

Digital marketing in art organizations: the use of online platforms to effectively engage with consumers. The case of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan.

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KEYWORDS

Digital Marketing, Arts Management, Online and Mobile Platforms, Consumers Engagement Behaviors, Community, Social Network.

ABSTRACT

Today the flow of information about a brand has become multidirectional, interconnected and a new dimension of perception is created in which virtuality and reality are merged. New online channels are systematically erasing the dividing line between offline and online. These

online platforms allow people to engage in the exchange of information and learn from and about each other as they create and share content and communication (Rothaermel and Sugiyamb, 2001). If a brand engages in conversation the outcome will be a relationship development that can take brand into new levels of awareness (Solis, 2009). The Internet was all about the World Wide Web and exposing its users to a world of information and experiences that never existed before. The evolution of the web and its devices will bring the Internet to consumers, by creating customized layers of information and engagement over the physical world around them. So we can say that the Internet is changing the way businesses operate. ‘Brick and mortar’ companies, above all in the arts industry, can now use the Internet to reach and engage with consumers, promote activities and sell in addition to the traditional channels. In this scenario there are several challenging that theatres, for example, have to face in order to build effective brand strategies that can encounter and interact with consumers and that can deliver superior relational benefits and competitive advantage. Web 2.0 in fact does emphasize the conversational dimension of those who work in marketing (Kent and Taylor, 2003) and they are creating a new culture by leveraging online platforms like communities, webtv, social networks, mobile, etc. Moreover it’s proved that digital marketing is considered as a strategic function to develop relations, both online and offline, fundamental in order to gain a competitive advantage (Berthon et al., 2012, Peretti, 2011). In this scenario, this paper wants to understand how art organizations, theatres in particular, can use online platforms to effectively engage with consumers, based on the last evolution of digital marketing theory and practice. The research will deeply analyze the successful case study of the Piccolo Teatro of Milan. The Piccolo Teatro of Milan, founded in 1947 is one of the most important theater companies worldwide and its marketing department has a strong customer focus (Colbert, 2005). *“The Piccolo is a good example of successful branding, scoring high on all five characteristics of a strong brand: customer loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality,*

brand association and identity and proprietary assets” (Colbert, 2005). In 1997 they launched a web sites, in 2000 a community, in 2008 a fidelity program online and in 2009 a web-tv, since the real beginning they were able to test, innovate and leverage the evolution of social media and the cultural process of the theater. Results of this work showed the growing importance of digital marketing in the arts industry and the role of online platforms to reinforce brand awareness and engagement because of their effectiveness and because of its unique characteristics. The new challenge that the Piccolo Teatro of Milan is now living is the integration of all the content combined with a strong social media orientation.

SHORT ABSTRACT

Objective: purpose of this research is to understand how art organizations, theatres in particular, can use online platforms to effectively engage with consumers, based on the last evolution of digital marketing theory and practice.

Methodology: a case study approach is adopted and the qualitative results are analyzed in this research. This method is particularly useful in new and not fully developed areas (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2009) such as this one, where current perspectives are bringing new knowledge that is not yet that well developed and known and previous theories are not completely applicable.

Results: results of this work showed the growing importance of digital marketing in the arts industry and the key role of online platforms in the engaging process with consumers. It showed the effectiveness of the different online platforms (in particular community and Facebook), their unique characteristics and the kind of impact that they can have in reaching the right target audience and in increasing brand awareness and engagement.

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper shows the results of an exploration around the topic of digital marketing and the use of online platforms, in the art industry, considering a marketing perspective. The literature review explores the theoretical fields of marketing management, relationship marketing, art management, brand management and interactive marketing.

Researches were conducted, in 2012, papers published between 1998 and 2010 were reviewed, in particular from the following publications: *International Journal of Art Management*, *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Brand Management*, *Marketing Journal of Research and Management*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *Journal of International Marketing*, *International Journal of Non profit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, *International Review on Public and Non Profit Marketing*, *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Internet Research*, *Business Horizons*. In addition we explored books in the areas of marketing and art management and conference papers from 1997 to 2012. The case study was built by analyzing more than ten years of data, depth interviews with managers from the Piccolo Theatre of Milan and by an analysis of internal documents and research plus articles from the press.

Finally based on the fact that in the marketing literature there are many different interpretations about concepts and implications related to Web 2.0, social media and online platforms; we established that in this paper we adopted the following definitions:

- Web 2.0: set of online applications and digital technologies that enable users to actively participate in a dynamic online environment, where people can collaborate and share information and multimedia content (Henderson and Bowley, 2010; Kitchen and Panopoulos, 2010; Grunig, 2009; O'Reilly, 2007).
- Social Media: “*Internet-based applications that help consumers share opinions,*

insights, experiences, and perspectives” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009). “Social media is the product of Internet-based applications that build on the technological foundations of Web 2.0” (Berthon et al., 2012).

- Online Platforms: they are considered relationship platforms and they are both online and mobile (Shankar, 2011; Heinonen e Michelsson, 2010, Da Cortà, 2007). In particular online platforms are: websites, social media applications that can include collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), social network (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn), blogs, content community, forum, e-commerce; mobile platforms are: applications, m-commerce, geolocalized social networks (e.g. Foursquared).

MARKETING IN ART ORGANIZATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Marketing is constantly evolving and in the last ten years both theorists, researchers and practitioners agreed on the impact that both Web 2.0 and social media had on consumers behaviors and marketing culture and approach (Berthon et al., 2012). We can say that marketing moved from a product-centric approach to a values-driven one, from a one-to-many transaction, to a many-to-many collaboration and conversations, from 1.0 to 3.0 (Kotler et al., 2010).

In this scenario no longer can brands expect to “tell” and “sell” in their marketing communications and be as effective as they once were. To be effective with a digital consumer, brands must seek to build relationships with them by creating experiences that make them want to engage with the brand (Sawney et al., 2005). Marketers are moving from one-way messaging to consumers, to developing a two-way (or more) dialogue with them,

from extending a “look and feel” online, to creating experiences for consumers to engage with, from addressing consumers as a mass audience, to leveraging the fact that they are a community (Solis, 2009). This mindset shift should be at the heart of every part of the business and marketing strategy, even in the art industry where discussions about how to creatively use the Internet were there since the real beginning (Clarke and Flaherty, 2001). Web 2.0 has created, over time, new types of interactions between organizations and individuals (Solis, 2009; Lovari, 2011). The explosion of Web 2.0 (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2010) and online platforms, above all social networks (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), has generated a process of changing systems of communication and relationship as a whole.

Mohanbir Sawhney and Philip Kotler in the study "*Marketing in the age of information democracy*", in 2000, emphasized that effective marketing in the era of accessible information requires a change of three key assumptions, in particular, the authors were referring to the following changes in the approach of traditional marketing: (1) The transition to the role of marketers from "controllers" to "facilitators". In the era of access to information, in fact, customers have gained control and this has led them to be able to define the information they need, they are interested in the offer, the prices they are willing to pay. In this scenario, marketers must rethink their role and help the situation, listen to them, invite them to participate, let them define the rules of engagement that the mode of interaction and above all to build multi-channel shopping experience with high level of customization. (2) The new role of online marketing activities; marketers in this approach must also change the policies and culture at the base of their activities, see the new technologies and online platforms (e.g. social networks) and manage this change by being transparent, open and honest. (3) The importance of relationship and engagement; in others words how to find new customers and better serve the existing ones. Sawhney and Kotler underlined the fact that the objective is all about creating a relationship of value with customers and engage with them. Where

engagement is considered a process, a continuum conversation.

These elements are empathized by other marketing researchers and studies (see Figure 1), in particular, the following ones: the new role of marketing based on the evolution of the Internet (Deighton, 1996; Sawney et al., 2005; Chen et. Al, 2011; Berthon et al., 2012); definition of digital marketing, marketing to the web (Mandelli, 1998; Wind and Mahajan, 2001; Coviello et al., 2001; Ngai, 2003; Urban, 2004; Prandelli and Verona, 2006; Rowley, 2008); social media as a new component of the marketing mix (Mangold and Faulds, 2009); the importance of the relationship between brands and individuals while interacting in online platforms and social media (McWilliam, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Cummings et al., 2002; McAlexander et al., 2002; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Kim et al., 2009; Hanna et al., 2011; Muñiz and Shau, 2011; Bansan and Bharti, 2012); characteristics and effects of e-Word of Mouth and willingness to provide purchase intention and satisfaction (Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Keller et al., 2007; Rosen, 2009); benefits of engagement with customers within social media (Sawhney et al., 2005; Ramaswamy, 2009; Bond, 2010; Brodie et al., 2011; Porter et al., 2011); online interactivity and its positive implications for multi-channel marketing (Chen et al., 2005).

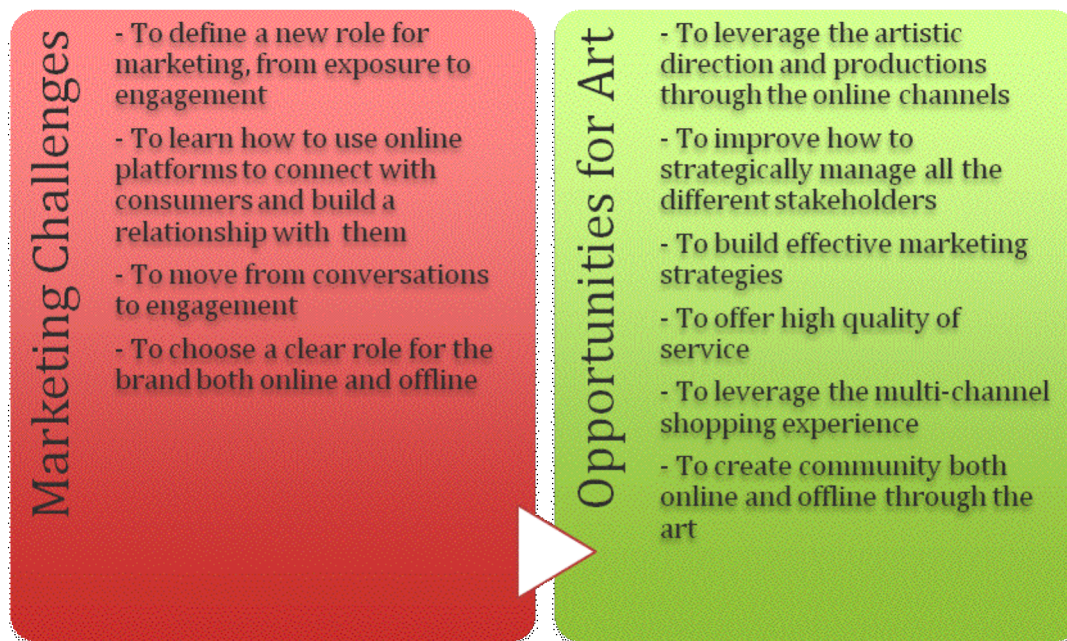
Figure 1. Literature Review: digital marketing, online platforms and engagement

Authors	Subject
Deighton, 1996; Sawney et al., 2005; Chen et. Al, 2011; Berthon et al., 2012	The new role of marketing based on the evolution of the Internet
Mandelli, 1998; Wind and Mahajan, 2001; Coviello et al., 2001; Ngai, 2003; Urban, 2004; Prandelli and Verona, 2006; Rowley, 2008	Definition of digital marketing, marketing to the web
Mangold and Faulds, 2009	Social media as a new components of the marketing mix
McWilliam, 2000; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002; Cummings et al., 2002; McAlexander et al., 2002; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Kim et al., 2009; Hanna et al., 2011; Muñiz and Shau, 2011; Bansan and Bharti, 2012	The importance of the relationship between brands and individuals while interacting in online platforms and social media
Bickart and Schindler, 2001; Keller et al., 2007; Rosen, 2009	Characteristics and effects of e-Word of Mouth and willingness to provide purchase intention and satisfaction
Bond, 2010; Brodie et al., 2011; Porter et al., 2011	Benefits of engagement with customers within social media
Chen et al., 2005	Online interactivity and its positive implications for multi-channel marketing

Based on this preliminary literature review we can define four possible main challenges that organizations have to face in the digital marketing era: (1) define a new role for marketing and marketers, with a different approach and methodology, by switching from exposure to engagement; (2) learn how to use online platforms to connect with consumers and build a relationship with them; (3) move from conversations to engagement with customers in order to generate value on a long term basis; (4) choose a clear role for the brand both online and offline by trying not to drive sales but to influence them.

Based on that we can say that nowadays digital marketing is fundamental for organizations in order to gain a competitive advantage (Wind and Mahajan, 2001; Sawhney et al., 2005; Bond, 2010; Peretti, 2011; Berthon et al., 2012). Accordingly to researches and studies in the art management and marketing field (Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Conway and Whitelock, 2004; Colbert, 2005; Bussell and Forbes, 2006; Korza et al., 2007; Slack and Rowley, 2008; Chong, 2010; Colbert, 2011) and the previous analysis on the evolution of digital marketing, it is possible to identify several opportunities that art organizations can exploit: (1) to leverage the artistic direction and productions through the online channels; (2) to improve how to strategically manage all the different stakeholders; (3) to build effective marketing strategies; (4) to offer high quality of service together with a stronger customer relationship management by using online platforms; (5) to leverage the multi-channel shopping experience and sell products/shows accordingly; (6) to create community both online and offline through the art (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Digital Marketing in Art: challenges and opportunities



The need to make further contribution of knowledge about this topic, in the art management field, has also come from an in depth analysis of the literature. Previous researches (see Figure 3), in fact, have focused more on different topics like the following ones: financial aspects of the performing arts (McCarthy, 2001; Kirchner et al., 2007; Chong, 2010); nonprofit, public administration, artistic development and art management (Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Rentschler and Potter, 1996; Dewey, 2003; Byrnes, 2008); relationship marketing and strategic thinking applied to theatres (Conway and Whitelock, 2004; Passebois and Aurier, 2004; Bussell and Forbes, 2006); consumer behavior and repurchase intentions (Hume et al., 2007; Hume and Mort, 2008; Slack et al., 2008); audience development (Bernstein, 2006; Kotler and Scheff, 2006; Scollen, 2008); internalization strategy (Robertson, 2005; Fillis and Lee, 2009); service experience (Hume et al., 2006; Hume and Mort, 2008); marketing approach and planning (March and Thompson, 1996; McNichol, 2005; Sorjonen, 2008; Byrnes, 2008; Chong, 2010); public relations (McDonald and Harrison, 2002); the use of online communities and types of audience relationships (O’Sullivan, 2007); consumer

behavior in multi-channel contexts (Slack et al., 2007).

Figure 3. Literature Review: Art Management

Authors	Subject
McCarthy, 2001; Kirchner et al., 2007; Chong, 2010	Financial aspects of the performing arts
Kotler and Scheff, 1997; Rentschler and Potter, 1996; Dewey, 2003; Byrnes, 2008	Nonprofit, public administration, artistic development and art management
Conway and Whitelock, 2004; Passebois and Aurier, 2004; Bussell and Forbes, 2006	Relationship marketing and strategic thinking applied to theatres
Hume et al., 2007; Hume and Mort, 2008; Slack et al., 2008	Consumer behaviour and repurchase intentions
Bernstein, 2006; Kotler and Scheff, 2006; Scollen, 2008	Audience development
Robertson, 2005; Fillis and Lee, 2009	Internalization strategy
Hume et al., 2006; Hume and Mort, 2008	Service experience
March and Thompson, 1996; McNichol, 2005; Sorjonen, 2008; Byrnes, 2008; Chong, 2010	Marketing approach and planning
McDonald and Harrison, 2002	Public relations
O'Sullivan, 2007	The use of online communities and types of audience relationships
Slack et al., 2007	Consumer behaviour in multi-channel contexts

ONLINE PLATFORMS AND CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

Platforms, both online and mobile, have generated different changes in consumers, markets and marketing over the last years.

Consumers became the new protagonist of this era. Due to the rapid penetration of Internet and the rise of social media, they now have more control over the access and use of information compared to the past (Shankar et al., 2011), they are connected with one another and they learn from each other because they can exchange information, content and communication (Rothaermel and Sugiyamab, 2001). There are papers and articles that talked and discussed about the “consumers’ empowerment” phenomenon (Wathieu, et al., 2002, Pires et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2006, Cova and Pace, 2006) and about the role and the impact of conversations and e-word of mouth on customer decision-making, purchase intention, loyalty and brand image (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007, Villanueva et al.,

2008; Trusov et al., 2010).

Markets became global and highly competitive (World Economic Forum, 2008). Today the market globalization is generating a cultural convergence that from one side is standardizing the overall product offer and individual needs, and from the other side, thanks to evolution of the different digital platforms, is multiplying exchanges and communication occasions worldwide.

Marketing based on the previous analysis is facing a new era with a shift in its approach and methodology.

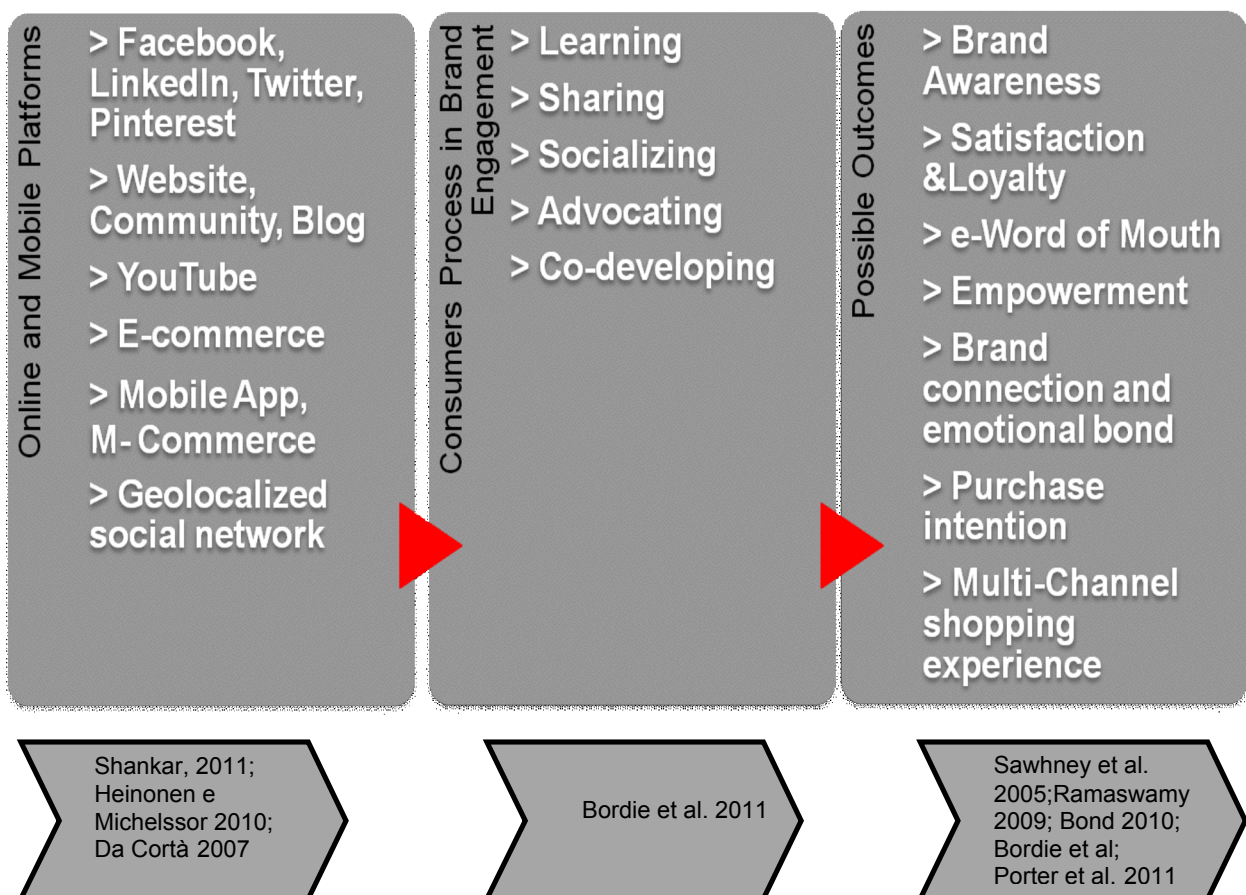
In synthesis online platforms together with the evolution of these elements allow people to engage with brands. Consumer engagement plays a fundamental role in this scenario.

An in depth literature review about the definitions of engagement was made by Brodie et al., 2011 (p.3) and the authors arrived to a working definition that combine a multi-disciplinary approach together with a clear focus on the online platforms environment: *“consumer engagement in a virtual brand community involves specific interactive experiences between consumers and the brand, and/or other members of the community. Consumer engagement is a context-dependent, psychological state characterized by fluctuating intensity levels that occur within dynamic, interactive engagement processes. Consumer engagement is a multidimensional concept comprising cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral dimensions, and plays a central role in the process of relational exchange where other relational concepts are engagement antecedents and/or consequences in interactive engagement processes within the brand community”*. In the same paper (Brodie et al., 2011), based on this definition, authors did an ethnography research in order to identify the main components of consumers engagement process and sub-process in an online brand community. Consumers engagement dimensions, in this environment, are: cognitive, emotional, behavioral. Sub-processes are: learning, sharing, socializing, advocating and co-developing. Previous studies also analyzed

possible outcomes of consumers engagement online (Sawhney et al., 2005; Ramaswamy, 2009; Bond, 2010; Brodie et al., 2011; Porter et al., 2011) and mail behavioral outcomes identified include: brand awareness, satisfaction & loyalty, e-Word of mouth, consumer empowerment, brand connection and emotional bond, purchase intention, effective multi-channel shopping experience.

A possible conceptual framework of online platforms, consumer engagement process and outcomes is developed (see Figure 4) and it will be the reference for the case study analysis of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan. The idea is to understand how the theatre combines the objects of the consumer engagement (content and communication about the brand, the company, the industry, the brand), the level of consumer engagement and the kind of outcomes that can be generated by the use of the different online platforms.

Figure 4. Online Platforms, Consumer Engagement and Outcomes: a possible framework



In this scenario, where consumers play an active role, markets are becoming more competitive and marketing is living the age of participation and conversations, art organizations that have direct access to consumers are facing a double challenge. Theatres, in particular, have to manage these new online platforms together with traditional media by leveraging their spaces and promote their products/shows accordingly.

Moreover “*modern arts management is based on the mediation of internal artistic expression with the external public*” (Bendixen, 2000, p. 12), and for theatres, like others culture institutions, this means to be able to face several challenges (Bewey, 2003): (1) managing international cultural interactions; (2) representing cultural identity; (3) promoting innovative methods of audience development; (4) treating the fine arts as a member of the creative industries; (5) encouraging innovative marketing, education, and outreach programs; (6) dealing constructively with changing audience demographics; (7) using technology to develop audiences of the future; (8) exercising effective strategic leadership.

These characteristics showed the challenge for theatres to manage online platforms and the requirement for marketing to understand their contribution to these challenges and their possible outcomes.

Based on this analysis it is helpful to structure a possible framework that can combine a classification of the different online platforms, possible brand roles and consumer engagement process, plus the kind of metrics that each online platforms considered correct in order to analyze the level of engagement¹ with users and to conclude all the possible outcomes (see Figure 5).

In order to analyze the Piccolo Theatre of Milan use of the online platforms in order to engage with consumers and possible outcomes, we created a framework (see Figure 5) based on the previous literature review and main metrics that are available for every online platforms. The

¹ Sources: Google Analytics, Facebook Insights, Twitter Insights, YouTube Analytics.

idea is to understand the Piccolo Theatre of Milan performance and strategic use of these channels.

Figure 5. Framework used to analyze the use of online platforms in order to engage with consumers

ONLINE PLATFORMS	POSSIBLE BRAND ROLES	CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT	ENGAGEMENT METRICS	POSSIBLE OUTCOMES
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entertainer - Support/Service Provider - Problem Solver - Connection Maker - Crowdsourcer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning - Sharing - Socializing - Advocating - Co-development 	Unique Visitors, Impressions, Time spent on site, Views, Bounce rate, First Page View, Returning Visitors, New Keyword, Download, Google Ranking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Awareness - Satisfaction - Loyalty - Word of Mouth - Empowerment - Brand Connection & Emotional Bond - Purchase Intention - Multi-channel shopping experience
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entertainer - Support/Service Provider - Problem Solver - Connection Maker - Crowdsourcer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning - Sharing - Socializing - Advocating - Co-development 	New registration, New registration ratio, Engage to post and comment ratio, sales generated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Awareness - Satisfaction - Loyalty - Word of Mouth - Empowerment - Brand Connection & Emotional Bond - Purchase Intention - Multi-channel shopping experience
Facebook Page	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entertainer - Support/Service Provider - Problem Solver - Connection Maker - Crowdsourcer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning - Sharing - Socializing - Advocating - Co-development 	Likes on page, Likes and Share on posts, Comments, Conversations, reach, # of shares, New Fans/Friends, Total of Contributors, Average Post Engagement Rate, Daily Page Engagement Rate, sales generated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Awareness - Satisfaction - Loyalty - Word of Mouth - Empowerment - Brand Connection & Emotional Bond - Purchase Intention - Multi-channel shopping experience
Twitter Account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entertainer - Support/Service Provider - Problem Solver - Connection Maker - Crowdsourcer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning - Sharing - Socializing - Advocating - Co-development 	Followers, Total Retweet, Follows, Mentions %, Inbound Messages per Customer Messages, Uniques @replied, Average Tweet Engagement Rate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Awareness - Satisfaction - Loyalty - Word of Mouth - Empowerment - Brand Connection & Emotional Bond - Purchase Intention - Multi-channel shopping experience
YouTube Channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Entertainer - Support/Service Provider - Problem Solver - Connection Maker - Crowdsourcer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning - Sharing - Socializing - Advocating - Co-development 	Views, Audience Retention, Likes and dislikes, Favorites, List, Total Comments, Sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brand Awareness - Satisfaction - Loyalty - Word of Mouth - Empowerment - Brand Connection & Emotional Bond - Purchase Intention - Multi-channel shopping experience

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

With such a background, the overall objective of this paper is to understand how art organizations, theatres in particular, can use online platforms to effectively engage with consumers, based on the last evolution of digital marketing theory and practice. More specifically, the idea is to follow these steps: (1) to explore theatre marketing opportunities within the Internet – through a literature review; (2) to identify theatre branding key drivers (content and communication) and the levels of consumer engagement and the kind of outcomes that can be generated by the use of the different online platforms - through a case study analysis; (3) to analyze the managerial implications, in terms of marketing, of the use of online platforms for a theatre in order to deliver a unique engaging brand experience online.

METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY OF THE PICCOLO THEATRE OF MILAN

Background history

Established on 14 May 1947 by director Giorgio Strehler and general manager Paolo Grassi, Piccolo Teatro of Milan was the first public theatre in Italy.

“Theatre of art for everyone” was the mission that characterized Piccolo Teatro since its very beginning and it still remains today the best way to fully express Piccolo's goals and objectives: to stage high-quality performances addressed to a public as broad as possible.

Piccolo Teatro today runs three different theatres in Milan: the experimental theatre venue Teatro Studio (around 370 seats), the new venue, named after Giorgio Strehler, which has 980 seats and the historic venue in Via Rovello (which has around 500 seats), renamed Teatro Grassi. This venue was reopened on 12 December 2009, after complete renovation and the restoration of the Cloister, a new space open all day with a café, bookshop and conference hall for meetings with artists, press conferences and all the educational activities organized for students and general audiences. Since 1991 Piccolo Teatro has been Theatre of Europe.

In over sixty-five years of activity, Piccolo has staged more than 300 performances, 200 of them directed by Giorgio Strehler. It performs works by playwrights including Shakespeare, Goldoni, Brecht, Cechov, Pirandello and Goethe.

When, after Strehler's death in 1997, Sergio Escobar and Luca Ronconi started running the theatre, respectively as general manager and artistic director, Piccolo focused on an international and interdisciplinary dimension, becoming a cultural flagship both at national and European level. In relation to Piccolo's international character, the theatre has been on tour all over the world, from Russia to the US, from China to Japan, from Europe to North Africa. Every year since 1999, Piccolo Teatro has organized a theatre festival. The festival brings to Milan artists such as Peter Brook, Eimuntas Nekrosius, Robert Lepage, Lev Dodin, Lluís Pasqual, Ingmar Bergman, Ute Lemper, Declan Donnellan, Simon Mc Burney, Edward Hall and John Turturro. Since 1986, Piccolo has been running a theatre school, founded by Giorgio Strehler and today directed by Luca Ronconi. Over the years more than 198 professional actors have graduated from the Piccolo Teatro school.

“Theatre of art for everyone” marketing strategies since 1947

When Piccolo Teatro of Milan was founded in 1947, there was the hope in a complete revival, particularly a cultural one, that could overcome the horrors of the Second World War.

Piccolo's mission was clear: *"Theatre of art for everyone" represented exactly that spirit. This provided the basis for creating a strong "brand identity" aimed at building and maintaining a close relationship with its audience. The objective was clear: to educate and to foster a relationship of trust and a sense of belonging, creating not an indifferent spectator but one who was active and "ready",* said Giovanni Soresi, Marketing Strategist of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan.

The artistic and organizational choices of Piccolo, that were taken from the very beginning of its activity, in order to fulfil its mission, were:

- multi-genre and international content for each theatre season (classical and contemporary drama, music and dance);
- pricing policies that would bring in all audiences and social classes (from the earliest discounted subscription options to special offers aimed at certain targets).

This policy was successful to “form the Theatre’s public” and to create a “brand” synonymous of reliability and a sense of belonging deep-rooted in the Milanese cultural scene. The growth of Piccolo from the forties to the eighties was continuous, to a point where it was offering over 30 shows per season, with more than 10.000 season ticket holders. Nevertheless, Piccolo experienced a fall in demand due to the economic crisis of 1992/93, and season ticket holders drop to 5.000.

The public in the world of culture and theatre in Italy changed and became more fragmented, due to the subsequent changes in the social, political and economic scenarios. Within the context of these changes, a crucial step in Piccolo’s marketing strategy was the development of new technologies and the advent of the Internet. In the mid nineties it switched from the idea of *"Theatre of art for all"* to *"Theatre of art for each and everyone"*. This change was thought to satisfy different needs and to create targeted offers and services for season ticket holders, youths, groups, and so on.

Therefore the practical choices to face the economic crisis, taking advantage of technological innovation, were:

- increasingly flexible season ticket options to provide a targeted offer to the public;
- new educational activities for the public and in particular for students;
- a CRM system fed by continuing off and on-line surveys held among its audiences;
- a personal Web system.

Clearly since the beginning, we can say that company's marketing department used a strong customer focus (Colbert, 2005). *"The Piccolo is a good example of successful branding, scoring high on all five characteristics of a strong brand: customer loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand association and identity and proprietary assets"* (Colbert, 2005, p.).

Today Piccolo, in its three theatres (Teatro Strehler 980 seats, Teatro Grassi 500 seats and Teatro Studio 370 seats), performs over 60 shows a year, staging classical and contemporary drama, dance, music, opera and performances for the young.

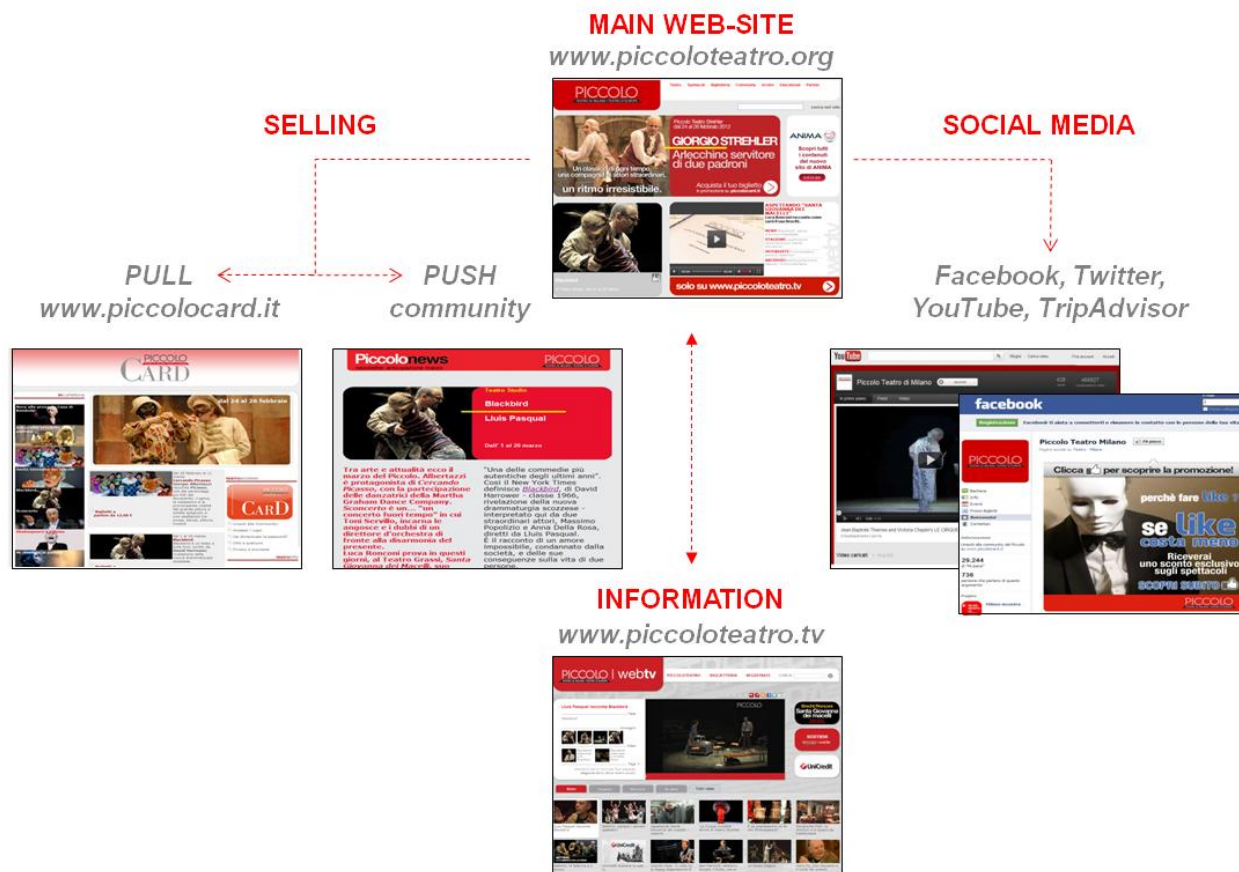
Piccolo sells about 275.000 tickets each year, of which over 100.000 come from the sale of over 20.000 season tickets.

Digital Marketing Strategy

The first approach to the Web for Piccolo Teatro was in the late '90s with the creation of the website www.piccoloteatro.org. This first step was followed shortly afterwards by the launch of the EuroLab project, to digitize scan, enhance and circulate Piccolo's documentary heritage: photos, videos, scenery sketches, costume sketches and newspaper articles. Initially Web activity focused on information and training, to put the Piccolo's 'virtual, fourth theatre' on-line at www.piccoloteatro.org.

Hereafter Piccolo's web strategy developed, around the main site, other subsidiary sites in order to provide to the audience the possibility to have an e-commerce service - first with the "Community del Piccolo" (a newsletter based on push strategy) and then with "www.piccolocard.it" (a sales site based on pull strategy) - and moreover to build more in-depth relations and to give additional information, exemplified by the launch of www.piccoloteatro.tv and the creation of the Facebook / PiccoloTeatro fan page (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Web system of Piccolo Teatro



The evolution of this process (Figure 7) has brought more than 1.000.000 visits per year with monthly peaks of 105.000 visits and 3.500 single visitors a day to the site www.piccoloteatro.org, more than 103,000 community registered members as of August 2012 plus the Web system it led to sales for 77 thousand euros only during the last season (2011/2012).

Figure 7. The use of online platforms by Piccolo Theatre of Milan in the last 15 years (1997/2012)

Year of launch	Online Platform	BRAND ROLES	URL
1997	Web Site	Information, Entertain, Social Connections, Support/Service	http://www.piccoloteatro.org
2000	Online Community	Information, Entertain by directly experience the brand, Support/Service with high levels of customization	http://www.piccoloteatro.org/community
2000	E-commerce	Support/Service	http://www.piccoloteatro.org/community
2008	Online Fidelity Program	Support/Service, Reward Loyalty	http://www.piccolocard.it/
2009	Web TV	Entertain	http://www.piccoloteatro.tv/
2011	Social Network (Facebook, Twitter) plus video channel (YouTube) plus geolocalized social network (Foursquare)	Information, Entertain, Social Connections, Support/Service	http://www.facebook.com/PiccoloTeatro - http://twitter.com/Piccolo_Teatro - http://www.youtube.com/user/PiccoloTeatroMilano - https://it.foursquare.com/v/piccolo-teatro-strehler/
2012	Social Commerce on Facebook	Support/Service with high levels of customization	http://www.facebook.com/PiccoloTeatro

Sergio Escobar (General Manager of Piccolo Theatre of Milan from 1998), in 2000 presented what could be “a digital revolution in the world of live entertainment”². *“It is no longer to play through the movie theater, just as happens today with television - said Escobar - but to produce shows designed and manufactured especially for the new medium of communication, the Internet”*. A choice dictated by love for the theater, made __possible by the particular technological evolution and really advanced in its vision and approach. *“We want the theater to be prepared for a new generation of entertainment. The strategy will result in the creation of a community theater in Europe: online booking, e-commerce, digital archives, seminars, etc. A new reality where you change the economic model in the art industry”*.

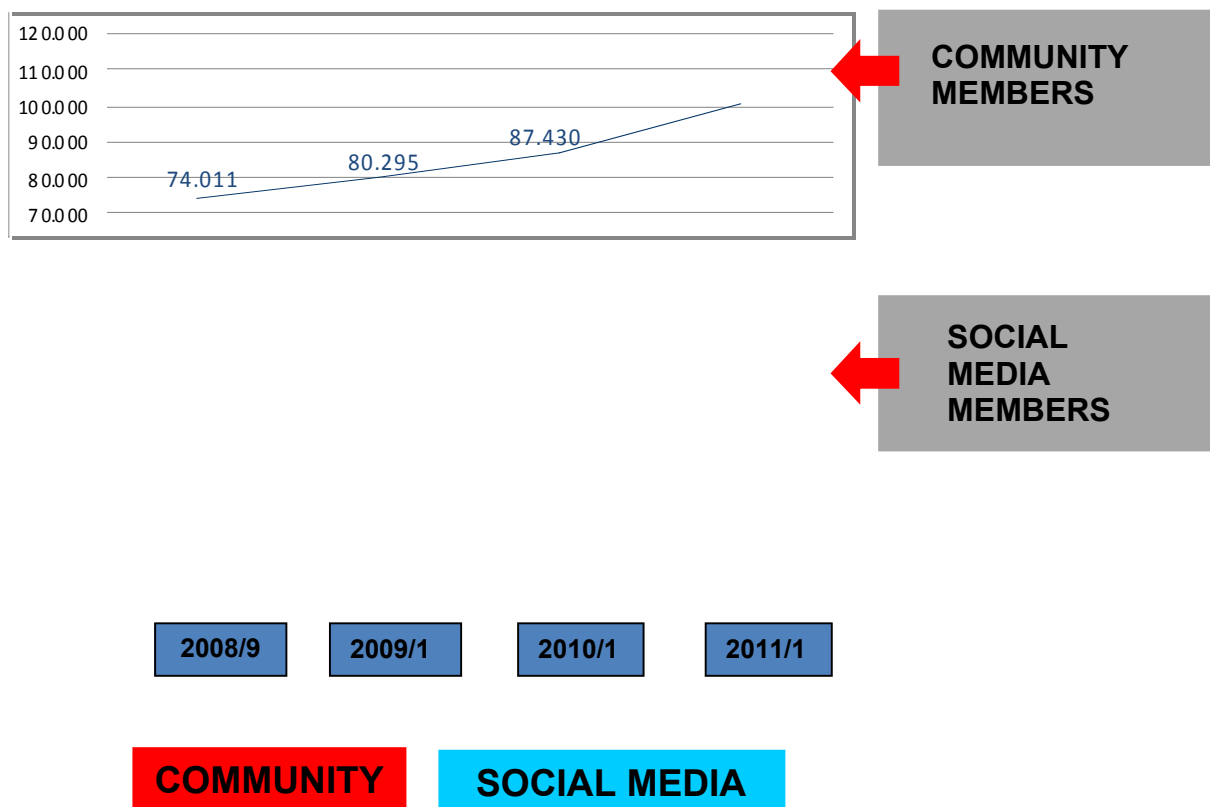
The Community is an online platform that allows the company to monitor and profile the different target audiences, to provide promotional information with high level of customization. It is nowadays a strongly integrated marketing system in the theater, from the point of view of management, considered strategically crucial to establish a mutually appropriate, direct and continuous link with the stakeholders through a strategic relationship marketing approach and activities. The objectives that the Piccolo Theatre of Milan intends to pursue thanks to the use of the different online platforms are the following ones:

² Source: Cella F., “Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano lancia gli spettacoli via web”, Corriere della Sera, 13 June 2000, retrieved online at http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2000/giugno/13/Piccolo_Teatro_Milano_lancia_gli_co_0_00061310200.shtml

- to reconfigure the marketing approach by adopting a “pull” strategy instead of “push”;
- to put the consumer at the center of a unique brand experience, even during and after the purchasing process;
- to establish a direct, transparent, honest and open dialogue with customers and fans, where the sale is not the primary objective, but the natural consequence of the relationship the Theatre is trying to establish;
- to engage by a constant and in depth interactive relationship with all the consumers through a real and direct exchange of views and experiences.

Since then community management has become strategically important and a fundamental asset of the company to engage, to drive sales and to offer fans a unique experience, (see Figure 8) at the same time consumers were discovering all the other online platforms that grew continuously in the last five years.

Figure 8. The evolution (January 2008/April 2012) of the users that registered to the Piccolo Theatre community and social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Web TV)



From a comparative analysis carried out by analyzing market researches (both quantitative and qualitative) from the Piccolo Theatre of Milan in the years 2009/2010, 2010/2011 and 2012, we can underline an evidence of the return of online platforms activities and their impact on sales. In particular, in the 2009/2010 the most important method of purchasing tickets was traditional subscription (33.6%) and the Web site piccolocard.it (11.6%) and the online community (8.3%) were worth together 19.9%. In 2012, the Web site piccolocard.it rose to 41.7% and 24.2% the online community being worth a total of 65.9%. At the same time the use of traditional subscriptions decreased to 30.7%. The online use of online platforms to buy tickets and interact with the theatre grew over 330 % in the last three years.

Meanwhile Facebook, launched at the end of 2011, in order to increase level of engagement around the brand Piccolo Theatre of Milan and to test new brand experiences and sales channels, became an important tool moving from 5.700 fans (October 2011) to 57,650 fans in July 2012 with high level of engagement (average of over 2.500 fans that talked about the brand on a weekly basis, 36% of spontaneous fans generated in less than seven months, high engagement rate thanks also to specific activities like the “fan of the month”, positive tone of voice, high weekly rate of likes and shares). Based on a survey that the company did on Facebook fans, 40% of them are passionate about theatre, 42% of them considered the Piccolo Theatre of Milan a point of reference in the art industry, 24% want to use the page in order to talk about culture and 7% of them joined the page thanks to a friend’s shared post on the theatre, an example of a good level of engagement and of e-word of mouth potential in this area. The theatre in December 2011 decided also to innovate by using Facebook as a sales channels and it was one of the first company in Italy and a pioneer in the art industry to test social commerce or F-commerce (F-Commerce, derived from e-commerce, is considered the use of Facebook as a platform for facilitating and generating sales transactions). F-commerce

is considered a form of social commerce: *“the use of social media, online media that supports social interaction and user contributions, to assist in the online buying and selling of products and services”*³. The theatre sold over 1.700 tickets to a new target audience (46% of people who bought on Facebook, in fact was not a member of the community nor of the piccolocard.it fidelity program) and it has increased by far the level of engagement (likes and share) of the Facebook page. It’s now selling an average of 400 tickets per month.

Together with Facebook the company decided to use Twitter in 2012, in order to increase the efficiency of communication activities and engage with the 2.490 followers. Even if in Italy Twitter is consider a niche online platform (2,4 millions of users in 2011 versus 22 millions of Facebook – 37,4% of the Italian population), it can make the difference in order to recruit specific target audiences and to enhance brand activities (events, promo, news). The engagement rate is still small and number of re-tweet is on the average for a consumer brands, but the page is good in terms of performance compared to other Italian theatres.

Finally in order to entertain, to inform and to engage by enhancing the artistic production and content of the company, the Piccolo Theatre of Milan decided to launch a Web TV in 2009, followed by a You Tube channel in 2011.

The Piccolo Theatre Web TV entirely produced within the company, with the participation of marketing and media relations, from May 2009 have been producing over 600 videos.

Technically it is an information Web site with four channels:

- News: previews of shows, meetings with directors and actors, presentations of books;
- Season: in-depth reports on performances at the Piccolo plus all the behind the scenes (creating scenes/costumes, assembly of the shows, evidence of the scene, etc.);
- Interviews: Exclusive interviews with actors, directors and the public of the performances;

³ Source: Wikipedia, retrieved online on July 2012: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_commerce

- Archive: video materials from the Archives of the Piccolo Teatro.

During the season 2011/2012 there were over 400,000 views of videos put online and a monthly 20% increase of visitors/views with a non stop growth in the last three years.

YouTube video channels, on the other side, combine the social connections brand role together with entertainment. The 200 videos posted by the company registered more than 512.000 visualization. Likes, total comments and shares are showing a positive trend in the last six months.

The target established by the marketing department of the Piccolo Theatre of Milan, for December 2012 is to reach 100,000 fans on Facebook and to stabilize the 500 tickets sold each month on this channel together with a 30% increase of engagement rate. The next challenge, based on these results, would be a more in depth integration of Facebook, Twitter, Web TV and YouTube within all the other online platforms (a new Web site that it will be like a hub where it is possible to live completely the experience of the theatre, the fidelity program online – Piccolo Card - and the Community) plus the development of specific apps and functionalities that can help the interactions and engagement process (mobile).

FINDINGS

Thanks to the adoption of different online platforms plus the use of an innovative marketing strategy (strong mission, clear brand role for each platforms, unique content developed for the Web, transparent, honest and strong relationship with all the consumers involved and a specific program to reward loyal customers) the company achieved several results:

- Increase in brand awareness; an example, if we compare two market researches, in 2011 people declared to know the theatre and its offer thanks to online in 34,1% of cases; this percentage growth to 72,2% in 2012 thanks to the use of the online platforms.

- Extension of word of mouth, in fact in 2012, the yearly survey showed that 5,3% of people discovered the theatre thanks to family and friends, percentage that was around 2% in 2011.
- A more in depth brand connection and emotional bond with the brand, see Facebook survey mentioned above, results in fact showed a strong relationship between the brand and its fans.
- Growing loyalty, thanks to both community and fidelity program online, piccolocard.it, plus the strategic use of Facebook, the company was able to have an impact on sales and increase over 10% the percentage of returning customers and subscribers.
- Satisfaction increased but at the same time people asked for more services, like seats reservation online, mobile app for both service and support.
- Purchase intention and multi-channel shopping experience, it is another outcomes that thanks to the use of social commerce on Facebook was able to reach, engage and sell to a new target audience.
- Increase in efficiency of marketing activities; thanks to the use of a bottom up approach and a direct and interactive dialogue with the different stakeholders, the theatre was able to use an effective combination of promotional tools, pricing strategy and communication that was “tailored made” to their specific needs.

This work show how connecting platforms, for a theatre in particular, is critical for enabling the continuation of its brand story and activities for the future years.

DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this work was to show the growing importance of digital marketing in the arts

industry and the role of online platforms to reinforce brand awareness and engagement because of their effectiveness and because of its unique characteristics.

We went through a literature review about challenges and opportunities that the evolution of marketing is giving to the art industry companies and we proposed a conceptual framework about a possible combination of online platforms, brand roles, consumer engagement online behaviors and outcomes that can be generated. We used an in depth qualitative method of analysis from the Piccolo Theatre of Milan case study experience, by going through data, market researches, interviews to top management, articles and studies from 1997 to 2012.

In this sense in the Piccolo Theatre of Milan case study, was particularly effective for two main reasons.

First of all because it showed that even in the art industry “*the Internet allows firms to engage customers more broadly, more richly, and more speedily. It allows firms to create ongoing customer dialogue, absorb social customer knowledge, and scan knowledge of potential or competitors’ customers. By establishing direct, persistent, and interactive dialogue, the firm can access knowledge at low cost from individual customers as well as from communities of communities*” (Sawnehey et al. 2005, p. 14).

Second because it gave an example of the process that a company can follow in order to develop the next generation of interactivity by connecting platforms and give the consumer the chance to engage with the brand wherever they go. More than ever before, in fact, nowadays consumers rely on their devices (tablets, smartphones, etc.) to consume content, make purchases and connect with others anytime, anywhere.

Finally, this project showed that the use of online platforms to engage with consumers provides an excellent opportunity to gain insights and to learn more about how to build an

effective marketing strategy.

From a managerial point of view, the main lesson learned from this project is that marketing in the art industry has to evolve; though that fundamental mission hasn't changed, marketers have to leverage the capabilities of the information age together link to the explosion of social media and Web 2.0 to capture more information than ever about consumers and their preferences, to learn from them and not just to connect with them but also to bring them to a new level of engagement that is build around direct dialoge and a transparent relationship.

In this perspective, the new challenge that the Piccolo Teatro of Milan will live in the future is the integration of all the content combined with a strong social media orientation. They can also explore new ways to collaborate with customers and work on a co-creation of programs and activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the end of the 90' the first generation of interactivity focused on developing something that would live and be on a single platform: a Web site, an online community, an e-commerce Web site. These single channels were designed to fill the vertical gaps where consumers could not previously have been reached. Nowadays the evolution of the online platforms give companies the chance to deliver different brand experiences, with an increasing level of engagement. Brands need to make themselves immediately relevant to what consumers do and to how they behave both online and offline. The next generation of interactivity therefore will not just fill in gaps but create synergy across all the online and mobile platforms by connecting activities that prolong the experience across the multiple channels where the consumer can engage with the brand.

Besides, in order to translate the new “pull” marketing strategy, a company in the art industry must support this process through specific actions aimed at redefining marketing approach and methodology, as well as brand management policies and activities.

We hope that this paper provided useful insights about how online platforms can help marketers in the art industry to reach one key marketing process, enabling the continuation of the theatre brand story throughout consumers' future generations and to bring new level of engagement. We also wish that our work stimulates further investigation into other aspects like the impact of digital marketing activities on the organization and a more in depth analysis of the engagement process within online and mobile platforms.

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