE implementing traditional marketing methods in social media is the advertisement of events, which nowadays can be done easily using Facebook (Neti 2011; Hays et al. 2012). The different marketing efforts of the firm, whether those may be SMM, direct mail, or printed advertisement, should be integrated, not to cause confliction between different marketing channels (Kotler et al. 2016: 365; Singh & Diamond 2015: 17).

4.2. Managing social media marketing

The previously cited definition of social media by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) indicates that also the users, i.e. the customers, on social media create the content on it, not only firms. This implies that marketers no longer have full control over the communication and the image of the firm. Customers today have a large part of the control as the popularity of social media platforms has increased, especially in the tourism industry, in which other people’s reviews and opinions have a great impact on purchase decisions (Hays et al. 2012). Constantinides and Fountain (2008: 233) suggests that social media, or Web 2.0, “presents businesses with new challenges but also new opportunities for getting and staying in touch with their markets, learning about the needs and opinions of their customers as well as interacting with them in a direct and personalised way”. Thus, social media is a tool for direct communication and sending personal messages to the customers (Ottesen 2001: 43).

One way of using social media in marketing is to engage customers to participate in conversations and dialogues. The firm can either be a leader or a participant of the conversation. In social media, the communication is not restricted to one-way processes (Ottesen 2001: 35) or producer-to-consumer communication, but can take form in consumer-to-consumer and consumer-to-producer communication, as well as one-to-many, many-to-one, one-to-one, and many-to-many communication (Ottesen 2001: 43; Buhalis 2003; Hays et al. 2012). All of these dynamic interactions generate eWOM (Grönroos 2004; Hays et al. 2012).

Before considering social media as a part of the firm’s marketing strategy, there are some matters that should be taken into account. It is essential for the firm to be present and active on social media, if the customers expect them to do so (Charlesworth 2015: 18-19; Neti 2011). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue there are five main activities to
obey while managing SMM: to be active, interesting, humble, informal, and honest. It is also important to set objectives to the SMM and evaluate the desired results (Castronovo & Huang 2012). Moreover, the firm’s activities on social media should be connected with the values of the firm (Charlesworth 2015: 18-19; Neti 2011). Considering IMC (Kotler et al. 2016: 356), the SMM efforts should fit into the holistic marketing strategy of the firm (Charlesworth 2015: 18-19; Neti 2011).

According to Charlesworth (2015: 20), many firms today do not have clear objectives for their presence on social media, but use these channels simply with the motive that everyone else seem to be doing so. Setting objectives for the firm’s SMM is part of the strategy, which is crucial while implementing a new marketing channel (Charlesworth 2015: 21-22; VanRysdam 2010: 21-22). Acknowledging social media as a marketing tool means that an official strategy for it should be developed, however the strategy should be flexible and have room for changes. Although firms can implement traditional marketing principles in their SMM strategy, social media is a unique marketing channel with its own characteristics, which needs to be taken into consideration (Hays et al. 2012; VanRysdam 2010: 22). One distinctive feature of social media is that the information and content on it is available for everyone at all times and is very easy to access (Hays et al. 2012).

4.2.1. Evaluating the resources of the firm

Especially for SMTEs, strategy and planning are key ingredients in SMM. The amount of time to spend on SMM activities should be determined in advance (Singh & Diamond 2015: 117-118). Customers often use social media to ask the firm questions and authentic communication with customers on social media requires time. Moreover, the SMM work should be delegated to one or several employees in order to decrease misunderstandings about whose task it is to manage it (Hays et al. 2012). Both the technical and marketing skills of the employee managing SMM should be evaluated. Although many social media platforms seem to be simple to manage, it can require more advanced skills to make them into the firm’s own individual pages. Skills in visual design can be needed, too, in order to create e.g. illustrations (Singh & Diamond 2015: 117-118). Moreover, the financial resources of the firm and the resources in form of time need to be considered. Social media is currently an attractive marketing channel for firms dealing with limited budgets, since it is a low-cost marketing channel and firms can choose how much money they want to spend on it (e.g. VanRysdam 2010: 20). A
firm with enough financial resources but lacking of time and understanding about SMM can alternatively outsource the work to a digital marketing agency, which can perform these activities for the firm (Hays et al. 2012).

Although social media is considered a low-cost marketing channel (e.g. VanRysdam 2010: 20), it should be declared that the media on it can be paid, owned or earned. **Paid media** means that the marketer can pay extra money in order to increase the number of people that are to be reached by the marketing messages sent through social media. **Owned media** means the content marketers produces on their own, on their own channels, such as their social media platforms or a company blog or website. **Earned media** refers to any content or discussion about one’s firm or its products or services produced by someone else on a channel that is not owned by the firm. (Smith 2016a; VanRysdam 2010: 20)

### 4.2.2. Choosing the right platforms

As previously mentioned, there is a wide range of platforms on social media that firms can utilize for their marketing. Getting started with SMM, it is wise to choose more than only one platform, as customers today rarely have a profile on just one social media platform (Singh & Diamond 2015: 112). Additionally, while using several social media platforms, firms have the possibility to reach out to multiple target audiences. In marketing communications, it is important to remember that each target group have their own characteristics and behave in different ways. Consequently, marketers might want to tailor the messages to each target audience, so that they suit them in an appropriate way (Fill 2009: 49; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). This can be performed by taking advantage of the distinct features that are offered on different social media platforms (Singh & Diamond 2015: 112; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Before creating a company profile on a social media platform, it is important for the marketer to know how to use the platform in question properly. Studying e.g. the basic settings of the chosen platforms before starting to market on them is beneficial and will result in higher quality content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

It requires some research to find out which platforms the target audiences are using, in order to communicate the right message through the right channel, which is one of the most essential starting points in all kinds of marketing (Nakara et al. 2012). Three of the most frequently used social media platforms in Finland, according to MTV et al.
(2015), are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, which will be described in the following subchapters.

4.2.2.1. Facebook

The social networking platform Facebook, founded in 2004, is the most frequently used social media platform worldwide, considering the high number of users. Facebook has approximately 1,70 billion active users on a monthly basis and 1,083 active daily users (by July 2016). Not surprisingly, Facebook is also a popular social media platform among SMTEs in Ostrobothnia, with 76% of the firms that participated in VASEK’s (2016) study being present on the channel. Firms have the opportunity to create a Facebook page for their businesses and upload multiple types of content, such as photos, video material and messages. Creating such a page is free of charge, however firms can choose to pay for their Facebook business page in order to reach out to a larger scale of people and thus ensure higher visibility. This action is called boosting (VanRysdam 2010: 39, 140; Sjöberg 2016). Another way of receiving visibility on Facebook are through the networks of Facebook friends – when a person “likes”, shares or comments on something, it will be visible also to his or her friends (Leino 2011: 36). A large number of businesses have a Facebook page (50 million), however only 2,5 million of these pay for their Facebook marketing (Smith 2016b). Facebook provides possibilities to reach both large audiences and smaller groups of people. There are various possibilities for marketing on Facebook, e.g. video advertisements, competitions or event marketing (Sjöberg 2016).

4.2.2.2. YouTube

The publishing website YouTube, founded in 2005, has developed into the world’s second largest search engine, after Google, which is the owner of YouTube. Users watch more than six billion hours of videos each month, and 100 hours of new videos are uploaded every minute (Sjöberg 2016; Smith 2016c). Moreover, YouTube has decreased the popularity of television, as statistics show that six out of ten people prefer to watch online videos instead of television (Smith 2016c). Through YouTube, tourist firms have the opportunity to share videos of e.g. destinations or hotels. Firms offering such videos provide value to their customers and a higher level of knowledge about what they offer. These videos can be shared to other social media platforms, such as Facebook.
Facebook has, in fact, a higher rate of views per video than YouTube. However, the search function available on YouTube does not exist on Facebook (Sjöberg 2016).

4.2.2.3. Instagram

Instagram, which is a social media platform for uploading photos and videos, was founded in 2010 and has gained 400 million active users since then. More than 60% of the users sign in to Instagram every day, which makes the platform the second most engaged social network after Facebook (Smith 2016d). Instagram also has over one million corporate users (Instagram Business 2017). In Ostrobothnia, 23.8% of the participating firms in VASEK's (2016) study, use Instagram for marketing. On Instagram, firms have the opportunity to communicate through pictures or short video advertisements. This is particularly suitable for tourist firms, wishing to share content demonstrating destinations, attractions or activities. Variation in uploads and advertisements are possible through e.g. videos, gif-animations and illustrations (Sjöberg 2016).

4.2.3. Creating marketing content on social media

When suitable platforms on social media have been determined, the planning of the marketing content can begin. In this phase, it is important, again, to recall IMC (Kotler et al. 2016: 356). Even if a firm chooses to be present on two or more different platforms, both or all of these are equally part of the image of the firm. Creating marketing content on different social media platforms, marketers need to remember that messages sent through different channels have to be aligned (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kotler et al. 2016: 365). A well-organised plan of the content that will be used is crucial for its quality (Sjöberg 2016).

In order to create successful and effective content on social media, firms need to find out what the customers want to see, hear and read about. In other words, it is central to know the customers’ interests and values. It is also beneficial for the firm to take the role as an active participant on social media, by both creating and being active in discussions with customers (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). In this way, firms can engage customers into open conversations on topics they find valuable. In addition, this is a way of letting the customer be part of the value co-creation (Vargo et al. 2008). High-quality content on social media means more than advertising and selling; it should also be able to engage and generate value for customers (Sjöberg 2016; Hays et al. 2012).
Social media provides firms with the possibility to share media-rich content with their customers. These contents should preferably make customers engage in it, by “liking”, commenting and sharing it with friends. All of these actions are small signs of approval from the customers, which does not require a lot of involvement. (Hays et al. 2012).

The content on a firm’s page on social media should, especially in the field of tourism, be highly informative. The information can be classified into factual or historical information, and opinions or reviews. Factual or historical information may contain e.g. dates of events or opening hours of a tourist attraction, whilst opinion or review may contain a review of, e.g., a hotel or a restaurant. Providing information is also a way of gaining visibility; journalists, for example, might browse for easily accessible information online, and social media is a suitable channel for this. Providing people who can have an influence on the general public with information is a good way of increasing the visibility of the firm (Hays et al. 2012). These people can be seen as using opinion formers or leaders in order to reinforce the marketing messages. It is also an example of how technological sources can facilitate the interaction process between the firm, opinion formers and leaders, as well as the target audiences, as recalled from the interactional model of communication. (Fill 2013: 51-57; Hays et al. 2012)

A firm’s update on social media can either be interactive or non-interactive. An interactive post, such as a question posed to the customers, automatically requests a response by the audience. This is a way on two-way communication (Ottesen 2001: 35). An example of a non-interactive update might be an online advertisement, in which some minor changes in the content of the message have been made in order to fit into a certain social media platform. Using interactive content is a form of personal communication with the customers (Fill 2009: 635-637). By this action, the firm can receive response, feedback or input from the consumers. These responses need to be assessed thoroughly, as it can provide the firm with valuable information (Hays et al. 2012). According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media is about collaboration and sharing with the customers. The firm can choose to “repost” other users’ (e.g. customers’ or other firms’) content on their own social media profile (Lin, Lachlan & Spence 2016; VanRysdam 2010: 44). This is a type of interactive communication, which can also be a way of showing the customers that the firm has noticed them and appreciate what they have posted on their own, individual pages.

Hays et al. (2012) developed a cycle of key steps (Figure 5) for successful SMM, which is adapted from Gretzel, Yuan and Fesenmaiser (2000). The idea of the cycle is to first
attract the consumers to the social media platform. The second step is to engage the consumers by encouraging interest and participation. In this step, both interactive and user-generated content play an important part. Step three is to retain the users, i.e. make them come back (to the social media page) and gain their loyalty. Step four involves learning about the user preferences, in order to capture valuable information. The fifth step is about providing relevant and customised information to the users through personal communication in order to generate value for the customers.

Figure 5  Five Steps for Successful Social Media Marketing (Based on Gretzel et al. 2000)

4.2.4. Measuring the effectiveness of social media marketing

The results, or the effectiveness, of SMM efforts can be measured in several ways. One can review the amount of followers (audience size) on a firm’s social media page, or measure to what extent people are engaging, through e.g. shares, “reposts”, comments or “likes” (the degree of consumer engagement or consumer sentiment). Measuring the engagement is vital for evaluating what kinds of campaigns or content are successful, and which kinds are not. Furthermore, the amount of people that have been reached through a campaign (viral impact) can also work as a guideline for measuring results (Hays et al. 2012; Sjöberg 2016). This provides an image of the level of visibility the firm has succeeded to achieve. The effectiveness of videos can be measured in the amount of views and the amount of people who took time to watch the video until the end. It is also possible to measure when people quitted watching a video, which can be
an indicator of its popularity amongst customers (Sjöberg 2016). Other ways of measuring the effectiveness is to observe the sales, and whether the SMM effort had a positive effect on it, i.e., increased sales (Charlesworth 2015: 60). In addition, many social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, have their own tools and automatic reports for measuring activity on business pages. (Hays et al. 2012; Castronovo & Huang 2012)

4.3. **Summary of the theoretical framework**

Marketing today is highly customer-oriented and one of its most important aims is to know and understand the customers in order to create and co-create value for and with them (Kotler et al. 2016: 10; Vargo et al. 2008). SMEs can use traditional marketing principles in their marketing, both in conventional and in digital marketing channels, which usually are applicable for both small and larger firms (Coviello et al 2000; Reijonen 2010). In contrast to larger firms, SMEs commonly have a limited amount of time, a restricted marketing budget and a more narrow understanding of marketing (Reijonen 2010; Walsh & Lipinski 2009). Moreover, smaller firms have often received criticism for their disorganised and informal marketing, which usually lacks a proper marketing strategy (Gilmore et al. 2001; Coviello et al. 2000).

Despite these somewhat undesirable characteristics of SME marketing, there are some tools that can help SMEs perform marketing in a successful way. First, these firms could use traditional marketing principles as guidelines and apply them into their own context, as well as develop an efficient marketing strategy, either by themselves or with the help a marketing agency can provide (Reijonen 2010). Second, building both strong customer and business relationships helps reinforcing their network (Walsh & Lipinski 2009). SMEs within the tourism industry should aim to be as service oriented as possible and offer high quality services, which in turn results in satisfied customers and customer loyalty (Zehrer 2009). Third, in order to provide customers with value, the target group and their wants, needs and preferences are to be taken into account (Kotler & Keller 2012: 55-56).

Social media marketing (SMM), with its wide-ranging spectrum of channels, is an attractive marketing method for SMEs, as it provides the possibility to reach out to large audiences and is less expensive than traditional marketing channels (Fill 2013: 646-647; Nakara et al. 2012; VanRysdam 2010: 20). SMM enables two-way communication between the firm and its customers, which tends to be more effective
than simply a monologue from the firm (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015; Dahlen et al.
2010: 444). Digital technology has changed the way people behave: the communication,
information searching and sharing works mostly using the Internet today (Kotler &
Armstrong 2016: 48; Yoo & Gretzel 2016: 189; Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015).

The communication in SMEs and on social media is typically personal and individual
(Dahlen et al. 2010: 444). Moreover, a model for communication that is suitable for
SMM is the interactional model of communication. In this model, all parties that are
exposed to the marketing message, i.e. the source of the message (the firm), the
different target groups, opinion leaders and opinion formers, as well as personal and
electronic sources, are able to interact with each other and respond to the message (Fill
2013: 51).

All of the different marketing messages that might be tailored according to different
target groups create an image of the firm in the customers' minds (Grönroos 2004;
Kotler et al. 2016: 365). In order to not cause confusion or confliction between these
different messages, they should all be aligned, which is called integrated marketing
communication (IMC). Integrating all the marketing channels results in clear and
coherent messages sent out by the firm (Kotler et al. 2016: 356). Unplanned messages
are considered the most reliable from the customers' perspective, but are difficult to
plan for (Grönroos & Lindberg-Repo 1998). One example of this is word-of-mouth
(WOM), i.e. what customers speak about the firm and their opinions about it, in real
life or online. In the case of online communication, it is called eWOM. Positive eWOM
is desirable especially for SMEs with limited marketing budgets, since the word can be
spread rapidly using social media (Grönroos 2004; Reijonen 2010; Ladhari & Michaud
2015; Williams et al. 2017).

Another form of unplanned communication is user-generated content, i.e. the content
on social media that customers create (Ye et al. 2011; Litvin et al. 2008). This can be
seen as earned media, which is not owned or created by the firm itself (Smith 2016a).
This results in more control to the customers and less to the marketers (Hays et al.
2012). Furthermore, before a SME decides to implement social media into their
marketing strategy, setting objectives for the new marketing channel and integrating it
into the additional marketing of the firm should be done (Charlesworth 2015: 18-19;
Neti 2011). The firm should also evaluate the existing resources, such as how much
time and money they should spend on SMM and what kind of knowledge and skills they
have (Singh & Diamond 2015: 117-118).
While choosing platforms to use for SMM, the firm should consider being present on the ones that their target audiences use (Nakara et al. 2012). Three of the most popular platforms in Finland are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube (MTV et al. 2015). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) explain that a firm should be active, interesting, humble, informal, and honest in their content on social media. The content should also contain valuable information, which is also a way of gaining visibility, e.g. from journalists looking for easily accessible information. In order to know whether the SMM efforts have been useful for the firm or not, firms should measure the marketing outcome. This can be done in several ways, e.g. by evaluating the viral impact or the audience size (Hays et al. 2012).

![Figure 6](image)

**Successful SMTE marketing in a digital context**
- Value creation and co-creation
- Customer Relationship Marketing
- Networking
- Service Marketing
- Integrated Marketing Communication
- Two-way communication
- Resource evaluation

→ **Marketing strategy**

**Implementing a strategy for social media marketing**
- Choice of platforms based on target audiences
- Integrated with overall marketing strategy
- Suitable, informative, interactive, interesting and engaging content
- Measurement of the outcome of the social media marketing

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**Figure 6  Preparing the Marketing Strategy for Successful SMM Implementation (by the author)**

The model, presented in Figure 6, illustrates the most relevant success factors of SME marketing that should be considered in the development of a marketing strategy. Additionally, it illustrates central aspects to take into account while implementing a strategy for social media marketing.
5 METHOD

This chapter describes the research method used for the empirical study, as well as the data collection method, the sampling technique and sample size, the design of the interview guide and the method for analysing the data.

5.1. Choice of research method

The research method chosen for this thesis is qualitative in nature. A qualitative method is suitable for this study, as this type of research method aims to interpret and understand different phenomena (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 4). Creating an understanding of how SMTEs in Ostrobothnia do marketing, how they use social media as a marketing channel as part of their holistic marketing strategy and which challenges they face doing so is the purpose of this thesis. Moreover, qualitative research methods view the reality as socially constructed, i.e. that the reality is created and understood through social and cultural meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 4). This is suitable for the context this thesis will examine.

An inductive approach has been chosen for this thesis. Induction refers to a research approach in which the theory is generated as the data is collected and analysed. This means that the study is data driven, and themes and patterns can be identified based on the data collection (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012: 48, 144). The theoretical framework of this thesis, provided in chapters 2-4, works as a basis for the creation of the interview guide, as well as for the interpretation of the results of the study. The inductive approach is usually associated with qualitative research (Bryman & Bell 2005: 25). Qualitative, inductive research tends to be based on a continuous interplay between theory, empirical findings and interpretation (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 44; Bryman & Bell 2005: 40).

5.2. Data collection method

In qualitative research approaches, the data collection and the analysis take the social and cultural context into consideration in order to create a holistic understanding of the matters that are studied (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 4-5). The data gathered by the researchers themselves are referred to as primary data. Secondary data, on the contrary, refers to already existing data, such as data collected from libraries or archives. Qualitative data refers to any data that is not measurable, such as numerical
data. In other words, a characteristic for qualitative data is that it is interpreted or described based on textual, verbal, audio, material or visual material (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 82-83).

A commonly used data collection method within qualitative research approaches is interviews, which will serve as the data source of this thesis. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016: 83), interviews include “talks organized into a series of questions and answers”. Usually, interviews are conducted in person, i.e. face-to-face, however they may also take place through telephone or online, using the Internet (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 84; Bryman & Bell 2005: 140).

The purpose of using qualitative interviews is to produce research data. Using interviews as a data collection method is an effective technique for gathering information that is not available in published form. This method also enables examining people’s opinions and experiences from their subjective point of view. Interviews can in some situations be similar to everyday discussions, in which the difference between the role of the interviewer and the interviewee is rather indistinct. The difference between an interview and an everyday conversation is that the interviewer has prepared for the interview and that he or she focuses on specific issues that are part of the topic of the study and provides answers to the research questions. However, interview questions are not meant to answer the research questions directly. If they would do so, research and analysis would be unnecessary. There are several different types of qualitative interviews, and the type used in this thesis will be described in the next paragraph. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 91-94; Saunders et al. 2012: 372-373)

This study will use semi-structured, open-ended interviews as the data collection method. This interview type allows the interviewer to ask both **what** and **how** questions. Semi-structured interviews are rather informal in nature, and the interviewees have more liberty in what and how they answer to the questions. Conducting semi-structured interviews, the interviewer brings a prepared outline of topics or themes to the interview (an interview guide) but is still allowed to change the order or the formulation of the questions during each interview. Furthermore, open-ended interview questions allow the interviewee to give more detailed answers. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 94-96; Bryman & Bell 2005: 363; Saunders et al. 2012: 374)
5.3. Sampling technique and size

In this study, purposive sampling is used as a sampling technique, which is classified as non-probability sampling (Saunders et al. 2012: 287). This means that the probability of each case selected from the population (all the cases from which a sample is taken) is unknown and no statistical generalisations about the population can be made (Saunders et al. 2012: 260, 262). Purposive sampling occurs when the researcher’s own judgement is used for selecting cases that are able to answer the research questions of the study. For this study, the cases consist of SMTEs in Ostrobothnia. Purposive sampling aims to select the most informative and relevant cases and that provide in-depth insight into the subject that is studied (Saunders et al. 2012: 287).

Only firms that fulfil the criteria of being a SMTE and that use at least one social media platform for marketing were chosen as cases. This was done in order to collect relevant information to the topic of the study. The interviewees of the selected firms were chosen based on their role in the firms and only people dealing with marketing were interviewed. Moreover, firms that were able to provide maximum variation in the data collection were selected. In the case of this study, firms offering different kinds of tourism services, such as accommodation, activities and restaurant services, were chosen in order to make the data as versatile as possible.

Using a non-probability sampling technique, the size of the sample is indefinite, and there are no rules for it. However, using semi-structured interviews as a data collection method requires the sample size to be a minimum of five individual interviews. In this study, data were collected until data saturation was reached, i.e. until further data could not provide any new information or themes (Saunders et al. 2012: 283). A total of ten persons dealing with marketing in small and medium-sized tourist firms in Ostrobothnia were contacted by phone, of which seven could be reached. The firms’ presence on various social media was examined before contacting them. Finally, six representatives of the contacted firms agreed to participate in an interview.

5.4. Collection of data

The data collection for this study occurred in November and December 2016 by face-to-face meetings. The representatives were first introduced to the subject of the study by phone and then asked whether they would consider participating in an interview. Interviews were then scheduled with the representatives willing to participate. All of
the selected interviewees participated voluntarily and were not compensated for it. The conducted interviews are presented in Table 1, which provides an explanation of the firm type, the interviewees' roles, as well as the date, time, duration and languages of the interviews. Moreover, the six firms have been given code names in order to protect the interviewees’ identities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Firm type</th>
<th>Role of the interviewee</th>
<th>Date and time</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Firm 1</td>
<td>Adventure park</td>
<td>Owner-manager</td>
<td>22.11.2016 10.00</td>
<td>51:05:00</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm 2</td>
<td>Accommodation and cruises</td>
<td>Owner-manager</td>
<td>23.11.2016 10.00</td>
<td>47:28:00</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm 3</td>
<td>Fishing guide and excursions</td>
<td>Owner-manager</td>
<td>28.11.2016 10.00</td>
<td>35:09:00</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm 4</td>
<td>Animal farm</td>
<td>Owner-manager</td>
<td>28.11.2016 14.00</td>
<td>23:08:00</td>
<td>Finnish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm 5</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Owner-manager</td>
<td>29.11.2016 10.00</td>
<td>43:25:00</td>
<td>Finnish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm 6</td>
<td>Museum and culture</td>
<td>Museum pedagogue</td>
<td>02.12.2016 10.00</td>
<td>36:36:00</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1  Clarification of the interviews (by the author)

The language of the interviews depended on the interviewees' language preferences. Language barriers did not occur, however in a few interviews, some questions had to be asked twice, or in a different way, in order for the interviewee to understand them correctly. Overall, the interviews were conducted successfully without any major misunderstandings. Other topics, that were not part of the interview guide, occurred quite frequently during most of the interviews, which led to more relaxed and natural discussions.

The interviews were conducted at the representative's own offices or in a public coffee shop. The interviews were expected to not last longer than one hour, and as seen in Table 1, the longest lasting interview was approximately 51 minutes long. All of the interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and transcribed afterwards, which is an excellent way for the interviewer to get familiar with the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 96-98; Bryman & Bell 2005: 374). Notes were also made during the interviews, which worked as a support for the transcriptions.
5.5. **Design of the interview guide**

While designing the interview guide, a proper understanding of the purpose, the research questions and the subject of the study are essential parts. The questions of the interview guide should be formulated in a way that they facilitate answering the research questions. The questions should not, however, be too specific. Moreover, the interviewer should be prepared to be able to change the order of the questions, depending on the interview (Bryman & Bell 2005: 369). These instructions were taken into account while considering which types of questions should be included in the interview guide of this study.

Preparing for the topics and themes to be discussed with the interviewees is important for the interviews to succeed. It is crucial to ensure that all the topics or themes of the interview guide are covered during the interview. Since the interview questions are open-ended, the interviewer should be prepared for more in-depth answers and longer-lasting conversations. The interview questions should not be too complex, as that might make them difficult to answer. Moreover, leading interview questions, in which the expected response is obvious to the interviewee, are to be avoided in qualitative interviews. A more appropriate approach is to ask neutral questions. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2016: 96-98; Bryman & Bell 2005: 374)

The interview guide for this study was created in three different languages: Swedish, Finnish and English, because of the preferred languages of the interviewees. The interview guide was divided into six themes, all together with a few follow-up questions. The interview guide begins with asking for some background information about the firm and the interviewee; such as what their main business consist of, when the company was founded and what position in the firm the interviewee holds. The second theme is about the overall marketing of the firm in question, while the third theme aims to find out the social media platforms used in the firms. The fourth theme covers the SMM efforts, and the fifth theme is about resources in terms of time, money and knowledge. Finally, the sixth theme aims to find out the possible challenges the firms face regarding SMM.

5.6. **Analysis of the data**

Analysing qualitative data, the researcher has to make sense of and interpret the subjective meanings stated by the participants of the study (the interviewees).
Qualitative data is rich in content and tends to be somewhat complex. The qualitative data consists of large volumes of text, and the quality of the research depends much on a careful examination of the data through interplay between the data collection and the analysis (Saunders et al. 2012: 546-548). As previously mentioned, all of the interviews included in this study were recorded and transcribed. This resulted in large amounts of data, which was categorised into different themes in order to make sense of the data. A structure, which enabled answering the research questions, was then created based on the themes. After each interview and before the transcriptions, notes of what had been said and the nature of the interviews were made. This was done in order to recall the most important parts of the interviews, as well as an attempt to categorise the data in advance (Saunders et al. 2012: 560).

In this study, the analysis aims to search for recurrent themes and patterns in the data. Moreover, relationships between these themes can be recognized during the analysis (Saunders et al. 2012: 560). Decisions about which data fits which category are made through interpretation of the data. The categories enable a description and an understanding of the phenomenon studied. Consequently, the method for analysing the data collected in this study may be described as inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs 2008). For this analysis, some guidance from the grounded theory method may also be used, regarding recognising themes and patterns and dividing them into categories, as well as collecting data until saturation is reached (Saunders et al. 2012: 568-569). In addition, all of the citations of the respondents that will be presented in chapter six have been translated to English.
6  PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF EMPirical RESULTS

This chapter deals with the collected qualitative data and its analysis. The results are divided into different subchapters with different themes, which will be presented, analysed and related to the theoretical framework of this thesis. The first two parts of this chapter (subchapter 6.1 and 6.2) aim to answer to the three research questions of this thesis. Subchapter 6.3 presents guidelines for SMTEs using social media as a marketing channel. Finally, the reliability and validity of the study is discussed in subchapter 6.4.

6.1. The social media marketing landscape within SMTEs in Ostrobothnia

This subchapter answers research question 1 and 2, i.e., how SMTEs in Ostrobothnia perform marketing, how they use social media in their marketing and through which platforms. In order to provide an answer to this question, this chapter is divided into different themes, which look into the overall marketing in the SMTEs that participated in the study, their possible marketing strategies, the social media platforms they take advantage of, how they perform marketing on social media, the level of integration between their different marketing channels and finally their current resources and how well these fit into SMM. The results of each theme, including citations of the respondents, will be presented first. The analysis of the results, including references to the theoretical framework, will be presented in the end of each theme.

6.1.1. Overall marketing

Marketing through advertisements in local newspapers as well as through a company webpage showed to be the most frequently used marketing channels amongst the firms that participated in the study. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned their websites as one of the most important marketing channels they use and that they have invested a significant amount of time and effort on this. Two of the firms (Firm 4 and Firm 5) have outsourced the maintenance of their websites to external companies. The remaining firms take care of this themselves. Additionally, Firm 5 considered Google advertisements and keywords as an important marketing channel. All of the firms cooperate with Visit Vaasa, and acquire an equal share of visibility through the organisation’s website. Customers are allowed to make bookings, as well as to find
contact information and be forwarded to the firms’ own websites on Visit Vaasa’s webpage. Other marketing methods in these firms were posters and flyers distributed to e.g. local stores, radio advertising and handing out business cards to customers or potential customers. Two interviewees (Firm 1 and Firm 5) mentioned that they have received visibility by being featured in articles in the local newspapers Vasabladet and Pohjalainen. In addition, Firm 5 has had bloggers as customers twice, who later featured the firm and its offerings on their blogs.

Furthermore, both Firm 1 and Firm 3 mentioned cooperation with other service providers as a marketing method. This cooperation is in some of the firms necessary in order to offer service packages to the customers, including e.g. activities, sauna and food.

I cooperate with a local restaurant. In this way, we can offer the customers service packages, for example for companies, including activity, conference, sauna and food. (Firm 3)

Some of the interviewees also mentioned WOM as a marketing method, meaning satisfied customers spreading the word about the firm to friends and acquaintances.

My customers market my firm a lot. Last summer there were a lot of visitors who had heard about someone coming here, and then they had recommended it. It is slow but very good, as long as it is only positive feedback. (Firm 5)

One surprising fact that occurred during a few of the interviews was that some interviewees stated that they have not performed any marketing. Nevertheless, these same interviewees mentioned several common marketing channels that they currently make use of in their marketing, which was contradicting to their previous statements. After further discussions about their overall marketing, some additional marketing channels were discovered.

We don’t do any marketing. We didn’t have money before, so how can I spend on marketing? It was only Facebook and homepage, and newspapers that wrote on free will, and otherwise just spreading by word. (Firm 1)

This statement shows that Firm 1 actually has performed marketing, such as through social media, the firm’s website and earned media. Shortly after, this interviewee mentioned some of the other marketing channels that the firm has used, including posters and cooperation with other suppliers and Visit Vaasa.
I went to all hotels, to introduce, to give brochures, and then Visit Vaasa. Then there were some sort of posters in almost all shops and in Visit Vaasa...And Wasaline, they had some sort of ad on the screens on the boat going to Sweden. (Firm 1)

Taking a look at these firms’ overall, holistic marketing activities provides a deeper insight of the owner-managers’ skills and their attitudes towards marketing. As previously suggested, SME marketers should first have an understanding of traditional marketing principles in order to successfully perform SMM (Scott 2016; see also VanRysdam 2010: 22). A focal point of this study is to get insight into the marketing in these firms and their respective starting points or abilities to use social media for marketing. The results showed that all of the firms use both digital and traditional media in their marketing, and paid, earned and owned media (Smith 2016a) occurred in many of the firms. Outsourcing the marketing work (Hays et al. 2012) occurred in these firms to some extent, referring to the maintenance of two of the firms' websites. Networking, cooperation with other suppliers as well as customer relationship marketing is essential for SME marketing, according to Walsh and Lipinski (2009; see also Nakara et al. 2012). The results showed that most of the firms had taken these aspects of marketing into account. Some of the interviewees also mentioned WOM, which is, according to Reijonen (2010), favourable for SMEs. Additionally, the argument that owner-managers of SMEs tend to misunderstand the marketing concept (Coviello et al. 2000; Simpson et al. 2006) showed to be accurate to some degree, as some of the interviewees claimed that they have not performed marketing despite the fact that they actually already had made use of a range of marketing channels.

6.1.2. Usage of a marketing strategy

All interviewees said that they do not have a marketing strategy, as none of them have yet developed one. However, all of the firms agreed that marketing would be easier to perform by using a strategy as a tool. Two of the interviewees, Firm 1 and Firm 6, said they are planning to develop a marketing strategy during the winter in order to improve their marketing performance before the next season.

Our marketing is quite Ad hoc, and that has actually been a problem for us, that we don't have any strategy. But we have been thinking about it, it would be a tool for my work, which is missing at the moment, and I'm actually going to start working on it now during this winter. (Firm 6)
Moreover, Firm 1 and Firm 6 mentioned that the development of a marketing strategy would require more advanced marketing skills than they have at the moment. Outsourcing this work to e.g. a marketing agency or a marketing expert would be a solution to this problem, according to Firm 1. Another solution, mentioned by Firm 6, would be seeking help from the board of the firm, which involves people with knowledge about marketing.

Within Firm 2, the target audience seems to have a connection with the development of a marketing strategy. The interviewee mentioned that it has not been possible to develop a marketing strategy because the target group of the firm in question has never been defined. The only strategic marketing approach that this firm has used so far has been to reach out to as many people as possible through the different marketing channels.

It would be easy to develop a marketing strategy if we would have a clear target group, but since we don’t have one, we just try to reach out to as many potential customers as possible. (Firm 2)

Another reason for not implementing a marketing strategy, revealed by Firm 3, is that the firm mostly is a side business. However, the interviewee stated that the marketing is something that is always in the back of the head and actions such as using the English language in the marketing communication in order to target international customers can be seen as part of a marketing strategy. Other marketing activities that can be understood as strategic is to plan for the marketing during the predicted season peaks, as well as to offer a mobile version of the website, according to Firm 4 and Firm 5.

Previous literature claims that in general, SMEs tend to not make use of a proper marketing strategy (e.g. Gilmore et al. 2001; Coviello et al. 2000), which is the reason why the respondents were asked whether they use a marketing strategy or not. The marketing in these types of firms has also in previous literature been described as unstructured and disorganised (Reijonen 2010). The results of this study showed that within these firms, it is fairly true, possibly because of the lack of a marketing strategy and strategic planning. It should be mentioned that all the firms that participated in this study are more active and offer most of their services during the summer season. That is the reason why the winter is a suitable time for them to work on a marketing strategy and plan for forthcoming marketing. This is positive, as SMEs that carefully plan their marketing have greater possibilities of surviving on the market (Simpson et al. 2006).
6.1.3. Social media platforms used by the firms

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were used among the interviewed firms. However, two of the firms (Firm 2 and Firm 5) use only one platform for their SMM, which is Facebook. Two of the firms (Firm 1 and Firm 4) use two platforms, Facebook and Instagram. The two remaining firms (Firm 3 and Firm 6) utilize all of the three mentioned platforms.

The reason for utilizing only one platform in their SMM, according to both Firm 2 and Firm 5, is mainly the lack of experience of additional platforms. Moreover, Firm 2 mentioned their websites quite frequently while being asked about social media platforms. Both of these interviewees have personally been present on Facebook for quite a long time, and are therefore familiar with this platform and its features. However, both interviewees stated that they are not proficient in using additional platforms. Firm 2 had heard of YouTube and considered the platform as a possibly effective marketing tool, but does not have enough time and capacity for using it. Another reason for not utilizing additional platforms is the lack of necessary technical devices for it, such as a smartphone, which is required for using Instagram.

I don’t know anything about those other ones. I have only heard about something called Instagram, but I know nothing about it. (Firm 2)

Firm 1 explained that using both Facebook and Instagram for marketing on social media is effective and reaches out to people because of the popularity of these two platforms. Firm 4 motivated the usage of Facebook and Instagram by the statement that these two are easy to use due to previous experience. Moreover, the lack of time to start using additional platforms played a significant role in the choice of platforms. Additionally, Firm 1 was interested in extending the marketing to YouTube, and is planning to create a channel on the platform and to upload videos with support from another firm.

People like it. They want to check in and they use it. I see people using Instagram very much. They tag their friends and they want to share, so that is why we are there. (Firm 1)

Firm 3 used Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for SMM for the reason that these three were the first and the most popular platforms at the time when the business was started. Another reason was that the target group of the firm mostly use these three platforms. This interviewee did not want to use additional platforms, as it would require even more work, which there is no capacity for. Firm 6, on the other hand, uses
Facebook, Instagram and YouTube because of the variety of content that can be uploaded onto these platforms. However, the YouTube account of Firm 6 has not been very active lately. This firm has been planning to possibly expand their SMM to Twitter, but it has not been executed yet. Additionally, the target group of Firm 6 has affected the choice of the current social media platforms.

We started with YouTube through a project...we've had Facebook since before I started working here. And Instagram came when our director started using it, and then created an account for us. And then, there are people in the board who think we should start Twittering, but we have not came there yet. We cannot be present everywhere, we don’t have the resources and we simply don’t have time. (Firm 6)

As noted from the results, at least two of the interviewees have taken their target groups into account while choosing their platforms on social media. This indicates that they have predicted which social media platforms their target audiences are associated with and then chosen these particular platforms in order to reach out to the right target audiences (Fill 2009: 49). The customers are commonly present on more than one platform, according to Singh and Diamond (2015: 112), which is the reason why they can better be reached through multiple platforms. In addition, uploading different kind of content onto different and utilizing the distinct features of these can lead to more effective marketing messages that is appropriate for a certain target group (Fill 2009: 49; Singh & Diamond 2015: 112; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The technical skills and know-how about different platforms also played a significant role in the interviewees’ choice of platforms, and the firms who did not have the required skills and knowledge have not extended their SMM to more than one or two platforms. As stated by Singh and Diamond (2015: 117-118), more advanced skills in managing social media platforms is usually needed for SMM. Moreover, it can be noted that the interviewees using Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for SMM take advantage of the most popular social media platforms in Finland (MTV et al. 2015).

6.1.4. Characteristics of the SMM performed by these firms

The interviewees were asked what type of content they use for marketing on their respective social media platforms. Using social media in order to provide customers with information was one of the most frequently mentioned SMM activities amongst the interviewees. Information about e.g. opening hours and timetables, as well as information about the firm itself, such as contact information was typical.
All of the interviewees mentioned pictures when asked about their social media content. All of the firms agreed that uploading pictures together with a piece of text is essential for the content to be interesting for customers. Uploading pictures was also considered as a way of inspiring other people.

If there’s just text, nobody cares about it. If there’s some pictures and something beautiful, it reaches out to people. (Firm 1)

We use Facebook in a similar way that we use newspaper ads. Instagram is different, we want to create a certain atmosphere through our pictures there and inspire people. (Firm 6)

Moreover, many of the interviewees mentioned that they use different platforms on social media in different ways and for different purposes. Firm 6 stated that they use Facebook mostly as an information channel, whilst Instagram is used for inspirational pictures that are “nice to look at”. The YouTube channel of Firm 6 was initially created for a project, including crafts videos from the museum. Marketing events on Facebook was something that nearly all of the interviewees mentioned. These events consist of e.g. cruises, lunches, different holiday activities and workshops, depending on what kinds of services the firms offer.

I use Facebook mostly for marketing the events we arrange here. (Firm 5)

Firm 4 revealed that a Facebook Christmas calendar, including festive pictures and stories, was planned for December 2016. Firm 6 said that engaging customers into discussion and interaction on social media is an effective method in SMM. Customers engaging on a higher level than simply “liking” a post on social media, such as through commenting or sharing the content would be exciting, according to Firm 6.

It would be fun to make people discuss things! We have tried to do that now, but with varying results. We have asked direct questions, for example. Old photos are also always good. It raises reactions, and it’s something that people love to see. We should do that more often, to make people not just like, but also comment. (Firm 6)

Two of the firms mentioned storytelling as another way of using social media for marketing. Firm 2 believes that the history of the place in which the firm’s facilities are situated could possibly be interesting, however the existing customers have not yet showed an interest in this type of content. Firm 3 mentioned posting a story of a day trip with a customer or a group of customers as a common way of creating content.
I would like to use the history as a source of inspiration for marketing, and bring forward interesting things from that. But too few are interested in the history. Experts say that one should build a story around the place, but when you do that, nobody cares. (Firm 2)

Moreover, the interviewees were asked whether they habitually measure the effectiveness and results of their SMM investments. None of them use any specific tool for measuring, however some common patterns could be identified. Most of these firms commonly evaluate the customers’ engagement in different types of content on social media. This provides guidelines for what type of content the customers might be interested in. The type of customer engagement that the interviewees measure is typically “likes”, comments and amount of shares. Another way of measuring the effectiveness, according to Firm 4, is to look at the amount of new customers “liking” the firm’s Facebook page after uploading something that other people have engaged in, through e.g. sharing the content of the page. Despite this, some of the interviewees said that they have not yet noticed any real effect of the SMM.

I look at how many people I’ve reached, and if I have uploaded some ads, I look at how much new likes my pages has gained and so on. Customers usually tell me that they have seen my ads on Facebook. (Firm 4)

On Facebook, you can see how many people have seen a post and such. I don’t look at this very often, but it’s a way of seeing what type of content people like and what they wish to see. It’s very difficult to see if it makes any difference, though. (Firm 3)

As recommended in the theoretical framework, the content on social media should be created based on the customers’ interests and wishes (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The interviewees have done this by examining which kinds of content their customers notice, e.g. by reviewing how many “likes” the content has gathered. Moreover, Firm 6 mentioned engaging the customers into discussions as a way of creating content, which is something the firm would like to further improve. Vargo et al. (2008; see also Hays et al. 2012; Sjöberg 2016) suggest that this is a way of co-creating value with customers as it involves customers in discussions about topics that are valuable for them. Engaging people into discussions, by e.g. posing direct questions as Firm 6 has done can be seen as interactive content involving two-way communication between the firm and its customers (e.g. Ottesen 2001: 35). According to Hays et al. (2012), the social media content of firms within the field of tourism should be informative. The results showed that factual information (e.g. opening hours) was the most frequently communicated type of information. Historical information was also communicated to some extent through storytelling and old photos (Hays et al. 2012). Furthermore, the most
frequently used effectiveness measurement technique amongst these firms was measuring the degree of customer engagement (Hays et al. 2012; Sjöberg 2016), by evaluating how many “likes”, comments or shares their content has gathered.

6.1.5. Integration of traditional marketing channels and social media

This thesis has covered integrated marketing communication and highlighted the importance of the concept rather frequently, which is the reason why it was a part of the interview guide. Only two interviewees considered their other marketing channels to be fully integrated with their SMM. Firm 1 stated that in order to be recognised by customers, all marketing should be connected and aligned.

All the posters we have, our homepage, our pictures, Facebook banner, all of these ones, they have the same line. We order everything from the same designer who is making all of this stuff for me. Everything has to be connected, go in the same line to be recognised. It should all be smooth and in style. (Firm 1)

Another way of integrating all of the marketing channels was declared by Firm 6. First, the marketing on both traditional and social media is quite similar regarding the visuals and the communication. Second, the firm’s website includes linkages to all of the social media platforms this firm uses, which creates awareness of their presence on social media.

From our webpage, you can be forwarded to our Facebook page. We have both the Instagram and Facebook logo there...and YouTube, now that I think about it. Social media is sort of a different way of communicating, but still, I would say we use at least Facebook very much in the same way we use newspaper ads. (Firm 6)

The remaining firms do not integrate their SMM with their other marketing channels. Firm 3 and Firm 4 said that the marketing on social media is something that happens in the exact moment and has the possibility to be up-to-date at all times. This is unlike traditional marketing media, such as newspaper advertisements, which need to be planned well in advance. Nevertheless, Firm 3 believes that a firm needs to set the same objectives and vision for all marketing channels and that all of these need to move in the same direction.

Social media is alive in the moment. Things constantly happen at the farm, which can immediately be uploaded onto social media. (Firm 4)
You always want to reach a certain objective. If the objectives of the different marketing channels go in different directions, you can never reach your goal. (Firm 3)

Kotler et al. (2016: 365), as well as Singh and Diamond (2015: 17) recommend that all of the marketing efforts of a firm should be integrated in order to create a clear and consistent image of the firm not to cause confliction between different marketing messages (see also Grönroos 2004). The integration between the different marketing channels amongst these firms was generally on a fairly low level, as only two of the interviewees believed their marketing channels are integrated with each other. Contrariwise, two of the interviewees seem to have realised the importance of sending clear and coherent messages to the receivers (Kotler et al. 2016: 356).

6.1.6. Evaluation of the firms’ resources

The interviewees were asked about their firms’ current resources, in terms of time, money and knowledge about (social media) marketing, and how well these resources fit into SMM. Each firm responded that they do not have enough time for actively performing marketing on social media. Several interviewees admitted that in theory, they could do plenty of additional SMM work if their time would allow them to.

On social media, it’s not a question of lack of money, since it’s theoretically free. It’s more a question of time. We could probably perform better; I don’t think we are brilliant, definitely not. (Firm 6)

The reason for the lack of time is typically a result of the preoccupation of the interviewees. All of them do all marketing by themselves, together with all other tasks that need attention in a business. All, except one of the interviewees (Firm 6) are owner-managers, which means that they take care of everything in the firm. None of the interviewees have (yet) outsourced the marketing completely, which has resulted in an overload of work that leaves no extra time to spend on SMM. However, Firm 1 might have come up with a solution to this problem. The SMM work could either be outsourced to a marketing agency, or to the other employees whenever they have time for it.

Sometimes, I give it to the employees, when they’re at work and they have nothing to do. I tell them to go and take some pictures and write something down. (Firm 1)

As mentioned previously, most of these firms are more active during the summer. This also results in more social media activity during that time, whereas the winter season is
quieter. Nevertheless, almost all of these firms are available all year around on request, which might not always have been communicated enough. According to Firm 6, it would be important to constantly remind the customers about the firm’s existence also during the winter.

I do invest time in it during summer, as a matter of fact I try to do update every morning. When it’s fall and winter, the social media is quieter. (Firm 4)

We are open in summertime during such a short period of time, and we would like to show people that we are available also during the winter. It’s about reminding people of what we do all the time. (Firm 6)

Many of the interviewees considered SMM as inexpensive, and therefore an attractive marketing tool. Four of the interviewees revealed that they have “boosted” their Facebook posts in order to reach out to a larger scale of people and to be able to choose the target audience that are to be exposed to the posts. Despite this, most of the interviewees said that they have not noticed any higher performance of these boosted post, or that these have lead to e.g. an increase in sales or more interest from existing or potential customers. Some of the interviewees said they have tried to boost their Facebook posts, but have not done it a second time, as they were not satisfied with the results. The interviewees that have not boosted their Facebook posts are interested in trying and are planning to do it.

I have not really noticed any difference by boosting my Facebook posts. If it would make a difference, I would start boosting with maybe 1000 euros. And, if I would work fulltime with this, I would probably also do it. (Firm 3)

I have not put money into Facebook. It’s something that should be done; I have intended to do it. (Firm 5)

None of the interviewees have an education in marketing. However, many of them have a long career in entrepreneurship, which has given them some experience in marketing. Moreover, four of the interviewees have taken some courses that have dealt with marketing during their university studies, even if none of them studied marketing as a major. Nevertheless, these marketing courses were just a small part of these interviewee’s studies, which most of them do not recall anymore. Almost all of the interviewees said they would need supplementary knowledge about marketing.
I never had a start in marketing...or maybe in university we had some sort of course about it, but that's far away. I still have to read and I have to work, or I have to hire somebody to do it. (Firm 1)

I'm a mechanical engineer, and I have an MBA in leadership. I have probably taken some courses in marketing, but it's not something I remember. If we go far back in time, I was the president of a youth organisation, so I had to market some events. And my father was also an entrepreneur, so from that I have gained some experience...but that was of course before the time of social media. (Firm 3)

Most of the interviewees have complementary knowledge in marketing from courses and seminars they have participated in, which have mostly regarded SMM. All of the interviewees mentioned a seminar on how to market on social media that had been arranged by VASEK, although the opinions about the seminar were divided. One interviewee (Firm 5) wants to learn as much as possible and is more than willing to participate in further seminars. On the contrary, another interviewee (Firm 6) stated that these types of seminars mostly include basic facts about how to use different social media platforms.

It's a question of how this course or education should be arranged, so that people actually have practical use of it. (Firm 6)

I have participated in something small, like a course day regarding social media as a marketing channel. And then I took a course in how to use Wordpress to create websites. (Firm 2)

Evaluating the existing resources of these firms can be seen as an indicator of the quality of their SMM. Previous literature claim that time, money and knowledge about marketing are resources that SMEs typically lack of (e.g. Reijonen 2010; Walsh & Lipinski 2009). The lack of resources have been said to be the most central barrier to using social media for marketing (e.g. Hays et al. 2012). According to the results of this study, the lack of time was the most frequently mentioned barrier. A more precise time management, which is a key component in SMM according to Singh and Diamond (2015: 117-118), could be a solution to this issue and lead to richer and higher-quality content. The argument that SMEs typically do not have sufficient knowledge in marketing was also confirmed by the results of this study, as none of the interviewees are marketing specialists.
6.2. Challenges regarding social media marketing

This subchapter aims to answer the third research question, i.e. what challenges SMTEs in Ostrobothnia face in their use of social media marketing. Understanding what these challenges consist of is important in terms of useful insights for the guidelines that will be presented in subchapter 6.3.

Firm 1 considered producing interesting and appealing content for the different social media platforms to be a challenge. The same interviewee also mentioned the lack of knowledge about marketing as another barrier, as well as the culture difference, since this interviewee’s nationality is not Finnish. Content that could perform well in other countries does not necessarily work in Finland. Moreover, knowing what type of content the customers are interested in and find valuable came up as a challenge, mentioned by Firm 2. Concerns about customers not engaging in the content were also stated.

I need someone to write properly, with good writing skills, someone who knows how to be interesting and catchy...and then to be at the place and take good pictures. The content should be well made, representative and informative. (Firm 1)

I have tried to create quite nice content with pictures and text. I’m worried, or disappointed that nobody shares it. And I receive very little response. They probably think that it's rubbish. (Firm 2)

Measuring the effectiveness of social media was another challenge that came up during the interviews. Firm 2 mentioned that receiving assistance in how to interpret the different numbers and statistics in the report that is provided by Facebook after boosting a post would be helpful.

When you invest money in Facebook, you receive a certain report...but what do those numbers really mean? I would like to know how many actual customers I have gained through boosting the Facebook page. (Firm 2)

Another challenge regards expanding the SMM to new, additional platforms. Several interviewees mentioned that they have considered moving on to other platforms, but have not actualised it because of the lack of proficiency and familiarity with these ones. Investing enough time in learning how to use other social media platforms would also be a challenge, according to Firm 4.

I’d say Facebook is easy for me, but if I would have to start using Twitter or YouTube, then I would have to practice a bit, since I’m not familiar with these ones. (Firm 4)
Finding the time to work with SMM and to be active and to frequently upload content showed to be a common challenge amongst these firms. Firm 3 mentioned that it is more problematic to find the time to sit down and work than finding ideas for content. Firm 6 supported this argument and stated that social media content should be uploaded immediately in order to not be outdated. This is a major challenge for all of the interviewees, who need to take care of the marketing and all other responsibilities by themselves.

It’s this immediacy, to get the material out quickly. If you’ve had an event yesterday, and you post about it today, then it’s already a bit dated. (Firm 6)

The most prevalent challenges faced by the interviewees are the ability to produce suitable content that customers find interesting and valuable. Moreover, finding the time to spend on these activities was challenging according to the interviewees. Two other central difficulties the interviewees face consist of measuring the effectiveness of their SMM efforts, as well as expanding the SMM to additional platforms. Furthermore, the absence of sufficient education in marketing came up during most of the interviews, although the interviewees did not mention it as a challenge particularly for marketing on social media. These results confirm some of the previous literature that deals with the barriers SMEs face regarding SMM. Several authors, e.g. Reijonen (2010) and Walsh and Lipinski (2009) have mentioned the lack of time to spend on these activities and the lack of understanding of common marketing principles to be two of the barriers SMEs commonly face. By overcoming these challenges and difficulties, these SMTEs can perform marketing on social media more successfully. The following subchapter will deal with how to accomplish this.

6.3. Guidelines for SMTEs using social media for marketing

This subchapter offers guidelines for SMTEs implementing social media as a marketing channel. The social media landscape within SMTEs in Ostrobothnia, the challenges regarding SMM these firms face, as well as advice from previous literature will work as a foundation for the guidelines.

6.3.1. Create a strategy

SMTEs performing marketing on social media have a wide range of aspects to take into account in order to make the marketing as effective as possible on this inexpensive,
digital marketing channel. Before implementing social media as a marketing channel, it is crucial to develop a strategy (e.g. Simpson et al. 2006). The strategy should, however, be flexible in nature so that it can be modified whenever needed, such as in case of changes in the organisation (Hays et al. 2012).

Moreover, it is less problematic to work ambitiously with a new marketing tool if clear objectives are set (Charlesworth 2015: 21-22). A well-defined motive for using social media for marketing should be specified as well (Charlesworth 2015: 21-22). The firm’s target audience should also be defined, if it has not been done previously (Kotler & Keller 2012: 55-56). Furthermore, the marketer should aim to find out as much information about the target group(s) as possible, as more effective messages can be created in this way (Fill 2013: 48). This assists in determining the platforms the firm plans to perform marketing on and gives insight in what type of people the target audience consist of, as for instance their values and interests. Knowing the customers is essential in order to create valuable and interesting content (Kotler et al. 2016: 358).

Based on these remarks, four questions beginners should ask themselves while developing a SMM strategy are listed below.

- What do we want to achieve through marketing on social media?
- What do we want to tell our customers through communication on social media?
- On which social media platforms are our target audience available?
- Who are the people of our target audience? What are their interests and what do they find valuable?

### 6.3.2. Choose suitable platforms

Being present on more than one social media platform enables a greater amount of visibility and allows the firm to reach out to more existing and potential customers (e.g. Singh & Diamond 2015: 112). As previously mentioned, the target audience should be taken into account while choosing the platforms (Kotler et al. 2016: 358; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). In case the firm has multiple target audiences, these people might not necessarily use the same platforms (Fill 2009: 49). Moreover, different kinds of platforms are suitable for different types of content (Singh & Diamond 2015: 112; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). While choosing the platforms, it should first be determined
what kind of content the firm will use in their marketing. YouTube, for example, is suitable for uploading videos (Sjöberg 2016; Smith 2016c), while Instagram is known for picture and photo-based content (Smith 2016d; Sjöberg 2016). If a marketer wants to expand the SMM to additional platforms, but does not have the necessary skills for it, instructions for using different types of social media can be found e.g. online or by participating in courses covering SMM. Platforms also typically provide information about how to use the platform in question on their webpages (Sjöberg 2016).

6.3.3. **Produce informative, interesting and engaging content**

Useful information is an important part of the social media content. Basic information, such as opening hours, contact information, menus, timetables and a precise description of the services that the firm offers are important aspects to inform the customers about. One should never assume that people visiting the firm’s social media pages know everything about the firm in advance. The customers should also receive constant reminders of the firm’s existence through social media. A firm that is typically open mostly during summer, but still offers some services during the rest of the year should continually remind their customers about it. (Hays et al. 2012)

Content that encourages and makes people engage in it is favourable for the firm (Sjöberg 2016; Hays et al. 2012). In this way, the firm can acquire increased visibility because the content will be visible to other people also, such as friends of the customers engaging in the content (Leino 2011: 36). Asking customers direct questions about various topics generates discussion and interaction between the firm and its customers (Ottesen 2001: 35). Other types of media that is engaging and valuable for customers depend on their interests (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). The content can consist of anything from photos of people or educational videos to social media competitions in which the customers have the possibility to win a prize (Sjöberg 2016).

The firm should also be active in discussions and show a genuine interest towards the customers. This can be done by e.g. “reposting” the customers’ own content, such as a photo on Instagram on the firm’s own channel (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Lin et al. 2016). In this way, the customers notice that the firm keeps both its eyes and ears open, and actually cares about its customers and appreciates them. Furthermore, producing content that will be used on social media should be integrated with the rest of the firm’s marketing. Even though social media is a unique digital marketing channel, the firm
should always use a consistent communication approach while interacting with customers, regardless of media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Kotler et al. 2016: 365).

**6.3.4. Plan your time wisely**

Implementing a new, additional marketing channel in the marketing strategy, as well as maintaining these channels, require time. It is therefore vital to make a time plan for all of the tasks that marketing on social media demand (Singh & Diamond 2015: 117-118). Moreover, determining one or several employees that will have SMM as their responsibility, instead of leaving the work open to whoever has time for it at the moment, would make the time management more effective in case there are several employees doing marketing in the firm (Hays et al. 2012). Deciding a fixed amount of time every day, dedicated only to creating social media content and gaining visibility on these platforms, is useful in order to assure that the work will be completed (Singh & Diamond 2015: 177). This fixed period of time would oblige the responsible employee to sincerely focus on constantly developing the SMM and keep the workflow active. Another way of spending a limited amount of time wisely would be to plan for upcoming content and future posts. Planning the content in advance saves the employee in case a dearth of creativity strikes (Sjöberg 2016).

**6.3.5. Choose a technique for measuring the results**

Measuring the results of the firm’s SMM efforts can be accomplished in numerous ways, and it is not always easy to decide which metrics to overlook. As mentioned previously, one way of measuring the effectiveness is to evaluate the degree of customer engagement. Whether or not the content is effective and genuinely engaging can be measured by counting the amount of “likes”, shares or comments it has attracted. Content that does not draw attention is probably not engaging enough, or simply not part of the customers’ fields of interest (Hays et al. 2012; Sjöberg 2016). Another, yet very simple, way of measuring results is to review the report from e.g. Facebook or other platforms, which provides different kinds of metrics, such as the amount of people that have been reached (Hays et al. 2012). Interpreting such reports can be complicated, however previously set objectives can assist in this (Charlesworth 2015: 21-22). In case the firm’s initial objective for the SMM strategy is to gain maximum visibility, one would want to look into the audience size and the amount of people being reached (Hays et al. 2012; Sjöberg 2016).
The advice presented in subchapters 6.3.1-6.3.5 include five steps, which form a process that firms wishing to use social media in their marketing can follow. This process is illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7 Process of effective SMM Implementation (by the author)

6.4. Reliability and validity of the study

According to Kirk and Miller (1986: 20), reliability means “the degree to which the findings of a study are independent of accidental circumstances of their production”. The reliability of the study depends on whether or not it could be replicated by another researcher and thus achieve the same results, interpretations and claims. Reliability can be achieved through e.g. describing the whole research process in detail by means of research strategy and data analysis method. The reliability is correlated with the quality of the study (Silverman 2011: 360). In this study, reliability has been reached by describing the whole research process in detail in chapter five, which deals with the research method. Therefore, it would theoretically be possible for another researcher to replicate this study. Nevertheless, it can be argued whether the results of a replicated study would be the same, as the results of this study include the current marketing and SMM activities and the subjective opinions of the interviewees at the time of the interviews. The results might differ in case the same study would be conducted at a later time. (Kirk & Miller 1986: 20; Silverman 2011: 360)
The term validity, on the other hand, can be seen as more relevant to qualitative research than reliability is. The validity of the study refers to the credibility of the descriptions, explanations and the conclusions in it (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 90). External validity, which is more relevant for qualitative research than internal validity, which deals with statistical correlation, refers to whether the results of the study can be generalised for other relevant groups or contexts (Saunders et al. 2012: 194; Silverman 2011: 385). To assure the validity of this study, six different firms, offering different kinds of tourist services were chosen as interviewees in order to make the sample group more diverse. Moreover, the results of the study were related to the theoretical framework of the study, which is called theory-based generalisation, according to Daymon and Holloway (2002: 91-92). (Daymon & Holloway 2002: 90-92; Saunders et al. 2012: 194; Silverman 2011: 385)
SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This thesis has investigated and analysed the social media marketing landscape amongst small and medium-sized tourist enterprises in Ostrobothnia, Finland. The focus of the study was laid on three aspects: these firms’ overall marketing, their social media marketing and the challenges they face regarding marketing on social media. The empirical part of the study was fulfilled by conducting semi-structured interviews with persons dealing with marketing from six different SMTEs. Based on the results of the study and the analysis, conclusions about the characteristics of these firms’ social media marketing were drawn.

The analysis of the results showed that the overall marketing in these SMTEs is characterised by a combination of both traditional and digital marketing methods. Traditional marketing channels, especially newspaper advertisements, are common amongst these firms. Networking and cooperation with other service providers is also fairly common. Other conventional marketing methods, such as radio advertisement, posters and flyers also still occur. Digital marketing is adopted by all of these firms, as all of them have a company webpage and use at least one platform on social media for marketing purposes. Furthermore, the results showed that although these firms use several marketing channels, the marketing activities on the different channels are not necessarily integrated. By taking integrated marketing communication into account, higher level of recognition can be achieved, and the messages sent out are more likely to be coherent and clear to customers.

None of the firms used a marketing strategy at the time of the study, neither for their overall marketing nor for their social media marketing. Facebook, Instagram and YouTube work as platforms for social media marketing for these firms. Content varied firm-wise, however providing information, posting pictures and videos, storytelling and engaging customers into discussions, to mention a few, are common ways of maintaining the social media platforms amongst the interviewed firms. Many of the interviewees mentioned that they would like customers to engage more in the content and also to receive more followers, “likes” and comments. This shows that the content had not been engaging enough, and perhaps more suitable content that attracts customers could be created.

The interviewees in this study faced various challenges in their marketing on social media. Proficiency in using different types of social media platforms and tools, as well
as basic marketing skills, proved to be two of the major challenges. Measuring the outcome of social media marketing efforts could also be included as a challenge. Furthermore, the lack of time to spend on these activities was something all of the interviewees constantly deal with, as they have the full responsibility for the marketing in their firms. Additionally, knowing what kind of content the customers want to see was difficult, according to the interviewees. The guidelines suggested in chapter 6.3 in this thesis provide support and solutions to these challenges. Creating a diverse strategy for social media marketing, in addition to an overall marketing strategy is a key factor for successfully performing integrated marketing across all existing channels, both traditional and digital ones.

The purpose of the study was to develop guidelines that enable SMTEs to improve their social media marketing skills and providing advice on how to use this digital marketing channel successfully. It fulfilled its purpose by using the theoretical framework, as well as taking the results of the empirical study, especially the challenges of social media marketing adoption, into consideration while creating the guidelines. This study also managed to provide new information about the social media landscape within small and medium-sized tourist enterprises in Ostrobothnia, which in turn fills a gap within this research area.

Based on the results of this thesis, a couple of managerial implications can be drawn. The guidelines provided by this thesis can assist in creating a social media marketing strategy for small and medium-sized firms, possibly also within other industries than tourism. Additionally, the allocation of resources in a firm is vital in order to achieve successful marketing results. Financial resources might not necessarily be a significant issue regarding digital marketing; however, time and know-how are two important factors. The distribution of tasks in the marketing department requires consideration, as well as devoting some time for learning about basic marketing theory and how to use different tools and platforms on social media. In addition, the theoretical framework of this thesis described marketing theories that can be helpful for marketing managers of SMTEs.

One possible field of future research into this topic is analysing the content of social media pages managed by SMTEs in Finland. Such a study would yield more detailed information about what type of content these types of firms use for marketing on social media, and also the effectiveness of the content. Furthermore, the customers’ opinions about the social media content which tourist enterprises use might prove a rewarding
area to examine. This would work as an indicator of which types of content the customers find appealing and what content they genuinely find valuable.

The results of this thesis show that more information is needed about the outcome of social media marketing activities. This means that studies, which examine how the effects of marketing can be measured, would be useful. Furthermore, studies on how different resources can be coordinated in order to achieve the best possible effect of marketing are also needed. As this study was conducted in a tourism context, it would also be interesting to study how SMTEs simultaneously can market both their own firms and the destination in which they are active using social media as a marketing tool.
SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING

Marknadsföring på sociala medier inom små och medelstora turistföretag

Inledning


Tidigare studier har påvisat att aktiviteten på sociala medier bland små och medelstora finska företag fortfarande är på en låg nivå i jämförelse med större företag. Ett antal hinder som småföretagare står inför i samband med införandet av marknadsföring på sociala medier har påvisats vara orsaken till detta. Hindren består av knappa resurser i
fråga om tid, pengar och kunskap samt svårigheter att mäta och tolka resultat. (Karjula 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015)

**Motivering av studien**


Enligt VASEKs (2016) studie använder sig små och medelstora turistföretag i Österbotten av sociala medier i sin marknadsföring, där Facebook används av 76 % av respondenterna och således är den mest använda plattformen. Även om dessa företag redan använder sig av sociala medier påvisar undersökningen att merparten av respondenterna gärna skulle lära sig mer om hur sociala medier kan utnyttjas som marknadsföringskanal. Detta ger en överblick av den nuvarande situationen i regionen. Mer utförlig information om företagens marknadsföringsåtgärder på sociala medier saknas dock fortfarande. För att kunna stödja dessa företag i införandet av sociala medier behövs mer detaljerad information om hur företagen för tillfället marknadsför sig, både generellt sett och på sociala medier.

**Forskningsfrågor och syfte**

Denna avhandling fastställer följande tre forskningsfrågor som kommer att besvaras genom semistrukturerade intervjuer med marknadsföringsansvariga inom turistföretag:

1. Hur marknadsför man inom små och medelstora turistföretag i Österbotten?

2. Hur använder sig dessa företag av sociala medier i sin marknadsföring och genom vilka plattformar?
3. Vilka utmaningar står dessa företag inför gällande marknadsföring på sociala medier?

Denna avhandling eftersträvar att skapa insikt i marknadsföringen på sociala medier bland små och medelstora företag i Österbotten genom att utreda hur de generellt sett sköter sin marknadsföring, hur deras marknadsföring på sociala medier sker samt vilka utmaningar de står inför. Avhandlingens syfte är att utveckla riktlinjer som stöder dessa företag i att förbättra sina färdigheter inom marknadsföring på sociala medier.

Presentation av tidigare forskning


Det finns ett flertal verktyg som kunde hjälpa små och medelstora företag att förbättra sin marknadsföring. Traditionella marknadsföringsprinciper kan fungera som stöd och grund för att skapa en marknadsföringsstrategi. Ibland kan även den professionella hjälp som marknadsföringsbyråer erbjuder behövas (Reijonen 2010).


Marknadsföring på sociala medier är en fördelaktig marknadsföringsmetod för små och medelstora företag eftersom man med dess hjälp kan nå ut till stora mängder


För att veta vilken typ av innehåll som bäst når kunden bör man finna de rätta metoderna för att mäta resultaten av marknadsföringsinvesteringarna. Resultaten kan konkretiseras genom att t.ex. utvärdera den virala effekten eller publikens storlek, d.v.s. följarna antalet och följarnas engagemang. (Hays et al. 2012)

**Metod och genomförande av undersökningen**


Språken på vilka intervjuerna hölls varierade beroende på respondenternas modersmål. Tre intervjuer hölls på svenska, två på finska och en på engelska. Alla intervjuer kunde utföras på mindre än en timme och den längsta av dem varade i ca 51 minuter.


Resultatredovisning


Inget av företagen har hittills utvecklat en marknadsföringsstrategi. Respondenterna var ändå överens om att en strategi märkbart skulle underlätta marknadsföringen. Endast två av företagen har i skrivande stund planer på att utveckla en strategi. Dessa respondenterna nämnde dock att strategiutveckling kräver mer avancerade kunskaper i marknadsföring än vad företagen i nuläget innehar. Orsaken till att en strategi inte finns var i ett av fallen att målgruppen inte har kunnat identifieras och i ett annat fall att affärsverksamheten är en bisyssla.
Företagen använder sig sammanlagt av tre plattformar på sociala medier: Facebook, Instagram och YouTube. Två företag använder sig av samtliga plattformar och två andra företag använder sig av Facebook och Instagram medan de två resterande endast använder sig av Facebook.

I fallen där alla tre plattformar används försöker man nå ut till företagens alla målgrupper och använder plattformarna för olika ändamål. Orsaken till att endast använda Facebook och Instagram, eller endast Facebook, är i ovannämnda fall brist på kunskap och färdigheter i att hantera övriga plattformar. I några av fallen saknades även nödvändig teknisk utrustning, såsom filmkamera för videomaterial eller smarttelefon för användning av Instagram. Underhållet av flera plattformar är dessutom tidskrävande, vilket är en annan orsak till att företagen begränsar sin användning till endast ett fåtal kanaler.

De flesta respondenter nämnde att de använder social media mest för att hålla sina kunder informerade om bl.a. öppet tider, tidtabeller och menyer. Företagen i fråga använder sig också av bildmaterial på sina kanaler för att inspirera samt för att ge en bild av sina faciliteter och de aktiviteter de erbjuder. Videor är inte lika populära bland företagen och förekom endast bland två av dem. Övrigt material som används av dessa företag är berättelser ("storytelling") samt frågeinlägg i syftet att engagera följare till interaktion på mediet i fråga. Några av företagen avslöjade ändå en viss oro över det låga engagemanget bland kunderna.

Inget av företagen använder sig av särskilda metoder för mätning av resultaten av marknadsföringsinitiativen på sociala medier. De flesta respondenter nämnde dock att de noterar mängden av kommentarer, delningar och "gillningar" och därefter skapar sig en bild av följarnas engagemang.

Endast två av företagen anser att deras sociala medier är fullt integrerade med den övriga marknadsföringen. Dessa två företag strävar efter att layouten för företagens samtliga marknadsföringskanaler ska vara bekant för kunden och länkar till sociala medier används på företagens hemsidor för att förmedla medvetenhet om företagets närvaro på sociala medier.

Företagen i undersökningen är små och medelstora och resurserna är därefter knappa. De flesta av företagen nämnde tid som en bristvara. Arbetsuppgifterna fördelas
dessutom över endast ett fåtal personer vilket resulterar i endast litet tid för marknadsföring på sociala medier.

Alla respondenter ansåg att marknadsföring på sociala medier är ett förmånligt och attraktivt alternativ. Fyra av företagen svarade att de investerat små summor pengar i marknadsföringen på Facebook men att initiativet inte har gett några signifikanta resultat. Ingen av respondenterna är utbildad inom marknadsföring men de flesta har deltagit i enstaka marknadsföringskurser eller seminarier gällande exempelvis sociala medier. Respondenterna var överens om att ytterligare kunskap och utbildning inom området är behövligt för att kunna göra ett så effektivt marknadsföringsarbete som möjligt.


Avslutning

Denna avhandling har belyst marknadsföringen på sociala medier bland små och medelstora turistföretag i Österbotten. Studiens fokus lades på tre områden: företagens generella marknadsföring, deras marknadsföring på sociala medier och utmaningarna de står inför gällande denna marknadsföring. Den empiriska studien utfördes genom semistrukturerade intervjuer med marknadsföringsansvariga respondenter. Baserat på
undersökningens resultat kunde man dra slutsatser om marknadsföringen på sociala medier bland små och medelstora turistföretag i Österbotten.

Resultaten visade att den generella marknadsföringen hos dessa företag bestod av både traditionell och digital marknadsföring, såsom tidningsannonser, hemsidor, samarbete med Visit Vasa och marknadsföring på de sociala medierna Facebook, Instagram och YouTube. Det kunde konstateras att även om företagen som ingick i studien använde sig av flera olika marknadsföringskanaler var helhetsmarknadsföringen nödvändigtvis inte integrerad. Genom att använda sig av integrerad marknadsföringskommunikation kan företag sända ut klara, sammanhängande meddelanden om sitt företag till kunder och därmed skapa en tydlig, enhetlig bild av sina företag.

Företagen använder sig inte av en marknadsföringsstrategi. Innehållet som används av dessa företag på sociala medier varierade, och bestod bl.a. av bilder, videor, information och berättelser. Flera företag i studien uttryckte sin oro för det låga engagemanget i innehållet från kundernas sida. Genom att ta reda på vilket sorts innehåll kunderna tar till sig kan lämpligt innehåll skapas. Utmaningarna som dessa företag står inför gällande marknadsföring på sociala medier innefattar skapande av för kunden intressant innehåll, tidsanvändning, resultatmätning och kunskap om olika plattformar.

Syftet med avhandlingen var att skapa riktlinjer som kan hjälpa företagen förbättra sina kunskaper i marknadsföring på sociala medier. Detta uppfylldes med den teoretiska referensramen samt undersökningens resultat som grund. Denna studie lyckades också presentera ny information om landskapet för marknadsföring på sociala medier inom små och medelstora turistföretag i Österbotten, vilket i sin tur fyller ett tomrum i forskningsområdet.

Det kan konstateras att en grundlig allokering av resurser är nödvändigt för företagsledningen i små och medelstora företag inom turistbranschen. En strategi för marknadsföringen på sociala medier där målgruppen, olika plattformar, innehåll, tidsplanering och resultatmätning tas i beaktande är också nödvändigt.

Framtida forskning kunde förslagsvis fokusera på kunders åsikter om vilka typer av innehåll på sociala medier, genererat av turistföretag, som är tilltalande. Dessutom kunde det nuvarande innehållet hos små och medelstora turistföretag undersökas mer djupgående. Denna undersökning visar dessutom att ytterligare information om
resultaten av marknadsföring på sociala medier behövs. En studie som undersöker hur effekterna av marknadsföring kunde mätas är nödvändig. Fortsättningsvis kunde en undersökning där man forskar i hur resurserna kan koordineras för att uppnå bästa möjliga marknadsföringseffekt vara behövlig. En studie där man undersöker hur små och medelstora företag samtidigt kan marknadsföra både det egna företaget och själva turistdestinationen genom sociala medier skulle följaktligen vara intressant.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX 1  INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Background information

• Name, position, email address and phone number
• What does this firm’s main business consist of and which services do you offer?
• When was this firm founded?
• What is the target market of this firm? (domestic or international visitors / tourists)
• How many people does the firm employ?
• Are you responsible for all marketing activities in this firm or are there other people who also work within marketing?

2. How would you describe the marketing within the firm?

• Which marketing channels do you use most frequently? (e.g. advertisements in newspapers or online advertisements, radio commercials, e-mail marketing, webpage or social media etc.)
• Does the firm have a marketing strategy?
• What type of education, knowledge or expertise in marketing do you have?
• From where do you get inspiration for you marketing activities? (e.g. know-how, self-educated or own ideas etc.)

3. Which platforms on social media do you use for marketing?

(Facebook, TripAdvisor, Instagram etc.)
• Why do you use these particular platforms?
• Why do you not use other platforms?

4. How is this firm marketed on social media?

• How do you practise marketing on social media? (e.g. through texts, pictures, videos, competitions etc.)
• Do you have a distinct strategy for your social media marketing?
• How do you see social media marketing in relation to the other marketing activities of the firm? (is it integrated or does the firm’s social media "live its own life"?)
• How well do you think marketing on social media fits this firm?
• Do you normally measure the effectiveness of your marketing efforts on social media? If yes, in what way do you measure it? (e.g. how many people you have reached, impact on sales etc.)

5. How well does the existing resources of this firm (in terms of time, money and knowledge) fit social media marketing?

• How much time (e.g. per day or per week) do you spend on social media marketing?
• How much money (if at all) do you spend on social media marketing?
• How did you decide whom in the firm should have the responsibility for the social media marketing?
• Did those people or that person have any special knowledge or expertise (e.g. education or a course) of social media?

6. Are there aspects you find challenging regarding social media marketing?

• If yes, which aspects in particular?
• Is there something in particular that you would need help or support with?
• Do you believe that you need more information or knowledge (such as education or a course) in how to do marketing on social media?