

STREAMLINING ONLINE COMMUNICATION IN AGRICULTURAL HOLDINGS IN TIMIȘ COUNTY. COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The study undertaken focuses on a comparative analysis of the online communication of two agricultural structures in Timiș County: Max Agro and Merpano. Following the analyzes carried out, including the SWOT analysis and the multimodal analysis of the discourse of agricultural structures, we proposed a possible effective communication strategies. Since there are a variety of platforms for posting content, the analysis we undertook focuses on the communication tools that the two companies currently use. Thus, the analysis focuses on the websites of agricultural structures, Facebook and Instagram pages. As for the online communication analysis grid that we applied to each agricultural structure, it sums up the following sections: online communication channels: the website, facebook page, the Instagram page, frequency of posts and content of posts.

Key words: agricultural holdings, online communication, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Designing communication design as a realistic approach to communication in the online environment conditioned us to identify the functioning mechanism of this analytical system that is geared towards publishing and creating semantic content in the online environment.

The MaxAgro Group is an agricultural operator, with private capital and 100% Romanian, very important at the national level, with its headquarters in Gătaia, Timiș County. It was founded in 1993, by the Zifceak family. A family business that developed gradually, efficiently, healthily and sustainably, from five hectares, to over 15,000 hectares cultivated in Timiș County, performing crops mainly of wheat, rapeseed and corn. It is quality that becomes a company motto, becoming a policy that extends throughout the process, from seeding, to storage and delivery. Also, Maxagro has established a centralized system of 10 modern silos (built to the best market standards for grain storage), with a capacity of over 25.

Another important component is the zootechnical part that the group has successfully developed. The farm of 2,700 cattle, from the Holstein dairy breed, is self-supporting through the performance of its own productions. Milk production, always fresh and of a superior quality, is exclusively dedicated to customers, given the fact that they have 2 milk tanks with a cooler, with a capacity of 65,000 liters. The amount of milk produced per day is 30,000 liters, it is collected accordingly, a high-performance milking room with fifty stalls being made available (<https://maxagro.ro/>).

Merpano is an agricultural structure with private capital, 100% Romanian, which was born in 2002 and which addresses a varied range of farmers, regardless of the size of the agricultural holding. The main objectives of the company are the supply of agrochemicals, seeds of high genetic value, fertilizers and professional agricultural services. The agricultural structure, based on its own farm (3,000 ha), offers all farmers in the Western Region and not only, integrated customized solutions in order to support the selection

process and the application of the latest and most efficient large crop technologies.

Since its establishment, Merpano has continued to diversify its services and products in the agricultural sector, improving and consolidating its position in the agricultural environment of the Western part of the country. Following a large investment, the agricultural enterprise opened the most efficient seed conditioning station in the western part of the country. It includes more than 250 hectares of seed production of the most established wheat varieties, managing to offer customers more than 1,500 tons of wheat seed, selected, treated and packaged to the highest standards every year (<https://merpano.ro/>).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the current context, the multimodal analysis of a discourse is the subject of research by great communication specialists, in the context of a call for a new way of communicating information from a distance. Authors Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), but also Baldry et al. (2006), emphasizes the idea that modal texts simultaneously use at least two semiotic systems (linguistic, visual, auditory, etc.) in order to design a product. Thus, we used this analysis in order to examine the online multimodal discourses of two agricultural structures in the Western Region. The second is the graphic method, which consisted in the actual representation in graphic form of the analyzed indicators.

The definition of the SWOT analysis gravitates in two planes, an internal one targeting strengths and weaknesses (Strengths and Weaknesses) and an external one focusing on opportunities and possible threats (Opportunities and Threats). Thus, we used this method in order to project a general, overall vision of the farms.

The conversion rate represents the percentage of people/users who came into contact with a message from a certain agricultural structure (in the present case) and who, after the exposure, took a certain action, showing a certain behavior (either purchasing or requesting a information, or subscribed to the

newsletter). The conversion rate is given by the following formula:

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In what follows, we will proceed with the analysis we undertook, thus exemplifying an analytical perspective of communication in the online environment, where the communication design is reflected very well. The time period in which the study was conducted is April 1, 2022-April 30, 2023.

Maxagro online communication channels

Maxagro uses social media platforms in its online communication strategies: the Facebook page, the Instagram page, the TikTok account and, more modestly, the YouTube and LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/company/maxagro) accounts.

The Instagram page was created on 16.03.2022 (www.instagram.com/maxagro.ro) has 737 followers and a total of 70 posts. Page advertising is organic, with likes fluctuating from post to post based on content. From our point of view, the TikTok account (www.tiktok.com/@maxagro.ro) is the one that brings more followers and increases the visibility of the agricultural structure in the online environment, having at the time of research 9,566 subscribers and just over 84,000 likes. Thus, the first post, which also corresponded to the date the account was created, 16.03.2022, had approximately 6,700 views. The trend was a fluctuating one, but on 06/23/2023 at the last video posted on this network, the number of views was just over 267,000. Apparently, this trend of community growth on Tik Tok continues.

The Maxagro website is a complex one, but at the same time very well structured and friendly, highlighting, through the designed design, traditional family values. It is composed of sections dedicated to the agricultural structure and the products and services it offers. In the last twenty years, the Maxagro group has grown in the Western area, becoming a brand, which since 2022 has managed to lay the foundations for constant communication (Loiro, 2019) in the online environment as well. A friendly

communication was adopted (Biçoku, 2022), a direct and free style, which would facilitate the reduction of the distance between the company and the customers (Ali, 2021). Communicate in the first person plural, as in family (Mainardes, 2019). That is why the Maxagro group aims to be considered a Romanian brand, but which is close to customers, close to employees, close to the county and the region. This emerges from every discourse of the organization, emphasizing uniqueness and collectivity. At the same time, from the company's mission, vision and values, the same strong idea of preserving tradition, of regional development stands out. The mission communicated on the website emphasizes progress: "Our mission is to perform and turn performance into progress. For the community, for Romania". The vision refers to the development of the region: "Maxagro's vision is to become one of the most important and integrated agricultural operators in South-Eastern Europe, to be able to positively influence the region", and the principles underlying this family business are: performance, innovation, trust, quality, sustainability. A particularly important factor is represented by the consistency that defines the distribution of content on the website. The slogan is the only thing that is not highlighted from the first seconds of interaction with the site. Although the "Home" section welcomes you with a brand aphorism "Everything we do, we do it for tomorrow's generations", the slogan "Performance since 1993" is mentioned only in the "Values" section. From the point of view of communication, it is considered necessary to clearly establish the slogan and always use it with the visual elements of the brand, so that consumers associate the presented image with a well-defined slogan. Also, special attention should be paid to the wording itself. Every agricultural enterprise needs communication based on images as well, which play an essential role in delivering trust to customers (Marin et al., 2020). From this point of view, it can be stated that Maxagro has an effective, adequate communication, the images focusing on the fleet of machines and the technology found within the company. For the purpose of

illustrating these elements, the site has in its composition images with a high resolution, in well-defined and chosen colors, The company's Facebook page was launched on April 8, 2021. Maxagro Group has since built a small Facebook community with 2,800 followers and 2,200 page likes. Of the followers, a percentage of about 2.23% interacts with the page, in one or simultaneously several ways: likes, shares or even direct mentions and tags of the page in a post. This percentage also indicates the conversion rate for the Facebook page of the Maxagro Group, in April 2023. It should be noted that the conversion rate has registered an upward trend in recent months, increasing until the year 2023 by approximately 68% (Figure 1).

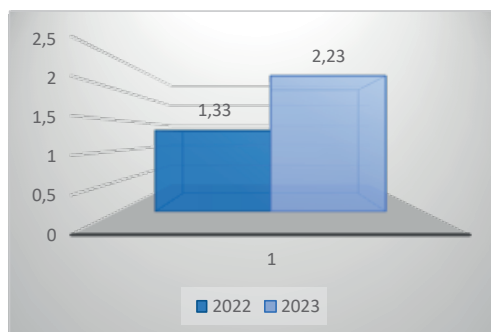


Figure 1. Conversion rate index, in April 2022-April 2023 of the Maxagro Facebook page

The page is very well structured. In addition to the contact information of the structure, information about the products and services offered and the certifications obtained can be identified. All are expressed in the 2nd person plural, in a friendly style that reveals the closeness to the members of the community. The cover page shows the brand visibility elements, the logo and the slogan, which is slightly different from the one posted on the web page. The slogan "30 years of success and performance" conveys a clear message regarding safety and continuity within the company, which is transmitted in a close relationship with the related public. Thus it was possible to plant in the minds of the community members a coherent

representation of the agricultural structure, which reflects familiarity and closeness.

In the analyzed period, namely 01.04.2022-30.04.2023, Maxagro does not have a cursive in terms of posts on the Facebook page (www.facebook.com/maxagro.ro).

The number of posts per month is fluctuating, we cannot talk about an average of posts per day, but per month, which is around 4, except for the month of January 2023 when nothing was posted on the page. In certain situations, for example: posts from March and April 2023, their number suddenly increased to 10 in March and 33 in April, respectively (Figure 2). Thus, it was desired to increase the visibility, the message of the agricultural structure reaching a considerably larger number of fans of the page, their existence in the online environment not being simultaneous. A higher frequency of posts would direct page activity to a wider segment of the target audience and directly proportional to this, it would also increase the feedback rate.

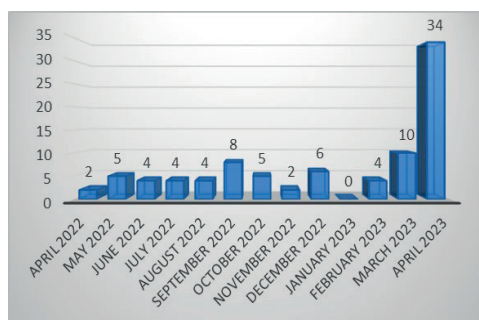


Figure 2. Frequency of posts on the Maxagro page, in the period April 2022-April 2023

The content of the posts is relatable, relevant to the target consumer and presents a stronger balance to user-generated content (Rutherford, 2007; Libaert, 2006), which is a perfect fit for Facebook. Maxagro showcases aspects of the brand and integrates its brand purpose in every post due to the positive flow of consumer engagement. Maxagro also intelligently considered what other aspects of interest their followers would have and effortlessly wove them into the content. With cultivation techniques, farm animals, farming, healthy lifestyle and family life mentioned in

almost every post, it offers a balance of content for different demographics. Maxagro does Facebook marketing exactly as they understand how it fits into their audience's lifestyle. We appreciate that one should make the most of the posting times, focusing on a certain number of posts, at least weekly, if not daily, and through the light content it provides, flow the elements of identity in each post visual, in one way or another, in the sense of making sure that its name and logo features are perfectly synchronized in their Facebook feeds, so that users constantly associate the brand with certain visual elements. Following the observation, several types of content were identified in the posts:

- posts related to the services and products sold, accompanied by images and videos of very good quality;
- posts about events organized by Maxagro, either events in which they participated or as sponsors;
- posts in which the Maxagro Group engages in social responsibility and charity activities; posts whose main subject is the employment announcements of the agricultural structure, with the exact statement of available jobs;
- articles that reproduce the positive feedback of the Romanian Maxagro brand from various supporters for the development of products and the support of domestic services.

In the following, the SWOT analysis was carried out in terms of external communication, within the Maxagro agricultural structure in the Western Region, in the online environment, based on the multimodal analysis carried out. As for the strong points, the following can be highlighted: the existence of Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok pages and Youtube and LinkedIn accounts; the high number of views of posts on the Tik Tok account; a well-structured and complex site; loyal current users; the mission, vision and values interconnect with the practices of the agricultural and public structure on the website; relationships and partnerships developed with local media; making information available through various web-based tools. Weaknesses highlight: lack of direct employee involvement in Facebook

advertising strategies; typos creeping into the website; the inconsistency of a design, based on the visual identity elements of the agricultural structure, in social media posts. The following stand out as opportunities: running a campaign on social media; populating the YouTube account; developing strong partnerships to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders; creating new marketing materials; collaboration with influencers from the agricultural sector; user loyalty by creating giveaways (contests with prizes). Aspects such as: competition from other agricultural structures; changes in technology that make your current communication tools obsolete; disruptive events that make it difficult to reach your target audience; data sharing issues and privacy policy.

Merpano online communication channels

Merpano relies in online communication on the following tools: website, Facebook page, Instagram page, and less Youtube. Compared to the previously presented agricultural structure, the Youtube channel, although more populated with videos, has only 6 subscribers, compared to the 500 subscribers and only 9 videos of the Maxagro (www.youtube.com/maxagrochannel). But, in both cases, the YouTube pages are not updated, the attention being focused on the platforms that generate a large number of views in a shorter time. The Merpano Group also has a very popular Instagram page from 25.03.2021, with 981 posts (www.instagram.com/merpanoromania).

Compared to the Maxagro company page, which is newer and has fewer posts, the members who joined the Merpano page are 57.39% less than the Maxagro company followers (Figure 3). Corroborated, although in this case too the advertising is organic, the number of likes is much lower than in the previous case. A very important element highlighted is the consistency and simultaneous and accurate distribution of content and images on all channels used, with the exception of the Youtube channel (www.youtube.com/merpanochannel).

Increasing the number of likes and followers of a page can be increased by initiating the

well-known "giveaways", a new way implemented by many of the influential personalities on Instagram.

The Merpano website (www.merpano.ro) is a complex, very well structured web page that emphasizes the company's visual identity elements. It is structured from multiple sections, the first of which is "Home" which highlights the products and services offered, the second section "About" provides information about the history of the agricultural structure, another section is entitled "Product Portfolio" in which the main producers and suppliers of the Merpano group are presented. The "Blog" section fulfills exactly the role of an actual blog where consumers can ask questions characteristic of the field, the answers being elaborated in the form of videos, taken from the company's YouTube account.

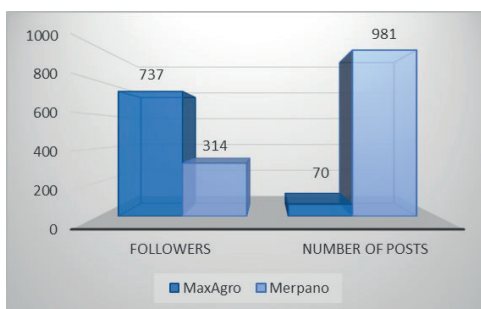


Figure 3. Number of users and likes for Maxagro and Merpano's Facebook pages

The "Why Merpano" section has a demonstrative role regarding the opinion of customers, employees and partners about the choices and experiences with this company (Kuchi, 2006), and in this case the videos are taken from the YouTube platform. Communication on the web page does not have a constancy. There is a combination of styles used, sometimes the informal one, but analyzing in a general approach, the style is impersonal, formal (Caelen, 2002; Dăncu, 2001), the emphasis being in some places on the company. It is communicated in the third person singular, in some places in the first person plural, which determines the establishment of a possible distance between the interlocutors. One can easily identify the

slogan of the company "your partner in agriculture", which always accompanies the logo, so users can identify and associate the company's image very easily. It is very important that the motto is always kept in the same form, there are two variants on the site, one of them previously mentioned, the second being written in capital letters. The essential elements that strengthen the credibility of a company's website are its vision, mission and values, aspects which, moreover, must be reflected in all published content, whether it is online or not. A website display of mission and vision, it is like a succinct definition of the agricultural enterprise, which has an important role in determining the strategic direction of the agricultural society. The company's values, transparency is also highlighted by the publication on the website of the company's values, they represent the own personality of the agricultural entity. The design of the website is essential, from this point of view it can be said that it is an adequate communication, the images used are of good quality, being directly proportional to the products and services offered. From the point of view of communication, it is considered necessary to outline very clearly the company's mission, vision and values, and if they already exist, to be published on the company's website.

The company's Facebook page was created on May 24, 2018 (www.facebook.com/merpano). The Merpano Group has established a community of farmers and beyond on Facebook, with 7,200 followers and 5,700 page likes. Among the followers, in April 2023, a percentage of about 2.5% interacts with the page, in one or simultaneously several ways: likes, shares or even mentions and direct tags of the page in a post. This percentage also indicates the conversion rate for the Merpano Group. The conversion rate in April 2023 increased by 140% compared to the conversion rate in the same month of 2022 (Figure 4).

The conversion rate is higher in the case of the Merpano page, compared to the Maxagro page by 12.1% in the year 2023, although in the year 2022 the situation was reversed, the conversion rate being higher in the case of the

Maxagro page with a percentage of 27.9%. This change can be attributed to the adoption by the agricultural structure Merapano of a strategy regarding the loyalty of the public not only through content, but through the consistency of posts.

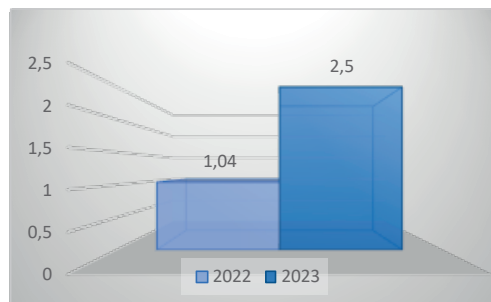


Figure 4. Conversion rate index, in April 2022-April 2023 of the Merpano Facebook page

Unlike Maxagro, which created the page in 2021, Merpano has 157.1% more followers, and 159.01% more likes, all related to the analyzed time period, considering the Merpano company has an advance of 3 years (Figure 5).

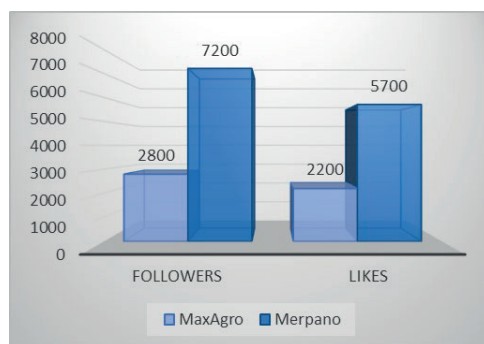


Figure 5. Number of users and likes for Facebook pages of Maxagro and Merpano

The page is very well designed, with complete contact information, a brief presentation of the company, its products and services. The formal style is intertwined with the friendly, familiar one, the expression is made in the third singular. The profile photo contains the company's logo and slogan, which conveys a concrete message regarding farmers, namely that they can rely on a partner in agriculture,

thus establishing a close relationship with the members of the page.

In the analyzed period, namely 01.04.2022-30.04.2023, Merpano has on average 1-2 posts per day. In certain situations, their number varies, increasing to 3, even 4 posts per day.

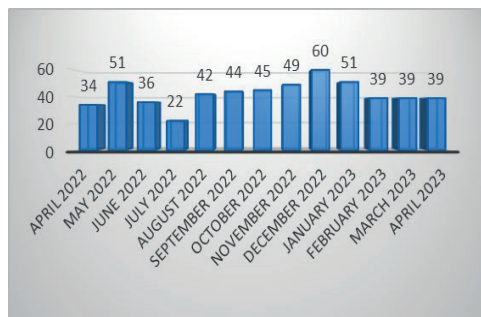


Figure 6. Frequency of posts on the Merpano page, in the period April 2022-April 2023

Thus there is a constant in terms of the number of daily posts, as can be seen in Figure 6. The month of July of the year 2022, was the month with the fewest posts, on average one post every two days, this is due mainly for the summer period, dedicated exclusively to holidays, at the opposite pole most posts were identified in the month of December 2022. The month of May 2022 also has more posts than usual, due to the fact that there was a special event for the enterprise, with double meaning, on the one hand the field and its fruits were celebrated and at the same time the 22 years of existence of the agricultural society were celebrated. The strategy of broadcasting the content at a certain well-established time interval has beneficial effects on the community,

Merpano posts a variety of content on its page. They usually contain information about the company, new products, release dates and promotional offers. They use different forms of media such as photos, GIFs and videos to display their message. They link many of their posts to their official website so customers will have convenient access to connect with them. The Facebook page is used as a customer service tool to address customer concerns.

After analyzing the content of the Facebook page of the Merpano agricultural company, we identified several types of content, as follows:

- posts about the products and services they offer;
- about the events taking place in society;
- referrals to warning campaigns about certain crop pests, thereby wanting to alert farmers to the problems existing in the sector;
- useful advice on topics of common interest between the brand and the community;
- posting of grain exchange information;
- posts with religious themes; posts related to gastronomy and other food;
- questions aimed at engaging the audience in the interactivity created on the basis of the verbal exchange of the conversation, which also generates the most likes and comments.

Also, the SWOT analysis was carried out in terms of external communication, within the Merpano agricultural structure in the Western Region, in the online environment, based on the multimodal analysis carried out. Thus, the strong points can be distinguished: the existence of Facebook pages, Instagram and the YouTube account; positive reviews from the public; loyal current users; a well-structured and complex site; making information available through various web-based tools. The weak points are: lack of online presence on other social media platforms; Interconect's mission, vision and values are not made public on the website; the inconsistency of a design, based on the visual identity elements of the agricultural structure, in social media posts. In terms of opportunities, they focus on: running a social media campaign; populating the YouTube account; developing strong partnerships to ensure the involvement of all stakeholders; development of new marketing materials; expanding online presence on social networks such as Tik Tok, LinkedIn; collaboration with influencers in the agricultural sector and user loyalty by creating giveaways (contests with prizes). The threats are summarized in the aspects that concern: competition from other agricultural enterprises; technological changes that make current communication tools obsolete; disruptive events that make it

difficult to reach your target audience; data sharing and privacy policy issues, but also the lack of successful stakeholder engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

The number of likes and shares of posts fluctuates depending on their nature. Posts about owned inputs (equipment, performance techniques used) get over 150 likes, also get the most comments and shares. Posts aimed at engaging participants in a social interactivity, in the form of a conversation-like verbal exchange, get both likes and comments.

Thus we can appreciate the fact that the way of communication in the online environment is quite effective. The statement is supported by several elements: the creation of appropriate content for community members, the degree of receptivity to feedback, the responses to members' requests, the partial achievement of the coherence of the verbal message with the visual one, the coherence and stability of the speech and style, but not least of of the permanently built rapport (enveloped by a permanently positive image - an open, traditional and pleasant agricultural enterprise). We have also identified the use of the identity strategy (emphasizing the idea that it is a Romanian brand, from the Western Region) as an image strategy and at the same time the environmental strategy which is embodied in the simultaneous use and application of several virtual communication tools, interconnected. In this sense, the communication efficiency of the Maxagro agricultural structure is shown by the high degree of visibility in the online environment and at the same time by the generation of multiple search results (94,200 results).

In terms of the number of likes, shares and comments it is high, it fluctuates depending on the nature and content of the posts. In general, users like informative posts, which have the highest number of likes (around 2000 likes).

Thus we can appreciate the fact that the way of communication in the online environment is an effective one. The claim is supported by the constant and frequent way in which content is posted. This method seems to have

a high success rate in gaining audience loyalty. At the same time, this agricultural structure also uses the identity strategy as an image strategy, which is highlighted by the simultaneous use and application of several interconnected virtual communication tools. Thus, the effectiveness of the communication of the Merpano agricultural structure is shown by the high degree of visibility in the online environment and at the same time by the generation of search results (17,600 results). The most important factor in online communication is represented by the adaptation of the agricultural enterprise to the environment in which communication is carried out. In this framework, the followers of a page want to receive qualitative information, distributed in a very short period of time, in a common, even familiar language and a friendly style, the adaptation being done at the level of the communication channel. On social networks Facebook, Instagram, it is imperative that the message is accompanied by a visual component, in order to attract more positive feedback, but at the opposite pole is the website where the emphasis should be on the informative part of the agricultural structure. Because the website of any agricultural enterprise is its business card in the online environment, it is a presentation brochure, precisely for this reason it must meet certain standards in terms of content, accessibility and its design. Given that any customer, upon first contact, judges the company by its cover, the first seconds of browsing the site are paramount in order to create customer satisfaction. The chances of losing a customer can increase exponentially, if the site has problems either loading, navigation is not simple or has grammatical errors crept into the content. The increasing popularity of promotion in the online environment attracts the presence of agricultural structures in this environment, and given the ease of access, differentiation is absolutely necessary, since the web page must impress the users. Another tool that is handy and should be developed more and more is the blog. It has recently become an effective tool in virtual communication, due to the fact that it allows the creation of content for the

products or services offered, their presentation in a distinct manner and even their humanization. To point out, in this case, is the SEO optimization, which can ensure the increase of the visibility of the blog. The blog, built on the basis of the implementation of a content strategy, can streamline the online communication process of an agricultural enterprise. Blog advertising can be supported by brand ambassadors, who are passionate people, have information about the agricultural sector and are regular users of the products/services delivered by the agricultural company. These, through personal social networks, I can promote the blog, delivering digestible content for potential users. Thus, by appealing to the ethos of communication, the transfer of trust in the company's services/products is also ensured.

The communication campaigns that should be carried out periodically (Şerban et al., 2022) must be different and ingenious to capture the attention of existing and future customers to involve them in all the actions of the company. Thus, social networks must be taken into account, which today are the ones that have the greatest impact on the majority of individuals. In order to make the communication process more efficient, it is imperative to apply an optimal strategy. First of all, it is necessary to monitor information about agricultural structures, already existing in social media. Nowadays, anyone can exercise the right to free speech and create and share content (they can be people who are satisfied or dissatisfied with the products/services offered). Secondly, it is necessary to choose the optimal communication channel, taking into account the audience to which the agricultural society addresses itself. Facebook, Instagram, more recently Tik Tok are very good communication and promotion tools when the agricultural enterprise addresses the final consumer directly. Through these platforms, the relationship with the users (the public) can be strengthened, moving to the next level (it can be humanized). Used correctly, these tools can generate many benefits for any agricultural company: customers and potential customers can be reached more easily; the

commitment of already existing customers can be made loyal through different prize campaigns, in this way the consumer remains loyal to the respective agricultural company. Another important aspect to take into account is shaping the humane and positive image of agricultural enterprises, a fact that determines paying special attention to the creation of messages or the subjectivity of the speech, thus strengthening the relationship of closeness with the public, a fact that simultaneously implies the readiness with which the society answers the questions asked, using an appropriate style and language. Starting from the premise of a society overloaded with content, attracting the attention of the public becomes an increasingly difficult process. A new way to surprise the audience is to use celebrities to promote products/services. Even if the communicative design elements were not integrated, completely balanced, the study has its relevance in the meaning-making mechanism, by sedimenting two of the fundamental properties of communication: hypertextuality and interactivity.

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