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Miglė ŠONTAITĖ-PETKEVIČIENĖ,
Aušrinė VAŠČĖGAITĖ

Employees as Brand Ambassadors: A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Employees' Communication on Consumer Behavior

The paper analyses the impact of employees', as brand ambassadors', communication on consumer behavior by empirically evaluating and comparing it from the view of customers. The theoretical part of the paper discusses the concept of brand ambassadors, specifics of employees as brand ambassadors and communication features related to it. After discussing theoretical insights on the topic, it is continued with the findings of the study from the selected Lithuanian case addressing main research question – how communication of employees as brand ambassadors affects consumer behavior. Research results proved that communication of employees as brand ambassadors increase customer interest and trust towards the company, however the impact towards purchase intention is not significant.

Keywords: brand; brand ambassador, employee branding, marketing communication, consumer behavior

Šiame straipsnyje analizuojamas darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, komunikacijos poveikis vartotojų elgsenai, tai empiriškai vertinant ir lyginant remiantis vartotojų požiūriu. Teorinėje straipsnio dalyje aptariama prekės ženklo ambasadoriaus samprata, darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, specifika bei su tuo susiję komunikacijos aspektai. Apibendrinus teorines įžvalgas, straipsnyje pateikiami tyrimo rezultatai, pagrįsti ir pasirinkti Lietuvoje. Analizuojama problema, kokią įtaką darbuotojų-prekės ženklo ambasadorių komunikacija daro vartotojų elgsenai. Tyrimo rezultatai patvirtino, kad darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, komunikacija didžiausią poveikį daro vartotojų susidomėjimui ir pasitikėjimui įmone, o įtaka pirkimo sprendimams nedidelė.

Raktiniai žodžiai: prekės ženklas, prekės ženklo ambasadorius, darbuotojo prekės ženklo kūrimas, marketingo komunikacija, vartotojų elgsena.

Introduction

In today's information-filled communication field, the concept of trust is increasingly being questioned. Brands also face a problem of consumer mistrust. To deal with this situation, brand ambassadors are becoming popular due to the proven concept of person-to-person communication. However, brand ambassadors are gradually losing consumers' confidence due to the excessive amount of promotional information. They are increasingly being replaced by employees as brand ambassadors. Employees as brand ambassadors seem to transfer their accumulated trust credit to the brand. Such marketing tool is gaining more and more popularity and is valued for its ability to not only shape consumer

Miglė ŠONTAITĖ-PETKEVIČIENĖ – PhD, associate professor at Vytautas Magnus University, Faculty of Economics and Management. Address: S. Daukanto str. 28, Kaunas LT-44246, Lithuania. Tel.: +370 37 327856. Email: m.sontaite-petkeviciene@vdu.lt
Aušrinė VAŠČĖGAITĖ – MSc from the Faculty of Economics and Management, Vytautas Magnus University. Address: S. Daukanto str. 28, Kaunas LT-44246, Lithuania. Tel: +370 641 06 930. Email: ausrinevasc@gmail.com

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attitudes towards the brand but also to strengthen the company's reputation as a good employer.

Researchers like F. Wang and E. Hariandja (2016), K. Sheena and M. Sudha (2017) analyzed what impact well-known public figures, transformed into brand ambassadors, have on the organization and its products, discussed the relationship of the opinion leaders with consumers and their influence on consumers' buying behavior. However, despite a large body of literature on brand ambassadors, the topic still lacks a united approach and empirical examination of consumers attitude and behavior towards the communication of employees as brand ambassadors. Thus, **the problem of the research –** how communication of employees, as brand ambassadors, needs to be implemented to have a positive effect on consumer behavior.

The object of the research is the impact of employees', as brand ambassadors', communication on consumer behavior.

The aim of the research is to analyze the impact of employees', as brand ambassadors', communication on consumer behavior.

The objectives of the research are as follows:

1. To define theoretically the concept of brand ambassadors.

2. To conceptualize theoretically communication features of brand ambassadors and the impact on consumer behavior.

3. To analyze theoretically the specifics of employees as brand ambassadors.

4. To prepare and substantiate research methodology.

5. To conduct empirical research to determine the impact of employees', as brand ambassadors', communication on consumer behavior.

Three **research methods** were used for this research. First, scientific analysis of the literature is performed. The empirical research was based on the content analysis, as well as qualitative research method - expert and semi-structured interviews. Finally, a customer survey is used to collect quantitative data.

The concept of brand ambassadors

Although scientific literature on the influence of celebrities and stars on people's choices dates back to the last century, the concept of brand ambassadors is still quite new. In fact, as early as 1989, researchers noted that celebrity endorsement of a product or service can increase advertising effectiveness, brand recognition and recall, and that it has a positive effect on purchase intentions (Misra and Beatty, 1990).

It has been found that celebrity attractiveness, expertise and credibility can lead to brand perceptions and attitudes towards advertising (Kahle and Homer, 1985; Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999). The term "ambassador" is itself a metaphor borrowed from political discourse. In it, an ambassador is a person who speaks or acts on behalf of another (in this case, a state) (Fisher-Buttinger and Vallaster, 2008). This concept is also used in marketing, where an ambassador is a person who speaks on behalf of a company and whose actions are identified with a particular brand. However, there is a lack of definitions of this term. For example,

according to R. Crouch, M. Proksch and P. Quester (2016), brand ambassadors are special speakers, usually company owners or senior employees, who communicate the company's brand messages and define its products or services.

They can embody a product or a company in the closest and most trustworthy way to the consumer, and in the relationship literature brands are also defined as human partners, giving them human characteristics (Thomson, 2006). Therefore, a person who possesses and declares characteristics close to the brand represented also identifies them in the eyes of consumers with the brand itself.

It is highlighted that the brand ambassador affirms and legitimizes the product's features and makes it appealing, thus can influence the public's relationship with the product or brand through his or her words (Sadrabadi, Saraji and MonshiZadeh, 2018). An ambassador, also recognized as an opinion leader, can be used to publicize a new product or idea, and create a special place for the brand in society (Rehmet and Dinnie, 2013). Brand ambassador can be seen as a mediator between internal and external brand management, which can have a significant impact on customers' perceptions of brands and organizations. According to D. Goutam (2013), they are like agents who validate brands by their reputation.

It could be stated that the concept of a brand ambassadors evolves with changing consumer habits and marketing trends. Also, brand ambassadors can be considered as public figures whose personal characteristics are consistent with the brand's identity, and who communicate to their audiences the key messages the company wants to spread.

Having experts, valued or known in the public eye, opens up a wide range of marketing opportunities for brands. As companies increasingly choose opinion leaders as one of their advertising channels, their effectiveness is also recognized by marketing researchers. J. Rehmet and K. Dinnie (2013) point out that a marketing tool such as brand ambassador is more effective than most other marketing channels such as traditional advertising. Due to their closeness and openness with consumers, influencers have high social credibility (Buyer, 2016), which is what makes this opinion leader phenomenon so successful and popular. While traditional marketing, due to the lack of precise disaggregation and segmentation, usually tries to reach mass audiences, thus reducing the effectiveness and increasing the cost of advertising (e.g., TV advertising), influencers have an unique opportunity to reach niche audiences that have been previously unreachable (Ledbetter, 2017).

Opinion leaders marketing used on social media has opened up a new channel for brands to organically and directly build a relationship with their audiences by entering into their daily lives (Adweek, 2015). Social media influencers embed product advertising into their everyday, personal lives, creating a sense of similarity and authenticity for the consumer, who can feel that they know the person they follow. When brand ambassadors start working with a brand, they not only bring followers to themselves, but also help build a larger network of followers for the brand. Influencers with a loyal audience of followers can also

target and drive them to the company's social media accounts or web pages, thereby increasing not only sales but also overall brand awareness (Matthews, n.d.). With the increasing prominence of online scams or ad-blocking, it is even more important for businesses to find alternative channels that not only do not cause consumers to doubt their trust, but also cannot be technologically identified as advertising and therefore blocked by ad-blocking systems. Content created and hosted by opinion leaders cannot be blocked (unless it is done by a specific user on a specific profile on social networks), so according to J. Hall (2016), the best way to earn consumers' trust is to associate oneself with what they trust.

When opinion leaders become ambassadors, they integrate the brand into their lives. Not only are they active on social media, creating content themselves with the products they promote, but they often use the brands' products in the public sphere, talking about them in interviews, thus demonstrating an even stronger connection to the brand.

Communication features of brand ambassadors

Choosing a brand ambassador is not only about personal characteristics, values and visibility, but also about the ability to communicate well. The brand ambassador must represent the values of the target audience he or she wants to reach, also positioning values that are in line with the company. At the same time, excellent communication skills and a friendly, warm disposition must be evident for the brand message to be communicated effectively (CPCommunications, n.d.).

However, for brand ambassadors' words to touch audiences, it is important to create a sense of trust. Therefore, brand ambassadors are usually someone who is competent in a specific field, who has a lot of knowledge and who not only knows a lot of information, but who is also able to communicate it and engage audiences. A brand ambassador should have a deep understanding of the brand, its business and products, and be able to answer any questions about the brand they represent (CPCommunications, n.d.).

For brand ambassador communications to convey a sense of genuine trust in the brand, communication between the companies and the chosen opinion leaders becomes crucial. The traditional route of simply signing a cooperation agreement and monitoring the ambassador's performance does not give the ambassador the extra satisfaction of a brand to showcase to his/her followers, so companies should look for more creative ways to not only make the brand ambassador feel important, but also to help him/her to create content around products.

Thus, a brand ambassador can reinforce consumers' attachment to a particular brand by shaping the brand's characteristics in the public domain. It is the credibility of the brand and the company, that has become a key element in both consumer and brand research in terms of influencing consumer behavioral outcomes (Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, & Iacobucci, 2010; Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005), and the integration of such individuals into the marketing strategy becomes a crucial step for today's companies.

The impact of brand ambassadors' communication on consumer behavior

The main reason why brand ambassadors are becoming more and more popular and, more often included in marketing campaigns is the impact of the message they send. Ambassadors, seen by consumers as ordinary people living ordinary but interesting lives, not only encourage audiences to read and engage with the content they produce, but also influence their followers' decisions. This is particularly important when it comes to influencing the decision whether to buy a particular product or service.

According to K. Matthews (n.d.), consumers trust recommendations from "third parties" (bloggers, social media stars) more than content created by the brand itself. The influencer often becomes like a friend, connecting the brand with the consumer. According to research by TapInfluence (2015) and Influitive (2015), consumers are almost 90% more likely to trust information from people in their personal newsfeed.

Such trust is especially important these days. As the information landscape continues to expand, fake news mechanisms become more sophisticated and fake news becomes more widespread, it is important for consumers to find people they can trust. The epicenters of this trust are often those who make their lives public, who talk about their daily lives and who have proven the relevance of their professional or expert knowledge.

However, in the theory different view on the influence of brand ambassadors on consumer choices can also be found. A study by C. Nisa and D. A. Pramesti (2020) shows that brand ambassadors are not as effective in encouraging consumers to buy a product or service nowadays. This is attributed to the digital era, where consumers are easily able to find descriptions of the products or services they want to buy, as well as reviews from other consumers, which are more trusted than brand ambassadors. As a result, the influence of them is diminishing.

However, when a user sees someone who is partly like him or herself, when someone can interact with that person or see how he or she interacts with others, and when someone is able to follow the comments of other users, he or she begins to trust the person he or she follows. By including information about certain products or services among everyday topics, this person also gives the brand he or she represents the credit of trust from the audience.

The importance of trust in the consumer choice stage is also highlighted by M. Fitrianto (2020). According to him, the purchase decision is a complex and sophisticated process that reveals the reasons why consumers buy products or services from certain brands. Intention to buy is usually linked to consumer behavior, perceptions and attitudes, and brand ambassadors can also influence this.

Another important aspect of an opinion-leader's influence on the audience is authority and professionalism. Brand ambassadors influence consumers' decisions through their personal opinion and authority, as they often see the person they follow as an expert in a specific field, a professional whose opinion can be trusted. Opinion leaders not only can directly influence consumers shopping decisions, but also to create trends, outlining

what products are fashionable and thus creating an even greater desire among consumers to keep up with these trends and to buy what celebrity they follow values (Sudha and Sheena, 2017).

The consumer purchase decision is part of consumer behavior, which can be defined as the process of actions that people perform when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products or services to satisfy their needs (Belch and Belch, 2009). The purchase of many products or services is the result of a long, detailed process consisting of extended information searches, brand comparisons, evaluations, etc. (Wang and Hariandja, 2016).

D. Mukherjee's (2009) research shows that consumers have a stronger personal connection with brands that they associate with the personalities, the stars they want to be. The effect of brand ambassadors or star worship is moderated by the symbolism of the brand. In other words, a brand that communicates something about the consumer's environment has a stronger impact on the consumer than one that does not use such themes or techniques in its communication. When a consumer associates a product with a celebrity they like, they start to seek the product as a kind of status and proof of the similarity between themselves and the celebrity they like (Goutam, 2013). This further reinforces the consumer's desire to own the advertised product or service.

It could be stated that by building on the audience's trust credit, a brand ambassador not only influences consumers, reinforces the desire to buy, builds the desire to be like the opinion leader they follow, and shapes trends, but also transfers this trust to the brand, thereby increasing its awareness and consumer trust.

The specifics of the employees as brand ambassadors

Brand ambassadors can be divided into three main types: (1) hired brand ambassadors (the company buys advertising from a public figure based on selected criteria, signs a cooperation agreement with him/her and sets communication guidelines and objectives to be achieved); (2) ambassadors from consumers who particularly like the company's products or services; and (3) brand ambassadors from within the company (managers, owners, employees). The last type of ambassadors is still relatively rare in organizational communication today, but the benefits of this model are increasingly being discussed.

According to communication strategist K. Hoffmann (2019), this format of brand ambassadors coming from within the company works across industries. K. Hoffmann (2019) states, that from the moment a person is seen as an employee of a company, they automatically become a brand ambassador. However, to ensure that the messages he or she spreads are relevant and proactive, it is important for the company to include a detailed brand ambassadorial element in the communication strategy. One of the key reasons why brand ambassadors from within a company are so valuable is their knowledge of the company. Not only do they know the most about the company, but they are also the most frequent interlocutors with customers. However, their active ambassadorship can only be

expected if they are given a clear structure on how to do so. L. Sasale (2017), a Forbes Author, has identified the most important steps to turn a company employee into a brand ambassador: 1) A clear vision; 2) Authorization; 3) Provision of guidelines; 4) Creation of good content; 5) Sharing; 6) Permission to contribute; 7) Creation of competition.

While all employees should be informed and encouraged to share the company's activities and innovations, only people who meet certain criteria can become brand ambassadors. In particular, when selecting a brand ambassador from within the company, it is important to consider the employee's sense of responsibility, commitment and enthusiasm. It is also important to have a strong emotional connection to the company's products or services and a sense of commitment to the company. However, one of the cornerstones of a successful brand ambassador is a genui ne belief in the brand and pride in the job (Matthijs, 2015).

According to F. Goedertier (2015), the higher the position of an employee in an organization, the more likely he or she is to become a brand ambassador. This can be explained by the statement that people become more and more tied to the organization as they move up the career steps in the company.

Once the right people have been identified for brand ambassadorship, it is important for the company to keep in contact with them and to encourage this activity. To help the process run smoothly, the key steps to follow to support brand ambassadors are: 1) Keep employees informed about the company's activities; 2) Periodically encourage employees to talk about the company; 3) Organize events for employees; 4) Allow employees to create a company blog; 5) Give employees gifts with company merchandise (Lyft, 2019).

In fact, employee brand ambassadors should not only be visible in the public space, but also at the company. According to D. Mclndoe (2020), an employee who becomes a brand ambassador should participate in company events, training, educational initiatives, and should be regularly seen in the office and other company activities. This person acts as a bridge between the company's employees and consumers. Branding is not just about the product - employees, customers, internal company culture and the growth of the business itself are equally important components of a brand. Visions or goals and the means to achieve them, whether generated by company managers, strategists or other decision-makers, are likely to remain theoretical without real contact with consumers and their expectations. Therefore, it is the internal brand ambassador that can help to understand consumers' relationship with the brand (Mclndoe, 2020).

The effectiveness of brand ambassadors' communication among potential candidates is confirmed by the 2017 Global Recruitment Trends Report published by the social network Linkedin. It states that candidates who receive recommendations from acquaintances are more likely to be hired, performs better and stay longer at the company (Linkedin, 2017).

Research methodology

Employees as brand ambassadors are one of the newest and least studied types of opinion leaders. However, in practice, there has been a significant increase in the use of such tool in organizations' marketing strategies. For this reason, the purpose of this research is to find out how employees', as brand ambassadors', communication impact consumer behavior.

The case of Andrius Baranauskas was chosen for this study. A. Baranauskas can be considered as one of the most prominent employee-brand ambassadors operating in Lithuania. For more than 10 years he held the position of Director of Corporate communications for the Baltic States at Tele2, a telecommunications company providing mobile communication services in Lithuania. His communication on social networks is full of information about his employer – Tele2 brand.

A mixed-methods approach was chosen for the empirical research. Firstly, empirical research starts with a mixed content analysis, during which qualitative and quantitative data are collected. Also, qualitative research method in the form of interview was used during the research. Two different types of interviews were organized: a) semi-structured interview with selected employee-brand ambassador; b) expert interview with an expert on the topic of brand ambassadors. A quantitative research method - survey - was also used to reveal the impact of the employee-brand ambassador communication on consumer behavior.

Content analysis. This research method was used to identify how Tele2 brand is positioned in A. Baranauskas' communication, how and what is being written about it, how often it is done, and what forms are used to disseminate information about the organization. This information allowed to comprehend employee-brand ambassador as a marketing tool and the ways and principles of its operation.

During the content analysis, Facebook records of A. Baranauskas from January 1, 2018 until January 1, 2020 were analysed. Each record was analysed and evaluated according to the established categories: date, subject of the record, whether record mentions Tele2, what keywords describe organization, what characteristics of organization are emphasized, if organization is linked to personal life of A. Baranauskas, communication tone (strict, official, informal, friendly), what emotion is created in the visual part of the record (if the record is placed with such material), if the visual part reflects A. Baranauskas or the symbolism of the organization. Such categories have been selected to find out links between A. Baranauskas' communication and Tele2 brand and, features and characteristics of the organization's positioning in A. Baranauskas' records.

Interview. Interview method was used to identify how employee-brand ambassador activities are implemented in practice. In order to gain a broader understanding of this, an expert and semi-structured interview were done. One of interviews was carried out with the brand ambassador A. Baranauskas, and the second – with an expert analyzing the issues of brand ambassadors. Interview questions were prepared for both interviews in advance, but during the interviews, they

were adjusted according to the context and direction of the conversation.

Customer survey. Customer survey was used to identify what impact employee-brand ambassador communication does on consumer behavior. Survey questionnaire consisted of closed, open and Likert scale questions. The questionnaire consisted of introduction, filtering questions, main questions on the topic and sociodemographic questions. Questionnaire was created in a specialized survey system www.manoapklausa.lt. In order to obtain reliable results, questionnaire was reviewed and tested to ensure that its integrity was maintained, that questions were presented in understandable language, that they are not complicated or unclear, that there were no spelling or style errors. A pilot study was also conducted before submitting questionnaire to the respondents. The survey was conducted from March 7, 2021 until April 27, 2021.

As it was chosen to analyze brand ambassador's communication on Facebook, only users of this social network were invited to participate in the survey. According to the statistics, there are 1.76 million Facebook users in Lithuania (Statista, 2020). Taking into account the standard error of 5% with 95% confidence level and indicating the size of tested population, a sample of the research was calculated. It was found that in order to obtain representative research results, it is necessary to obtain at least 384 responses from respondents.

Research results

Results from content analysis. In order to explore the contents of A. Baranauskas as employee's-brand ambassador's communication, the content of A. Baranauskas personal Facebook account was analyzed. For the content analysis, A. Baranauskas Facebook posts from January 1, 2018, to January 1, 2020, were analyzed. The content analysis showed that 455 posts were published on A. Baranauskas Facebook account during this period. They were first grouped into two parts: posts mentioning Tele2 and posts not mentioning the company. Of all the posts published during the study period, Tele2 was mentioned in 118 - less than one-third. The rest of the posts can be divided into two main categories: personal life (family, traveling, events) and professional field posts (communication). Considering the topics of all the posts, it can be seen that A. Baranauskas account during the research period was dominated by posts about the news (76 posts), communication (71 posts) and politics (55 posts). In his publications, Baranauskas commented on the events that took place in the country during this period, especially those related to political issues. The topic of elections (31 posts), politicians' speeches, and other events that had greater resonance in society were widely analyzed. Highlights of events or speeches in the field of communication and communication crises are also discussed. In many cases, they were also related to announcements by Lithuanian and foreign politicians. A. Baranauskas rarely communicated about his personal life. Of all the posts published, 10 were about family and 26 about nature.

Content analysis showed that almost one-third of the published posts mentioned the company Tele2, represented by A. Baranauskas. Some of these mentions were made in the context of

another topic, but the majority of them were devoted to discussing the company's events, activities or achievements. As many as 17 posts referred to awards won by the company or its employees, while 14 posts highlighted Tele2's competitors, compared them with Tele2 or described their failures. However, the majority of the company-themed publications focused on Tele2's activities, including internet speeds, growth and achievements, employees, office and work culture, as well as the company's crises.

Thus, following a content analysis and an analysis of A. Baranauskas posts on Facebook during the period of the study, it can be stated that the content of his posts is divided into three main topics: communication, Tele2's activities and personal life. The balance between these topics is strived to be maintained, with company-related posts occupying less than a third of the total number of publications, while the content is based on communication and news-related topics. This strives to balance between promotional content and real, additional value for followers. It can be assumed that the audience attracted by the analytical content and positively evaluating A. Baranauskas, which receives personal benefits (information, insights) from this profile, is also inclined to positively evaluate the information about the company represented by A. Baranauskas. By covering these different topic areas, A. Baranauskas uses his posts to build his personal brand and to increase the awareness and credibility of Tele2.

The content analysis also revealed a tendentious emphasis on certain characteristics of the company represented. Tele2's thematic entries encode the company's qualities such as customer care, good employer, social responsibility, transparency, leadership, growth, etc.

Results from semi-structured interview. In order to get a better understanding of what employee's, as brand ambassador's, activities involve from the inside, an interview was made with Aandrius Baranauskas himself. During the interview, A. Baranauskas, Tele2's Director of Communications for the Baltics and an employee-brand ambassador, was asked 14 semi-structured questions focusing on the principles of brand ambassadorship in reality, the challenges faced, the tools used, the ambassador's interactions with the brand, and the impact of his communication on the consumers attitude and behavior.

To summarize the results of the interview, it can be stated that Tele2 did not purposely seek its employees to become brand ambassadors. A. Baranauskas communication about the company to his personal audience was occasional and no specific measurable performance indicators have been identified to date the performance. However, through consistent and long-term communication about the company, which also naturally encodes the company's core values, A. Baranauskas aims to benefit the company's brand and has two main objectives for his posts: to help clients solve their problems and to help the company earn more money. A. Baranauskas constantly communicates about Tele2 and notices the influence of such communication on consumer behavior. According to him, consistent communication allows customers to trust the company more, to see the company's values, and it is also important in maintaining relations with the media. The boundaries

between personal communication and talking about the company were discussed, and it was found that the right mix of promotional and useful content on a specific topic is important for audience interest. A. Baranauskas has defined specific topics for communication on Facebook, on which he shares insights. According to him, without creating interesting and relevant content for the audience, their interest will drop and the company's advertising will be less well accepted. The interview also revealed that Tele2 actively uses the employee-brand ambassador advertising format, and A. Baranauskas is not the only company speaker of this type.

Results from expert interview. The second interview during the research was focused on a broader understanding of brand ambassadors as a marketing tool. The expert interview was needed to provide a broader context for the research and to complement the theoretical information with expert insights. For this interview, Dr. Viktorija Starkauskienė, an expert in the field of brand ambassadorship, a partner of the Ambassadors' Academy, which is designed to help companies implement an ambassadorship system, was chosen as the field of her research and activities is related to the topic of this research. During the semi-structured interview, the expert was asked 14 questions.

Summarizing the results of the expert interview, it can be said that the role of employees', as brand ambassadors, in Lithuania is growing. Some companies are adopting a systematic approach to the ambassadorship by participating in ambassadorship programs and thus encouraging employees to spread brand awareness. In order to keep employees interested in talking about the company, it is important to maintain their intrinsic motivation. This can be done by providing continuous feedback to the employee and with personalized motivational tools. The success of ambassadorship also depends on getting the key performance indicators right. These are usually differentiated according to the company's field of activity and the objectives to be achieved. The rise of the concept of person-to-person communication also affects the impact of employee-brand ambassador communication on consumers. Personalized communication on topics of relevance to the company, presented from the employee's perspective and integrating his/her values or story, may be more acceptable to the consumer than traditional communication tools. It can also earn the trust of consumers. This is one of the main differences between employee-brand ambassador and hired brand ambassador communication. Equally importantly, communicating about the company not only promotes brand awareness or sales, but also improves the company's image as an employer and employee satisfaction.

Results from customer survey. The consumer survey aimed to find out how consumers perceive and evaluate brand ambassadors and employee-brand ambassadors, and to compare the impact of their communications on consumer behavior. A total of 396 respondents took part in the survey.

A more detailed look at the overall characteristics of the respondents of the survey revealed that the response rate was balanced between men (44.6%) and women (55.4%), with the majority

of respondents in the 18-24, 25-34 and 35-44 age categories, but with results also coming from younger and older respondents. 41.1% of the respondents had a university degree, 30.6% had a college degree, and there were also respondents with a professional or secondary education. The majority of respondents were residents of large cities (48.4%) and Facebook users living in smaller towns (35.4%). In terms of income, most respondents identified their average monthly income as EUR 1001-2000 (34.7%) and EUR 642-1000 (32.6%).

As the survey focused on the communication of brand ambassadors, the first question of the questionnaire filtered out those respondents who follow at least one brand ambassador on Facebook. 72% of respondents answered positively to this question and were asked to answer the remaining questions.

Follow-up questions were designed to find out the information consumption habits of brand ambassadors' followers and their trust in brand ambassadors. It was found that Facebook users most often follow 1-2 (35.1% of respondents) or 3-5 (38.9% of respondents) brand ambassadors. 15.9% of respondents said they follow the beauty industry representatives, another 17.2% said they follow brand ambassadors from the communication/marketing fields, 14.7% from the food industry and 15.1% from the media. More than 10% of respondents also follow sports, technology and culture representatives. In the survey, it was also important to understand consumers' motives for following brand ambassadors. The analysis of the responses showed that the main reasons why consumers follow brand ambassadors are useful content (26.1%) and interesting personalities (24.4%).

Consumers also have mixed perceptions of different types of brand ambassadors' posts. They are most interested in product/service reviews (21.2%), practical product/service advice (21.2%) and personal stories from work related to the advertised product/service (20.2%). Non-product or service-related posts from personal life (19.2%) scored slightly lower. According to the survey, posts with offers for followers (discounts, discount codes, etc.) are the least relevant to users. The responses showed that followers are most interested in information about the products themselves, but also in posts with stories from work related to the product or service being promoted. This underlines the audience's interest in the ambassador's relationship with the brand.

Having established the respondents' motives for following brand ambassadors and the most relevant topics, the impact of ambassador communication on consumers was further analyzed. Firstly, the aim was to find out what emotions the content created by brand ambassadors evokes in consumers. Respondents were asked to rate different emotions on a 5-point Likert scale. The results showed that respondents are more likely to experience positive emotions than negative emotions when they see content published by brand ambassadors. The highest average score was for being interested, which was the emotion most often experienced by respondents. Other positive emotions, such as joy and motivation, were rated slightly lower but above average. The emotion of pride received a lower than average score (2.4). The same score was also given to the

emotion of irritability. Other negative emotions (frustration, disappointment, anger, sadness) received lower average scores. Women tended to score lower than men for most emotions (except motivation and irritability).

Respondents were then asked questions about the direct influence of brand ambassadors' communications on their behavior and decisions. The vast majority of respondents - 69.8% - confirmed that they had become interested in a product or service after seeing a recommendation on a brand ambassador's Facebook account. Another 21.4% were unsure or did not remember. These numbers indicate the impact of brand ambassadors' communication in introducing the consumer to the product and encouraging them to explore it further. Once the influence of the brand ambassador on the consumer's interest in the product or service has been established, it was also important to investigate a higher level of influence, so respondents were asked whether they had purchased a product or service after seeing a recommendation on the brand ambassador's Facebook posts. The responses show that fewer people (47%) have purchased the product or service advertised by the ambassador. A closer look at the characteristics of respondents who purchased a product or service after a recommendation from a brand ambassador reveals that women are more likely to take this action.

This difference in positive responses between interest in the product and purchase suggests that brand communication is more effective at the initial stages of the consumer journey when the consumer's interest in the product is aroused. However, the impact of ambassadors on sales cannot be underestimated either: according to the survey results, almost half of all respondents purchased a product or service after a recommendation.

As the theory analysis has shown, one of the main tasks of a brand ambassadors is usually spreading information about the brand, its products or services. This is complemented by the ninth question of the survey, which seeks to find out whether consumers would be more likely to purchase a brand's products or services if they had more knowledge and information about it. The majority of respondents (67.7%) answered this question positively, while another 23.5% said they did not know. This number shows that the amount of brand information available to the consumer is an important indicator to encourage the consumer to purchase a product. This can also be linked to the trust in the brand. The survey results showed that it is not only information about the brand itself that is important to consumers, but also knowledge about the specific product or service it sells. When respondents were asked to rate, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), what impact knowledge of a product/service has on their decision to buy that product/service, it was found that the relationship between information and the decision to buy is relatively close. The overall average of the scores obtained was 3.89, suggesting that the amount of information about the brand and the product is directly correlated with the consumer's decision to buy it.

The theoretical part of this paper showed that consumers are more likely to purchase a brand if they trust it, and that brand ambassadors also contribute significantly to building trust in a brand.

In order to test this relationship in the Lithuanian market, the survey asked respondents to rate the influence of brand trust on their choice to buy a product/service (1 - low influence, 5 - high influence). The answers to this question confirmed this relationship. The overall average of the responses (3.84) shows that trust in the brand has a strong influence on the consumer's choice to buy. In the context of this paper, this result also highlights the importance of the brand ambassador in the consumer journey: by building or strengthening trust in the brand, the ambassador also directly contributes to increasing sales.

In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the statements about trust in the content produced by brand ambassadors. The results showed that the majority of respondents choose to follow influencers not only on the basis of the interestingness or usefulness of the content they create, but also on the level of trust they have in them. This indicator is particularly important in assessing the trust a brand ambassador builds in a brand. The statement "I could name the brands of the brand ambassadors I follow" scored above the average of 3.58. This rating indicates that not all respondents know which brand the opinion leader they follow represents. It is also important to note the difference that respondents perceive between an employee-brand ambassador and an external ambassador. The results show that the majority of respondents agree that an employee-brand ambassador has more competence than others in talking about the brand's products.

After collecting data on consumers' general attitudes towards brand ambassadors and their influence, the second part of the questionnaire focused on a narrower area - the impact of employees'-brand ambassadors' communication. First, it sought to find out whether consumers care about the ambassador's connection to the brand they represent. More than half of the respondents (56.5%) answered positively, while another 26.7% said they had no opinion. To complement the information gathered on this question, respondents were asked who they would ask first when they had questions about a particular product/service. Given the choice between an influencer they follow who is not directly connected to the company and a brand ambassador who works for the company, almost half (47%) of the respondents answered that they would go to an employee-brand ambassador. A further 37.5% said they would not contact anyone. It can be concluded that the brand ambassador's relationship with the company is important to consumers, and that consumers are more likely to trust the opinion of employees-brand ambassadors over an influencer who has no direct working relationship with the company. When asked directly (who they would trust more), respondents reiterated this fact. So, 38.9% said they would trust an employee-brand ambassador more. However, 21.1% of respondents say they would not trust an influencer who is either connected or not connected to the company. This indicates a lack of trust in brand ambassadors.

The results also confirmed that consumer trust is influenced by the fact that they know someone who works for a company that sells or produces a particular product or service. Thus, 58.9% of

respondents agreed with this statement, while another 23.5% said they did not know. A slightly lower percentage (46.7) of positive responses was obtained when asked whether knowing someone who works for a company that produces/ sells a particular product/service would encourage to buy the goods or services they offer. Such responses supported the argument that the role of brand ambassadors, in this case employees-brand ambassadors, is most influential for consumers at the stage of interest in the product or service.

Survey participants were asked whether they follow brand ambassadors working for the brand they represent on Facebook. More than half (51.6%) of respondents said yes, while another 30.5% said they were not sure. Thus, half of all respondents who follow brand ambassadors also follow brand ambassadors working for the company of the brand they promote. Some respondents could not identify whether the ambassadors they follow are directly linked to a particular company.

In a follow-up question, respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale the statements about the influence of employees-brand ambassadors communication on their choices. All the statements asked to be evaluated in this question were related to the positive influence of employees-brand ambassadors communication on consumer decisions. All of them had a mean score above 3 but not above 4. In summary, the respondents' evaluation of the statements in this question showed that consumers are on the borderline of neutrality when it comes to the impact of the communication of employees-brand ambassadors on their preferences. Although the averages show that respondents agree more than disagree with the statement made, there is not a clear tendency towards the positive side.

The last part of the survey focused on the impact of A. Baranauskas communication as an employee-brand ambassador on consumer behavior. First of all, the number of respondents who follow the brand ambassador on Facebook was examined. Then 38.2% of respondents answered positively to this question and their opinion was further explored.

The characteristics of the respondents who follow A. Baranauskas were also examined. It was noted that consumers with higher than average incomes living in major Lithuanian cities are more likely to follow A. Baranauskas.

The vast majority (44%) of respondents who follow A. Baranauskas have completed higher education. According to the survey data, Facebook users aged 25-34 are the most frequent followers of A. Baranauskas, with an equal distribution of followers between men and women.

In order to find out whether respondents who answered positively to the previous question are sufficiently familiar with A. Baranauskas' communication, a second filtering question was asked - "Do you know which telecommunications company Andrius Baranauskas represents?" This question was followed by a further 22.9% of respondents who answered "no" or "I am not sure".

The content analysis revealed that A. Baranauskas is most active in communication on Tele2-related topics. The remaining respondents were asked whether they read the posts published by A. Baranauskas on Tele2. The

majo-rity (79.8%) answered that they do read posts on this topic. A similar question was asked about the readability of posts that do not include Tele2, and 76.2% of respondents answered positively. Comparing these answers, it can be seen that a higher proportion of respondents read posts about Tele2 than posts about topics not related to the company. Taking into account the information gathered during the interview with A. Baranauskas about the logic of selecting the topics of his posts (non-company-related content is created to attract followers, while Tele2-themed posts are inserted only as promotional elements), such a distribution of the survey responses can be seen as unexpected. This result suggests that the audience is nevertheless more interested in (or more likely to see) company-themed posts.

The next questions were aimed at finding out the impact of A. Baranauskas communication on his followers. When asked how the respondent's opinion of Tele2 has changed after starting to follow A. Baranauskas, two answers dominated. So, 54.8% of respondents said that their opinion had not changed, while 42.9% said it has become better. Yet 2.4% of respondents expressed a worsening of their opinion. Despite the fact that more than a half of the respondents said that they had not changed their opinion, 42.9% of the followers surveyed showed an improvement in their opinion, which shows the effectiveness of A. Baranauskas communication and the positive impact it has had on consumers.

The collected answers on the impact of A. Baranauskas communication on consumer behavior were complemented by a question on the choice of the mobile provider. The majority of respondents (70.2%) said that A. Baranauskas's recordings did not influence their choice of mobile operator. However, a few respondents said they had become Tele2 users after they started following A. Baranauskas.

The following questions provided specific examples of A. Baranauskas posts. The first one related to the company's social responsibility and care for its employees, which, as the content analysis showed, are among the main characteristics of the company highlighted in A. Baranauskas's communication. When asked how this type of content influences consumers' opinion of Tele2, 63.1% of respondents answered positively, while 29.8% said it had no influence. Such answers correlated with the results obtained during the content analysis - it was the posts on such topics published by A. Baranauskas during the research period that attracted the highest level of consumer engagement.

In the next question, there was a screenshot of the comments under A. Baranauskas's post. In the comments, followers praised the company and its initiative. The respondents were asked whether seeing such positive feedback about the company on a regular basis would encourage them to choose the services of this company. The majority of respondents (46.4%) chose the answer "Hard to say", 32.1% of respondents chose "Yes" and another 21.4% said "No". These answers can be explained by the complexity and difficulty of the decision. As subscribing/unsubscribing to a mobile provider cannot be equated to purchasing a single product or service, it is likely that such a move requires more serious motives than observing positive comments about another provider.

In the last question of the questionnaire, respondents were presented with a photo of a specific Facebook post by A. Baranauskas, detailing the story of how Tele2 agreed to help at a critical moment for the government. Respondents were asked to rate the statements made in the questionnaire in relation to the post on a 5-point Likert scale. The highest score (3.9) was given to the statement "I am interested in this type of content". The relatively high score suggests that respondents find stories about the direct work of a brand ambassador interesting. Respondents gave a score of 3.77 to the statement that posts reflecting a company's social responsibility increase trust in that company. This average of responses suggests a correlation between the communication of corporate social responsibility and consumer trust in the company. The data obtained during the content analysis showed that A. Baranauskas emphasizes social responsibility as one of the main characteristics of the company, so it can be stated that the emphasis on this characteristic contributes to increasing the trust of A. Baranauskas's followers in Tele2. However, the responses also showed that fewer consumers agreed with the statement linking the emphasis on social responsibility in the posts to a greater tendency to choose the company's services.

Conclusions

Content analysis evaluated the peculiarities of A. Baranauskas communication on Facebook. The results of the study revealed the main principles of the employee's communication in the public space as a brand ambassador: differentiation of content, expertise, emphasis on the values and characteristics of the represented company, consistency and the use of a personal communicative tone. Also, the need to reduce the sense of chaos in A. Baranauskas communication on Facebook and to strengthen cooperation with the represented company on communication issues were highlighted.

Expert interview revealed that the effectiveness of the employee's-brand ambassador's communication about the company depends on the ambassador's cooperation with the company. To ensure smooth communication and impact on consumers, the company should use a personalized incentive system for employee brand ambassadors, set performance criteria with the ambassador and measure the results on an ongoing basis.

Semi-structured interview with A. Baranauskas identified two main directions of the employee's-brand ambassador's communication: strengthening personal brand and achieving company's objectives. On the other hand, the creation of the audience's trust was also highlighted.

Results from customer survey indicated that A. Baranauskas communication has the greatest impact on creating consumer interest in the services provided by Tele2 and increasing trust in the organization. However, the impact on the purchase of services is relatively weak. Thus, research findings identify a problem related to the impact of employees'-brand ambassadors' communication in the last steps of the consumer journey.

Improving communication of employees as brand ambassadors from this research it could be recommended to focus on two aspects: increasing personal brand awareness and planning content of

communication. Personal brand awareness could be increased for example by posting personal comments on news portals, becoming more involved in content created by other Facebook users, and posting more personal posts. In order to improve the content planning process, it could be recommended to crystallize the main communication topics, determine frequency of publications, and determine the percentage distribution of topics in the total flow of published news. In general, it would be very beneficial to create a detailed plan of posts for each month so that expected impact on consumer behavior would be achieved.

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Miglė ŠONTAITĖ-PETKEVIČIENĖ, Aušrinė VAŠČĖGAITĖ

DARBUOTOJAI KAIP PREKĖS ŽENKLO AMBASADORIAI: DARBUOTOJŲ VYKDOMOS KOMUNIKACIJOS POVEIKIO VARTOTOJŲ ELGSENAI ANALIZĖ

Santrauka

Pastaruoju metu prekės ženklai pasitikėjimo jų vykdoma marketingo komunikacija problemą pradėjo spręsti į marketingo komunikacijos strategijas įtraukdami žmones, kuriais jų tiksliniai vartotojai pasitiki. Iš to išsivystė ir vis dar auga nuomonės lyderių, kitaip vadinamų influenceriais, banga. Ši didelio populiarumo sulaukusi marketingo komunikacijos priemonė pastaruoju metu vis labiau kelia vartotojų skeptiškumą. Nuomonės lyderių sraute stebint reklamuojamų produktų ir prekės ženklų gausą, vartotojai vis mažiau patiki tokių rekomendacijų nuoširdumu ir patikimumu. Prekės ženklai, reaguodami į didėjančias vartotojų abejones dėl nuomonės lyderių komunikacijos, su nuomonės lyderiais pradėjo siekti ilgalaikio bendradarbiavimo, kas influencerius pavertė prekės ženklo ambasadoriais, kurie nuolat komunikuoja atstovaujamo prekės ženklo žinutę ir taip su tuo prekės ženklu vartotojų akyse tampa glaudžiai susijusiu žmogumi.

Viena iš naujausių ir mokslininkų dar mažai nagrinėta ambasadorystės forma – kai prekės ženklo ambasadoriumi tampa ne samdomas viešojoje erdvėje populiarus autoritetas, o įmonės darbuotojas. Šiame straipsnyje siekiama išanalizuoti kaip darbuotojo-prekės ženklo ambasadoriaus komunikacija keičia vartotojų elgseną. Atlikus teorinę darbuotojų-prekės ženklo ambasadorių komunikacijos analizę, toliau straipsnyje aprašomi empirinio tyrimo rezultatai, atskleidžiantys pasirinkto atvejo – Andriaus Baranausko, kaip darbuotojo-prekės ženklo ambasadoriaus, komunikacijos poveikį vartotojų elgsenai. Empiriniam tyrimui atlikti pasitelkta turinio analizė, taip pat naudoti kokybinio tyrimo metodo instrumentai – ekspertinis ir pusiau struktūruoti interviu, kiekybiniams duomenims surinkti pasitelkta anketinė vartotojų apklausa.

Šio straipsnio tikslas – išanalizuoti, kokį poveikį vartotojų elgsenai daro darbuotojo, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadoriaus, komunikacija. Siekiant tikslo, suformuluoti tyrimo uždaviniai: (1) teoriniu lygmeniu apibrėžti prekės ženklo ambasadorių sampratą; (2) teoriniu lygmeniu konceptualizuoti prekės ženklo ambasadorių komunikacijos specifiką ir poveikį vartotojų elgsenai; (3) teoriniu lygmeniu išanalizuoti darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, specifiką; (4) parengti ir pagrįsti tyrimo metodologiją; (5) atlikti empirinį tyrimą siekiant nustatyti darbuotojų, kaip prekės ženklo ambasadorių, komunikacijos poveikį vartotojų elgsenai.

Išanalizavus ir apibendrinus tyrimo rezultatus galima teigti, kad darbuotojų-prekės ženklo ambasadorių, tarp jų ir A. Baranausko, komunikacija daro poveikį vartotojų elgsenai. Remiantis gautais duomenimis, galima išskirti tris pagrindines darbuotojų-prekės ženklo ambasadorių daromos įtakos vartotojų elgsenai sritis: a) pasitikėjimo atstovaujamu prekės ženklu didinimas, b) susidomėjimo reklamuojamu produktu / paslauga kūrimas, c) reklamuojamo produkto / paslaugos įsigijimo skatinimas.