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**Designing a B2B digital communication marketing strategy in a
consultancy context**

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Master Thesis

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Abstract

Digitization has become part of our daily routines changing therefore the customer behaviour. The variety of digital channels including social networks leads to a business revolution. Nowadays, the SME's are compelled to adapt to the new online environment in order to survive. Thus, firms' are faced with the challenge of developing good marketing strategies by adopting the right digital communication channels that fulfil its objectives. From this perspective, this research aims to design a digital communication marketing strategy in B2B consultancy context using a real case study. A quantitative research using survey method is adopted to carry on this project. Research findings suggest that e-mail is the preferred digital communication channel by B2B clients in consultancy context. Thus, a newsletter campaign integrated with Facebook was designed to increase brand awareness, spread positive word-of-mouth communications, get better insight into clients and attract new ones.

This study advances the knowledge of digital marketing in consultancy context as well as Portuguese B2B and service communication literature, by finding that social media is not a crucial communication channel for Portuguese consultancy SME's (Small Medium Entrprises). In contrast, this study suggests that they have to focus more on developing innovative strategies appropriate to the preferred e-mail channel.

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List of abbreviations

B2B: Business-to-Business

B2C: Business-to-Consumers

EBS :Excellence Business Solutions

GOE: Geometrias Ocultas, Lda

IES: Informação Empreserial Simplificada

SEA: Search Engine Optimization

SEO: Search Engine Advertisement

SM: Social Media

SME's: Small Medium Enterprises

WOM: Word-of-Mouth

1 Introduction

1.1 Project background

Technologies are evolving continuously, presenting hence new opportunities and challenges for industry practitioners, education and academic research. In the same frame, internet and social media are increasingly occupying an important part of our daily life not for entertainment purpose only, it migrated also to the world of business. The digital channels has growingly revolutionized business communication (Levy and Birkner 2011). In fact, social media is becoming an important marketing tool as the world is increasingly developing into a society of online networks (Raab and Kenis, 2009). The challenge of companies nowadays is to take advantage from the variety of digital marketing channels and properly execute it. Indeed, proper execution involves the integration of all of a firm's marketing efforts within one coherent strategy, with social media acting as the means through which all efforts can be coordinated (Bash 2015).

1.2 Project Description

The project took place in Geometrias Ocultas, Lda (GOE), a Portuguese consultancy company established since 2006 in the north of the country. The marketing activities are centered in a specialized partner company from the GOE group, EBS (Excellence Business Solutions) based in Porto, Portugal. The aim of GOE is to provide "valuable solutions" for companies/organizations in a wide range of consultancy services. GOE's core activity lies on consulting services and strategic advice for the development of innovation, internationalization and research projects under the actual guidelines of the European Social Fund with the Portugal 2020 program. EBS is a partner that grants the development of the intern marketing processes but is actually mainly focused on developing services for the actual clients with active internationalization projects. Being fully aware about the importance of digital communication marketing, GOE wishes to go in the direction of developing a new strategy, dedicated to the digital channels, which is currently undermined with the actual strategy, mainly focusing on word-of-mouth.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

The current study aims to achieve practical and research objectives. The practical ones are business oriented, trying to give a deeper insight about the digital marketing strategies and channels according to the Portuguese SME's reality. In terms of research objectives it is intended to explore the most value add marketing solutions for national SME's to communicate with customers and how to gain wider customer insights.

Regarding the practical objective, although GOE is communicating with customers through digital channels such as e-mail, website and facebook, it's evident the lack of a proper marketing strategy. Hence, the aim of this project is to develop and apply a proper digital communication strategy to fulfil the following objectives:

- ✓ Increase communications word-of-mouth (WOM) among company clients
- ✓ Increase brand awareness
- ✓ Get better insight into clients communication channels preferences
- ✓ Maintain existing customers

- ✓ Attract new customers

The research objective aims to analyse the different digital marketing communication channels for B2B service companies, specifically in the consultancy field and understand their advantages and disadvantages. More specifically the research questions identified are:

RQ.1: The value of social media communication channels in B2B consultancy business.

RQ.2: What digital channel(s) most enhance WOM communication in a consultancy B2B context?

1.4 Report outline

The present report is organized into 8 chapters.

- Chapter 1-Introduction: describes the background of the thesis research followed by the description of the project. Then, the research objectives and questions are identified followed by the report outline.
- Chapter 2-Literature Review: This chapter is a crucial part, which presents a review of the published literature on digital marketing, and summarises relevant theoretical and empirical foundations.
- Chapter 3-Problem Characterisation: in which the company presented first. Second, both internal and external analyses are carried on followed by the identification of practical and research objectives.
- Chapter 4-Methodology: in which a comparative analysis of research methods was undertaken first followed by comparison of existing data collection approaches. Then, we proceeded to the description of the adopted approach and the method proposed.
- Chapter 5-Results: is dedicated to present the survey analysis and the main conclusions.
- Chapter 6-Proposed Solution: in which the steps taken to design the solution are described in details followed by a discussion
- Chapter 7-Conclusion: in which we answered to research questions initially identified.
- Chapter 8-Limitation and Future Research: presents the limitation of this study and opens perspectives for future research

2 Literature Review

New technologies impact our everyday life in almost all levels. It also became an important tool in the professional field especially when combined with internet. This huge evolution was the lead of progress in different fields, marketing for example. In the following section we are going to present the different marketing approaches surrounding the traditional and the digital context. Then in a second step the possibilities of integration and collaboration between the digital communication channels in order to build an efficient and effective marketing strategy. Finally, we outlined the two major gaps identified through the literature review, which are essentially related to a lack of research concerning the consultancy firms and the client's perspective about the real value of the digital campaigns.

2.1 Traditional marketing

Valos et al. (2016) define the traditional marketing as any conventional form of one-way communication such as television, radio, direct mail, outdoor billboard, newspapers, magazines, newsletters and other print publications. According to them, most traditional marketing channels do not allow two-way interaction between customers and marketers. Further, Sand et al. (2014) found that traditional advertising media have been gradually losing their effectiveness in increasing brand awareness. Ries et al. (2002 p. 16) states that "advertising has no credibility with consumers, who are increasingly skeptical of its claims and whenever possible are inclined to reject its message". Marketing in its traditional form is expensive. Hence, usually young firms lack resources to use for this type of marketing. (Ahlberg et al. 2008). Marketing surveys showed that traditional marketing has lost its former glory in a current over communicated market (Ahlberg et al. 2008). In fact, the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simons stated that "A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention" (Karlöf & Karlöf, 2007, p.3). This directs us to investigate the way that nowadays marketing is handling its challenges.

2.2 Digital Marketing

According to Royle et al. (2014) digital marketing is a sub branch of traditional marketing and uses modern digital channels for the placement of products and primarily for communicating with stakeholders. However, Nito (2005) finds that digital marketing is not traditional marketing boosted by digital elements but it is a new approach having its own characteristics and dynamics, which should be understood in order to be able to select effective marketing tactics and strategies. According to the author, digital channels can be classified based on the viewpoint of which party controls the communications (the company or the target audience) and whether communications is one-way or two-way (see Table 1)..

Table 1: Classification of digital marketing channels (Source: Nito (2005))

	High company control	Low company control
One-way communication	Website Email newsletters Online directories Banner advertising	SEO (Search Engine Optimization) SEA (Search Engine Advertising)
Two-way communication	Company generated blogs Company's own communities	Social media

As mentioned in the table above, websites and email are considered as examples of one-way online tools with high company control. Indeed, these two basic forms of digital marketing are often used in SMEs (Nito 2005). For instance, Christodoulides (2009) describes the company's website as the home of the brand in the online environment. Although email is a two-way communication channel in its nature, it is often used as a one-way channel to deliver newsletters or advertisements. Furthermore, Bash (2015) finds that email is considered as an additional channel providing the marketers the opportunity to interactively reach their consumers, thus building a stronger brand identity and loyalty among consumers. Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the website's search engine rank in organic search results. Search engine advertising (SEA), is paid advertisements on a search engine's results page related to some keywords. In fact, these two tools are considered nowadays crucial to enhance the visibility of a company on the web. However, both SEO and SEA are commonly adopted by larger firms and not fully understood among SME's (Karjaluoto and Leinonen, 2009). In two-way communication channels such as social media the company has less control over its brand (Weinberg and Pehlivan, 2011).

Social media definition and tools

Social media can be defined as 'user-generated communication' Michaelidou et al. (2011). The authors find that it represents now a prevalent source of information changing the communication strategies of companies. Moreover, Sand et al. (2014) suggest that the term social media refers to means of interaction among people in which they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Furthermore, Tuten and Solomon (2015, p.4) define social media as "the online means of communication, conveyance, collaboration, and cultivation among interconnected and interdependent networks of people, communities, and organizations enhanced by technological capabilities and mobility". According to Singla et al. (2015), organizations can use social media in most of the activities in its value chain.

It is important to choose properly tools when formulating a social media strategy taking into consideration the objectives of the strategy. Therefore, the integration of the different social media tools increase the network's power. Table 2 presents the social media tools and its objectives according to Bash (2015). Next the different tools are briefly described.

Chat Rooms

Although Chat rooms are one of the oldest forms of social media, they still have significant value in terms of developing an effective social media strategy (Moran & Gossieaux, 2010). In fact, firms can improve the customer service, get better insight into their needs, and enhance the communication with them through incorporating a chat room into their website (Bash 2015).

Blogs

A business blog is considered as a powerful tool because it enables the company to publish content that drive positive word-of-mouth (WOM) recommendations. The main aim of this tool is to turn the conversation on the blog into online buzz for the firm (Niederhoffer et al., 2007). Moreover, a business blog can be used as a forum to publish an incentive program and to offer tips, thereby holding contests, gathering and showcasing customer stories and maintain the conversation by publically responding to stakeholder comments (Bash, 2015).

Table 2: Social media tools (Source: Bash (2015))

Tools	Objectives
Chat Rooms	• Improve customer service • Create sense of community • Garner customer feedback
Blogs	• Drive WOM recommendations • Build meaningful relationships • Increase loyalty
You Tube	• Harness power of video to increase embedding of content in other sites
Facebook	• Advertising • Develop a community • Target specific audiences
LinkedIN	• Connect with professional communities
Twitter	• Customer engagement • Conversation propagation
Google Wave	• Increase collaboration and engagement crowdsourcing
Four Square	• Increase local and mobile connectivity • Increase network engagement

YouTube

According to McNealy (2010), YouTube is the second most searched site after Google. In fact, it is considered as a powerful way to increase the consumer engagement through user-generated content. Maintaining a YouTube channel for one's company allows for videos to also be embedded within a company's blog, thereby cross-pollinating the sites, which in turn helps to increase website traffic (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Facebook

Facebook is the most popular social networking site (McNealy, 2010). In fact, it enables companies to create their own brand community through customizing their own profile and sharing important information (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). From consumer perspective, it enhances the two-way conversation.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is another social networking site that is geared towards a more professional audience (Bash 2015). Similar to Facebook, it provides companies the opportunity to create their own profile and to foster two-way relationships with individual career professionals as well as other firms (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Twitter

Twitter is referred to as a "micro blogging" tool, as posts are limited to 140 characters. Twitter is powerful and ideal way to engage with customers, to propagate conversations about the brand and to build relationships with key stakeholders (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Google wave

Google Wave is beneficial for creating rich brand experiences through crowdsourcing. This tool provides to consumers the opportunity to interact and engage with one another in real-time and with marketers (Laker, 2010).

Four Square

Four Square is another new tool that is still in its infancy. It aims to connect individuals on a local and mobile basis, while incentivizing participants through increased participation. Businesses may take advantage from Four Square by encouraging engagement within their networks, whether externally or internally (Armano, 2009).

The continuous growth of these interpersonal networks and online communities gives the opportunity to marketers to take advantage of them and promote their products or services through electronic forms of word-of-mouth (Bash 2015).

Social media advantages from B2C and B2B perspectives

In B2C context, social media offer the markers the opportunity to deliver individualized messages to consumers and to interact instantly with them. Most importantly, it can strengthen the relationship between costumers and firms as well as create brand commitment in a short period of time (Sand et.al 2014). In fact, customers who are committed through social media to the company are more profitable than those who are not committed to the brand on social media (Rishika et al., 2013)

From B2B perspective, social media is useful tool to help corporations to really understand their consumers, design their strategies based on this understanding, use on line tools to accelerate their company's growth. Moreover, good results can be achieved with a relatively low costs since a small firm can have access to these services that can pay 4-5 times times more than an advertising agency to propose (Sand et al.2014). Besides, Shih (2009) finds that B2B companies can take advantage from social media networks such as Facbook and LinkedIn by communicating with their customers and suppliers, creating brand engagement and building trust.

2.3 Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

WOM is defined by Sweeney et al. (2008) as a process of personal influence, in which interpersonal communications between a sender and a receiver can change the receiver's behavior or attitudes. Moreover, Abdolvand et al. (2012) find that WOM is volitional post-purchase communications between customers who share their evaluation of how the acquired service or product performs. In fact, consumers rely greatly on the others' advice when making purchase decisions, especially when purchases are financially or psychologically risky. That is why, WOM information sharing is a critical component of the marketing process (Cheema and Kaikati 2010). However, the information spread by consumers via WOM communications could have either a positive impact or a negative one because the consumers are motivated to share their opinions when they are highly satisfied or dissatisfied with a product (Anderson, 1998). Hence, increasing consumers 'commitment to the company is the key factor of generating a positive WOM communications and favorable recommendations among online communities. According to Matos & Rossi (2008), aligning customer values and identities with those of the organization increase this commitment. From B2B services perspective, WOM is considered as an important factor influencing customer

selection and use of services. In fact, the intangibility and simultaneity of services make them difficult to evaluate prior to purchase and perceived as high risk (Harrison-Walker, 2001). Furthermore, customers face serious disruptions if service providers fail to meet expectations. Consequently, customers rely on a small number of trusted service providers that consistently deliver high quality services (Cousins and Menguc, 2006).

2.4 Integrated marketing strategy

The age of information and communication technologies, as well as globalization, are forcing companies to go through the adoption of digital marketing techniques including social media. According to Brady et al. (2008), social media has become increasingly integrated with the digital space contributing to the individualization of marketing where companies are increasingly communicating with its clients, gaining feedback on a one-to-one basis and providing them with bespoke solutions. While many authors (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, Bruhn et al., 2012) agree that social media has become crucial as a marketing tool to promote brands and support the creation of brand communities, a study by Tiago et al. (2014) showed that the social media is an important channel of providing information to customers, connecting with stakeholders and generating sales. Therefore, social media is becoming integral to marketing strategy due to its interactive nature that allows collaboration and fast, efficient information collection (Valos et al. 2016). The presence of marketing communications keeps in imposing itself. Marketers are provided by options to create digital linkages with customers. In fact there are two main methods for developing these linkages. The first one is to perform as a digital or interactive firm, thereby maintaining or reinforcing the high levels of digital marketing usage. The second one is to adopt various kinds of social media interaction to increase usage of digital marketing (Tiago et al. 2014)

In regards to the use of the web there are different approaches. For example Ainscough and Luckett (1996) argue that the Web can be used in a direct way for publishing, online sales, market research, and customer support. When other scholars contend that the Web can assist in an indirect way by brand building, generating WOM communication among consumers, buzz marketing, and crowdsourcing (Whitla, 2009).

On the other hand, many studies show a synergy between social media and WOM. For instance, WOM promotion becomes more effective than the traditional media outlets due to the high levels of consumer engagement with the social networking sites. According to Bash (2015), social media is acting as crucial resources for informing influencers' decisions and allowing for word-of-mouth marketing to quickly become a driving force behind all strategic marketing campaigns.

2.5 Research gaps in digital marketing

The literature review revealed two major gaps in digital marketing which need further understanding. First, although the existing literature has studied in details the digital marketing and social media from B2C perspective and provides important findings, there is still an apparent lack of academic attention from B2B point of view especially in regards to the consultancy field according to my literature review. Second, although the objectives of the use of social media by B2B companies have been investigated from marketers' point of view, this issue has not been addressed from the buyer's point of view (Michaelidou et al. 2011).

3 Problem Characterization

3.1 Company presentation

GOE is a consultancy company established in Guimarães (Portugal) with a branch office in Porto. Incorporated in 2006, provides services in three core areas of activity: Consultancy; Professional Training; and Tests and Measurements.

These services are mainly provided in the context of B2B (Business-to-Business). GOE has a team of skilled senior technicians and consultants to the various activity areas, and presents itself in the market as a company that provides "value solutions" for companies/organizations, to its directors and Human Resources. At the moment, GOE deals with a consistent portfolio of clients in various areas of activity, such as metalworking, textile, footwear, construction, baking and food. The trust that customers place in the company is very important, because the principal marketing that the company uses is the "satisfied client chain". Figure 1 presents the different departments in the organogram, in order to understand better how the company works as well as future interactions between the departments that may occur further.

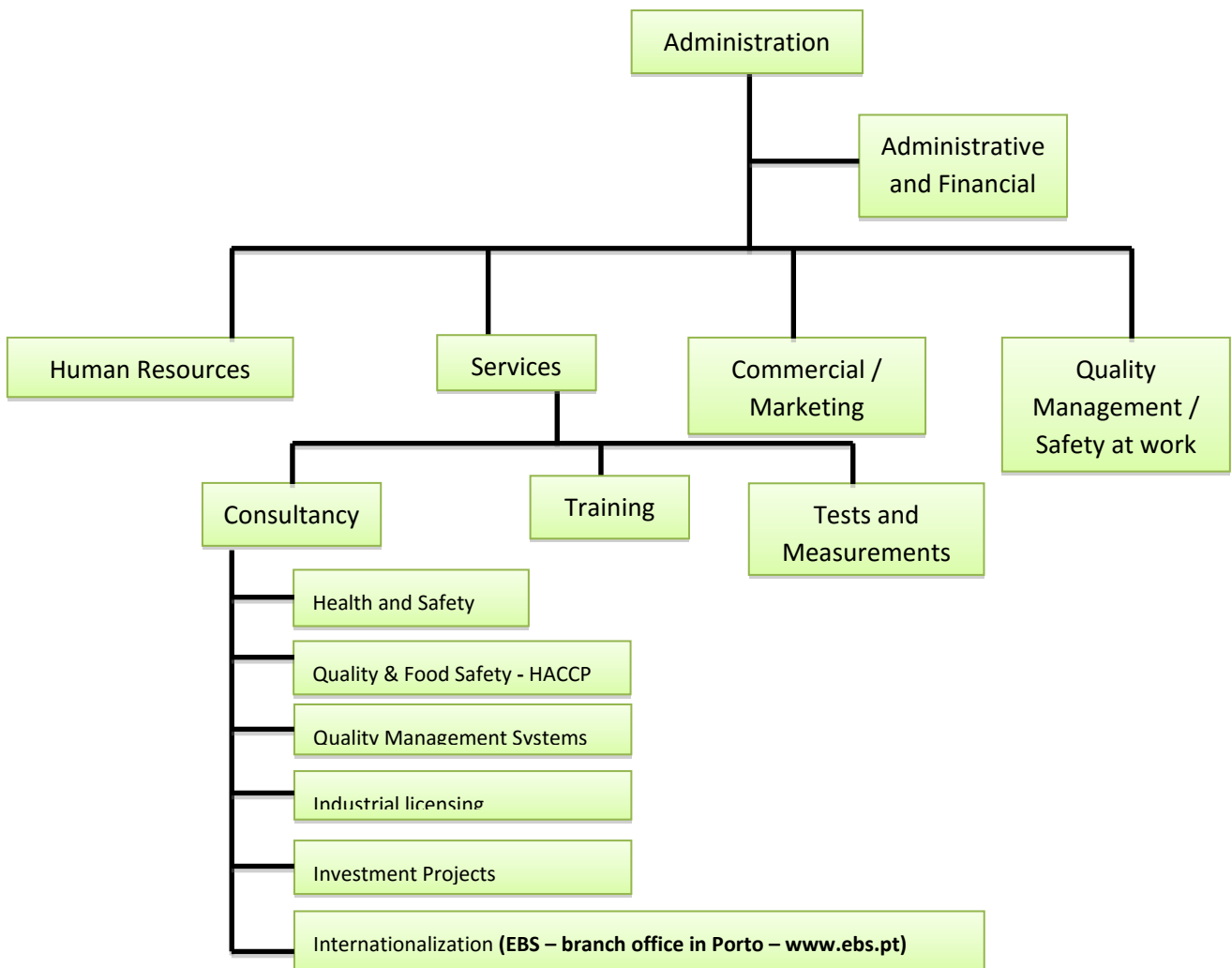


Figure 1: GOE's organogram

GOE has currently a team of 38 versatile employees that can, in most of cases, assure the development of at least two of the companies' sectors and a Financial Autonomy (Equity / Total Assets Net) $\geq 35\%$. According to the 2014 "IES" (Informação Empresarial Simplificada), the revenues are around 4 800 000,00€

3.2 SWOT analysis

Table 3 presents the company SWOT analysis in which we can get better insight into internal and external environment of GOE company.

Table 3: SWOT analysis

Strengths • A wide range of consulting services; • High quality of provided services • Good reputation due to word of mouth • Team with specific expertise in various areas of activity; • Good organizational skills; • Innovative working methods (Training in Work Context);	Weaknesses • Absence of marketing plan • Website and social media presence are not optimized for marketing purposes • Lack of market and competitors 'analysis • Outsourcing (dependence) in the Medical Service at Work; • Limited computer/IT skills of some employees
Opportunities • Appearance and exploitation of new technologies; • Variety of digital communication channels • Decay of some competitors; • Expansion of the coverage areas of services.	Threats • Legislation adjustments; • Evolution of competitors; • Worsening economic crisis.

Strengths

GOE offers to its customers a wide range of consulting services such as investment projects, Health and Safety at work; management systems, licensing. In terms of quality, GOE provides services with high quality. In fact, it has been continually distinguished by the "PME EXCELÊNCIA" prize over the years, what assures that GOE is ranked on the top 3 rating levels (1, 2 or 3) of the Mutual Guarantee System, according to the "IES". Moreover, GOE has a market presence and a good reputation due to the positive WOM communications spread among its clients. In the other hand, GOE has a team with specific expertise in various areas of activity such as industrial engineering, health and safety engineering, textile engineering and good organizational skills. Besides, GOE applies innovative working methods.

Weaknesses

Although GOE has a very good team in terms of marketing skills, there is still no marketing plan defined. Furthermore, GOE has not an active online presence. In other words, it is not using properly its digital communication channels which are website, e-mail and Facebook. There is a lack of strategic vision regarding the digital marketing. GOE has also a lack of market and competitors' analysis that sometimes can lead to loss of clients. The dependency on outsourcing in the medical service at work and the limited IT skills of some employees present another weaknesses.

Opportunities

GOE can bet in exploitation of new technologies and go through the expansion of the coverage areas of services. In digital marketing context, GOE can adopt other online platforms to increase brand awareness. The decay of some competitors is also good opportunity for GOE to attract more clients.

Threats

GOE faces a significant and consistent risk from the emergence of new technologies, and legislation changes. Furthermore, GOE can be negatively affected from the economic crisis and the evolution of competitors.

3.3 PESTEL analysis

In this section, the General Environment (also called PESTEL) is presented in Table 4. This tool presents the dimensions in the external environment that influence an industry. The components of the General Environment are: political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal segment.

Table 4: PESTEL Analysis

Political	• Government Policies (-) • Develop the work according to norms (-) • Increase bureaucracies (-)
Economic	• Global crisis, specifically Portugal crisis (-) • Opportunity to growth and be original (+) • Wide range of services (+)
Social	• Needs of companies/people are always changing (-) • Increase usage in social media (-/+)
Technological	• Need to constant keep up with innovation (-) • Need for investments in equipment's (-)
Environmental	• Increased environmental awareness
Legal	• Help companies taking care of legal issues (+) • Possibility of changes in legislation (-) • Hard to globalize this type of companies due to legal constraints, norms sometimes change according to country (+)

3.4 Business Model Canvas

The Business Model Canvas is a good tool to describe the rationale of how the company creates, delivers and captures value. It is composed by nine blocks which are: Key Partners, Key Activities, Key Resources, Value Proposition, Customer Relationship, Customer Segments, Channels, Cost Structure and Cost Streams. Figure 2 presents the Business Model Canvas of GOE.

Key Partners  - IT partners; - Suppliers: office material and equipment; - fuel.	Key Activities  - Training - Tests and Measuring - Consultancy: investment projects, quality management, occupational health.	Value Proposition  GOE Offers some significant services, bundled or not, that reduces troubles and costs when comparing to the creation of an internal department, or contracting services individually to other companies – that way GOE's costumers save time, money and energy.	Customer Relationships  - Wide range of services that help clients accomplish their objectives; - Quickness and confidentiality in the services provided.	Customer Segments  Companies that wants help and solutions to boost their competitiveness in a global market or simply to outsource some non core services
	Key Resources  - Information Technology Systems: Server - Employees - Physical Space: 2 offices; - Equipment.		Channels  - Website; - Facebook; - E-mail; - Telephone; - Physical Space; - Word-of-mouth.	
Cost Structure  - Salary of employees; - Buildings Rent; - Maintenance Costs; - Administrative Costs; - Marketing Costs.			Revenue Streams  Sales of the Services	

Figure 2: Business Model Canvas of GOE

3.5 Analysis of GOE's digital channels

GOE is present in the digital platforms through its website and Facebook page. In this section, we will analyse these two tools.

GOE's website

GOE uses its website in order to achieve these objectives:

- ✓ To introduce the company
- ✓ To present its services
- ✓ To inform its clients about the application's period to the projects through banners

Indeed the website is considered as a crucial tool to brand building, generating word-of-mouth communication (Whitla 2009), however, it is not the main channel that the consultancy companies rely on to resource for new clients. In fact, credence and reputation play an important role in the selection of a consultancy company (World 2000). That is why,

customers trust more face-to-face meetings rather than the internet researches. Regarding the existing clients list, it is very important to provide them with updated news through the website in order to maintain the ones having ongoing contracts and to keep the ones which contracts are completed in the loop of the company news. However, GOE's website is updated only twice a year to alert about the open period of projects only. There is no defined strategy for the website actualization.

GOE's Facebook

The flow generated by the Facebook page can be considered as poor. In fact, the company uses this communication channel with monthly-based updates, mainly promoting interest events and project opening periods. The events have a medium reach of 717 views but with low interaction rates, which 10% generates reactions and comments and a 5% medium rate of shares. It is clear that the report Facebook delivers is not accurate and not measurable in terms of business, but it may have some influence on brand awareness. With that goal, there should be created more campaigns, maybe exploring also the achievements of the clients, through GOE's services, which would potentiate the quality of the service. That would create more movement and involve more persons, bringing more visitors and awareness to the Facebook page. Of course, that would also bring some new concerns about the page management, a process that currently does not exist. It would be important to deal with the comments, especially the possible negatives, in order to maintain a clean sheet appealing to be visited, liked and shared. Despite the fact that the integration between websites and their associated social media pages became a trend and even a necessity in some cases, this is not the case for GOE due to the lack of social networks exploration. In fact, GOE is not managing properly its website and Facebook page because there is no structured digital marketing strategy yet. Therefore, this would be an opportunity for GOE to optimize its digital communication channels in a very easy and cheap way.

3.6 Practical objectives

As discussed above, GOE has several problems regarding digital marketing such as a lack of a digital communication strategy, deficiency in exploring social networks and a passive online presence. Therefore, this research aims to explore the value of digital communication channels from the clients' point of view in order to define the preferred ones, hence to develop a digital communication strategy for GOE.

4 Methodology

In this chapter, a comparative analysis of existing research methods and data collection approaches is conducted first based on the literature. Second, the choice of adopted approach will be justified. Finally, an explanation of the method used in our project will be carried on. However, there are several types of research and each type of research is associated with particular scientific tools (Tobergte et al. 2013). Therefore, marketing research approaches are undertaken in the following section. Indeed, marketing research is defined as the function that links the consumer, customer and public to the marketer through information for marketing purposes (Shiu et al. 2009).

4.1 Comparative analysis of existing research methods

To carry out a particular study and to answer to the research questions in a scientific way, it is crucial to follow a research methodology, otherwise the whole research effort could be a waste of time or produce a wrong or valueless result. From a business perspective, quantitative and qualitative approaches are the most frequently observed methods in the literature (Tobergte et al. 2013). We present below both the characteristics and the uses for each type of approaches.

Quantitative research focuses on a specific research question (Neuman 2006). It is defined as a research that places heavy emphasis on using formalized standard questions and predetermined response options in questionnaires or surveys administrated to large number of respondents (Shiu et al. 2009). The main goals of quantitative research are to provide specific facts decision makers can use to make accurate predictions about relationships between market factors and behaviors; gain meaningful insights into those relationships; validate the existing relationships and test various types of hypotheses (Shiu et al. 2009).

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative approach does not narrowly focus on a specific research question (Neuman 2006) but tends to gain preliminary insights into decision problems and opportunities through exploratory designs (Shiu et al. 2009). Hence, it tends to focus on the collection of detailed amounts of primary data from relatively small samples of subjects by asking questions or observing behaviors (Shiu et al. 2009). For instance, purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews seem to be the most adequate techniques for this purpose (Dudwick et al. 2006).

4.2 Comparative analysis of existing data collection approaches

A successful research study is based mainly on the effectiveness of data collection (Tobergte et al. 2013). In other words, consideration and planning of data collection needs to be done carefully. In this section, we outlined the main existing data collection approaches used in marketing research. Despite being a data collection method in its self, observation is considered by Tobergte et al. (2013) as an important element no matter which data collection method you follow. For instance, while conducting interviews in a company for marketing study purposes, it might be important to make observations about how the staff behaves and the physical infrastructure as well as the symbolic images of the company. On the other hand, to make observations more efficient, it is often wise to construct data collection sheets.

Survey method is mainstay of marketing research in general and is typically associated with descriptive and casual research situations. One of the distinguishing features of survey research method is the need to collect data from large groups of people (Shiu et al. 2009). In

fact, this method consists in asking individuals question using different techniques such as face to face, by telephone or via questionnaires in order to gather personal, company or sector information. However, bear in mind that it is crucial to make sure of the representativeness of those who are surveyed. Furthermore, it is very important that the survey has to be well designed and formulated, otherwise we may well face ‘garbage in, garbage out’ while analysing and reporting on our research. The principle is to collate answers to a number of questions and this lends itself to a more quantitative approach in terms of data analysis. (Tobergte et al. 2013)

Conducting an interview is the best method to gather qualitative data that enable the researcher to understand in-depth motivations for people’s behaviour or feelings (Tobergte et al. 2013). According to Margaret and Melissa (2009), interviews are usually one-on-one discussions, between an interviewer and an individual that aim to gather information on a specific set of topics. In addition, interviews can be conducted in person or over the phone. Comparing to survey method, interviews differ by the level of structure placed on the interaction.

The case study method is very common in business research and is particularly useful for the analysis of organisations Tobergte et al. (2013). Hence, Yin (1994) and Johnston et al. (1999) agree that the main focus is not on generalizations but on obtaining in-depth knowledge of a certain phenomenon. Furthermore, Yin (1994) affirms that case studies can include both qualitative and quantitative research. According to this author, case study research could be categorized into four main categories:

- Explanation of the causal links in real-life interventions, which are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies.
- Description of the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred.
- Exploration of situations in which the evaluation of the intervention does not have clear set of outcomes
- Providing a journalistic account of the intervention through an illustrative case study

4.3 Approach adopted

A quantitative research using survey method is adopted to carry on the present study. Indeed, one major advantage of surveys is their ability to accommodate a large sample size at relatively low costs. Furthermore, the data obtained from the survey method can increase the researcher’s ability to make inferences about the target population as a whole. Besides, the data can be analysed in many different ways based on the diversity of the variables. Thus, another factor in favour of surveys is that the collect data can be analysed with statistical tools enabling to identify hidden patterns and trends in the data (Shiu et al. 2009).

Figure 3 presents the research design of the project.

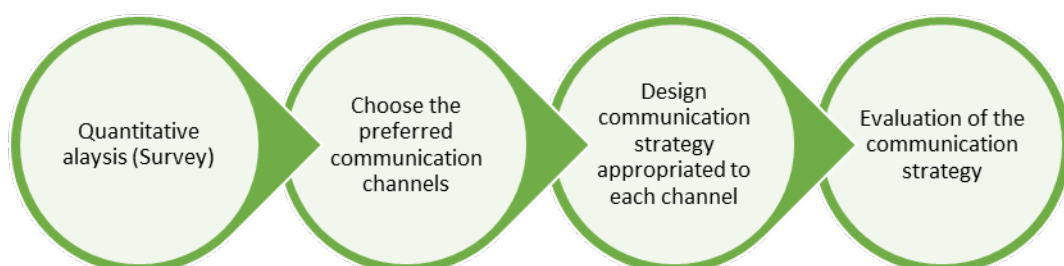


Figure 3: Research design

4.4 Method proposed

Our marketing research is based on a case study, using -GOE Company as a single case. Data is going to be obtained through a survey with GOE clients. The steps undertaken to design the survey are described in the following subsection. Taking into consideration that GOE' clients are Portuguese companies, the questionnaire was written in Portuguese.

4.4.1 Survey design

A flowerpot approach is defined as a specific framework for integrating sets of question/scale measurements into a logical, hierarchy-based questionnaire that ensures a general to specific data collection approach (Shiu et al. 2009). The diagram below illustrates the overall flowerpot design of a questionnaire that fits to our research survey.

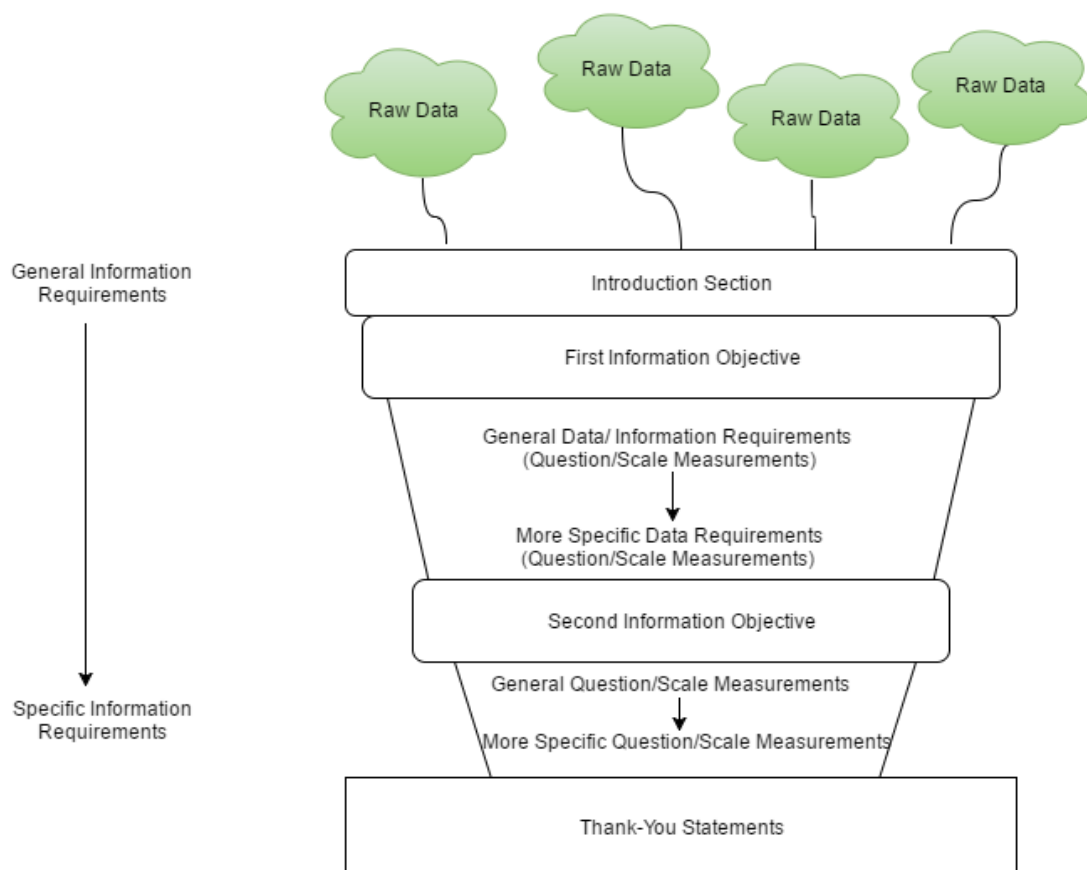


Figure 4: Flowerpot design

Development of a Flowerpot-Designed Questionnaire

Next the development process of the questionnaire through Flowerpot approach is described.

Survey goal

The goal of our survey is to get insight into the way that GOE clients perceive the digital communication channels and which is the preferred one.

Transforming Research Questions into Information objectives

In the initial phase of the development process, not only the research questions are transforming into information objectives but the number, order, breadth and depth of these information objectives are determined (Shiu et al. 2009).

RQ.1: What is the value of social media communication channels to achieve the practical objectives defined in the second chapter? (To collect data to identify which communication channels the client is interested on and the frequency of its use)

RQ.2: What digital channel(s) boosts WOM communication in consultancy context? (To collect data on the interaction of GOE' clients with its digital communication channels and to describe their expectations)

Determining Information Requirements for the Objectives

The specific data requirements which are needed to achieve each of the information objectives as well as the respondent classification information are determined in this phase.

In our case, both business area of the respondent and their type of contract with GOE are general information needed to achieve our information objectives.

Developing Specific Question/ Scale Measurement Formats

In this step, it is crucial to choose properly the type of data (e.g. state of being, behavior, intention); question format (open-ended or closed-ended format); data type (nominal, ordinal, interval or ratio); and the question and specific scale point wording (Shiu et al. 2009). The result of this step can be seen in the final questionnaire displayed in the annex.

Evaluating Questions and Scale Measurements

The questions were evaluated in order to be easy to understand, without the use of double-barreled items and phrased in a realistic setting.

Establishing Flowerpot Format and Layout

In this phase, it is important to present the questions in a logical order. In fact, our first questions aimed to identify the business area of respondent and the type of contract that he had or still has with GOE. Second, the respondent was asked about how he perceives digital communication channels in general. Third, he was asked about his opinion about GOE' digital communication channels. The aim of the last question was to identify the level of satisfaction with GOE' services. After creating a title for the questionnaire which is "*Study of digital communications channels value from clients' point of view*", a brief introductory section was included: "*Caro cliente, este inquérito visa averiguar o grau de satisfação dos serviços GOE e ficar a conhecer a importância que o marketing digital representa para a sua empresa . Por favor tire alguns minutos para que desta forma possamos servi-lo(a) melhor. O inquérito é anónimo, sendo apenas perguntada a área de atividade que exerce.*"

Evaluating the Questionnaire and Layout

This step aims to check if the instrument meets all the information objectives; the scale format and scaling properties and general-to-specific-order. Hence, it was carried on in collaboration with the GOE's marketing manager.

Implementing the Survey

After obtaining the approval of GOE's marketing manager, the questionnaire was first sent to marketing director/general director of each company via e-mail. However, the number of online answers was only 21. The rest of them were provided with a paper questionnaire. The empirical data was collected from a sample of 60 Portuguese companies, randomly derived from GOE database.

5 Results

This chapter explores the results obtained during the quantitative study. The data from the survey aim to get insight into the way that GOE's clients perceive the digital channels and hence to choose the adequate communication channels accordingly.

5.1 Survey analysis

To make the analysis of results easier, 19 questions were classified into five main categories:

- ✓ Characterization of the sample (Q.2 and Q.3)
- ✓ How do clients know about GOE' services and what are the main criteria of Consultancy Company's selection? (Q.1 and Q.4)
- ✓ How do clients perceive digital communication channels? (from Q.5 to Q.9)
- ✓ How do clients interact with GOE' digital communication channels? (from Q.10 to Q.18)
- ✓ Satisfaction level of GOE' clients with its services. (Q.19)

Characterization of the sample

Twenty one clients responded to the online questionnaire and 39 customers responded the paper version. Is important for the results analysis to acknowledge that GOE' clients are Portuguese SME's (small and medium-sized enterprises), from north of Portugal. Table 5 presents the sample characteristics.

Table 5: Sample characteristics

GOE' clients characteristics	(%)
Business area	
Textile	41,2%
Metallurgy	29,4%
Services	5,9%
Logistics and transportation	2%
Alimentation	11,8%
Other	3,9%
Type of service contract with GOE	
Investment projects	47,1%
Training	41,2%
HST()	29,4%
Management systems	35,3%

How do clients know about GOE's services and what are the main criteria of Consultancy Company's selection?

According to 70.6% of respondent, the word-of-mouth among other clients was the main reason to know about GOE' services. Only 5.9% of the respondents knew about GOE through

its website. However, no one used Facebook to get knowledge about GOE' services. When asked to choose three main criteria for consultancy company's selection, all of them agreed about the importance of the experience and the proofs that a consultancy company has, 41.2% relied on recommendations and 35.3% think that the notoriety and the image of a consultancy company are very important criteria. However, no one of the respondent took into consideration the website and the social media presence while selecting a consultancy company.

How do clients perceive digital communication channels?

87.5% of the respondents consider that the digital communication channels are important. Although all the respondent confirm that they use social media, only 52.9% of them affirm that their companies are present in the social media through LinkedIn against 44% through Facebook. When asked about the frequency of checking their e-mails per week, 82.4% of them answered more than 7 times. The frequency of using SM and e-mail by GOE's clients are presented by the following Figures 5 and 6.

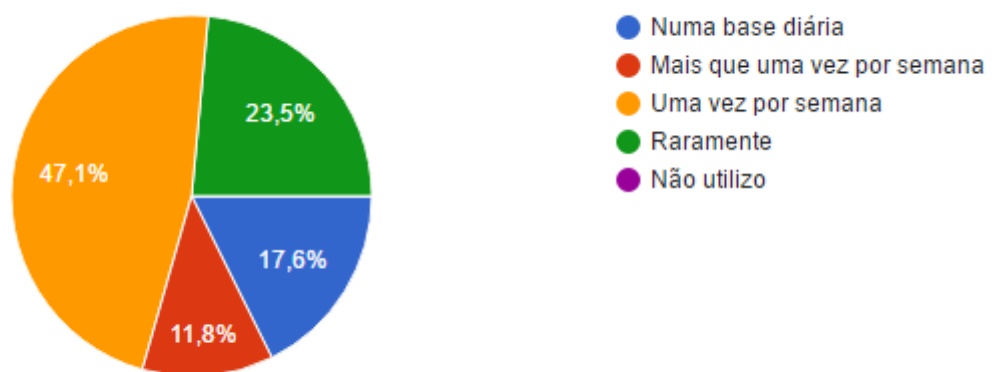


Figure 5: The frequency of using SM by GOE'clients

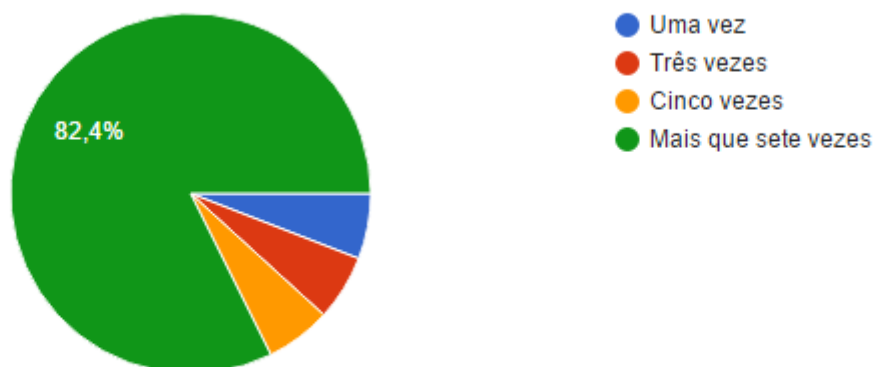


Figure 6: The frequency of using e-mail by GOE'clients

How do clients interact with GOE' digital communication channels?

Although the high majority (83.2%) affirm that they know GOE's website, 41.2% advised that they don't know about GOE's Facebook.

Question 12 was dedicated to define the level of satisfaction of the clients who use the website and the Facebook page. Figure 7 illustrates the results and shows that the majority of clients were satisfied with the website against a low satisfaction with the Facebook page.

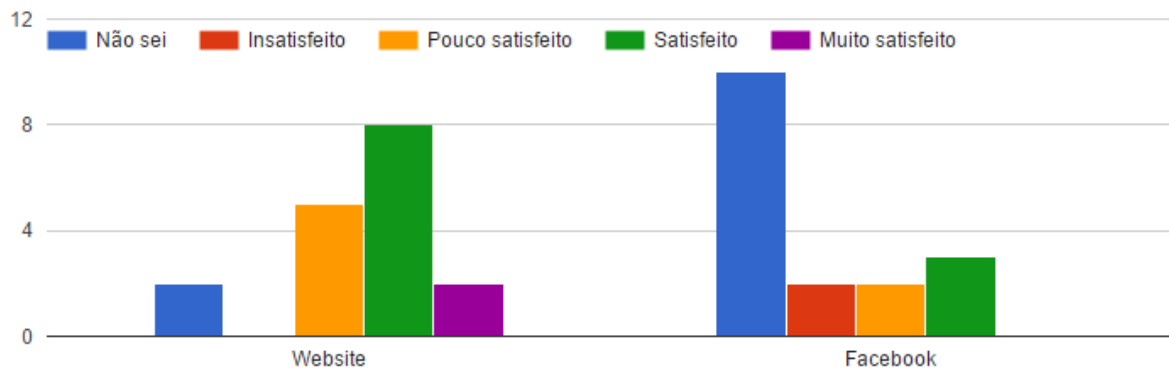


Figure 7: Satisfaction level with the website and Facebook page of GOE

78.6% of the respondents use the website of GOE only to know the company against 14.3% who are interested in getting information about the investment projects. 62.5% affirm that they visit rarely GOE's website against 12.5% who visit it one time per month. Figure 8 shows the frequency of visiting GOE's website.

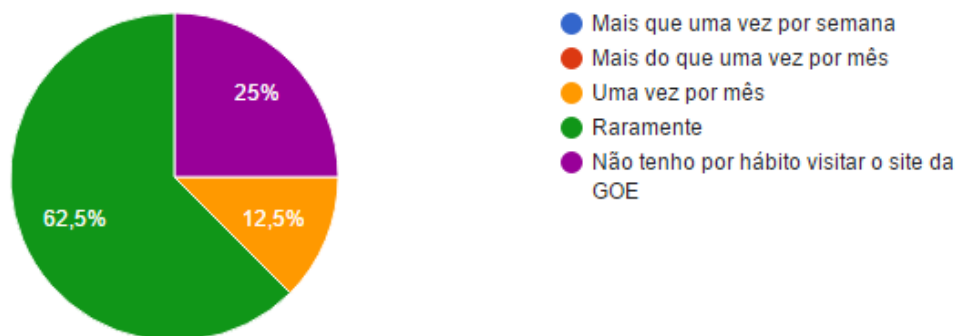


Figure 8: The frequency of visiting GOE' website

Referring now to the newsletter, when asked about the content that they want to receive, they suggested to get more information about new legal issues, solutions and applications for incentives, openings and closure periods for applications, business opportunities and campaigns, information about the services of GOE. The level of interest to receive a newsletter from GOE periodically is shown in Figure 9.

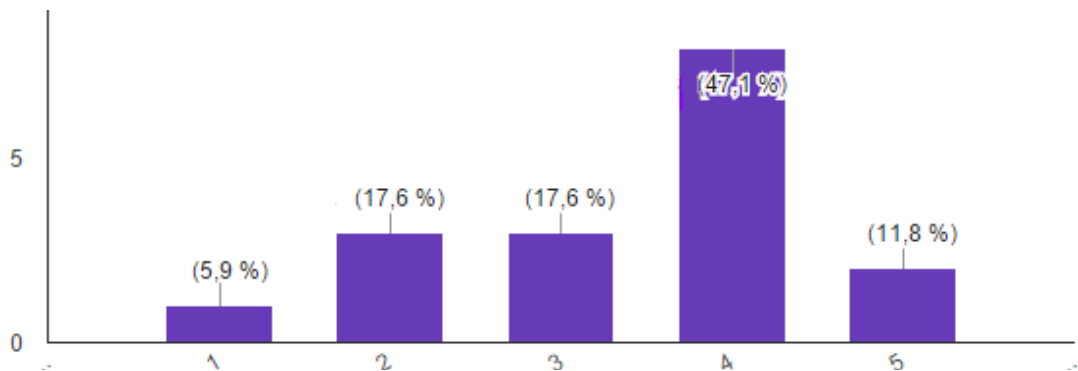


Figure 9: Interest level to receive a newsletter from GOE periodically

When asked about the promotion strategy that GOE follow, 41.2% of respondents agree that it is not relevant. The satisfaction level with the promotion strategy of GOE can be seen in the following graph.

It is important to know that 88.2% of the respondents consider GOE one of the main partners for the future projects.

Satisfaction level of GOE’ clients with its services

When asked about the level of the satisfaction with GOE’ services, 58.8% showed a high satisfaction and the rest were satisfied. Figure 10 shows the satisfaction level with GOE’ services.

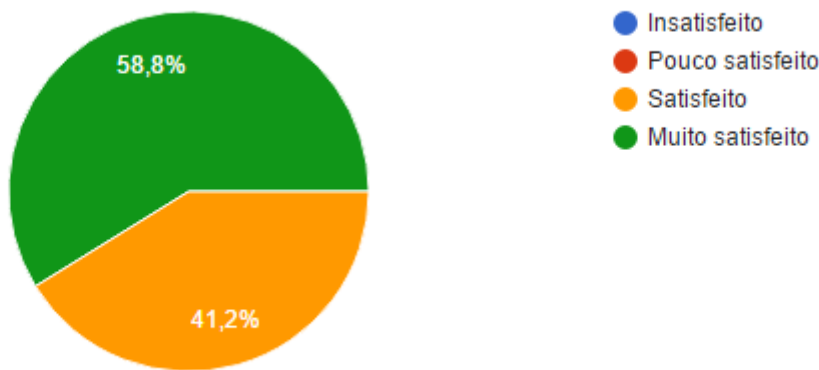


Figure 10: Satisfaction level with GOE' services

5.2 Conclusion from Survey analysis

For each category, we concluded the following:

- a. The clients of GOE are interested mainly in investment projects and training.
- b. To choose a consultancy company, the clients don't take into consideration its online presence
- c. Increasing WOM communications is crucial for GOE.
- d. GOE' clients use the social media for personal purposes more than professional ones.

The most used communication channel by GOE' clients is e-mail.

- e. The clients have higher expectations from both GOE' website and Facebook page. As discussed above in category a, the majority of respondents are interested in investment projects. However, the website is not optimized to that purpose. Furthermore, they show a big interest to receive a newsletter from GOE.
- f. Although GOE online presence is not very satisfactory, its clients are willing to maintain it as a main partner because of the variety and the high quality of its services.

6 Proposed Solution

Bearing in mind that we selected the e-mail as the best communication channel for GOE clients based on the findings of the previous chapter, the following section will describe the steps undertaken to design the appropriated digital communication strategy followed by a discussion.

Therefore, we will go through the creation of a newsletter campaign taking into consideration the goals cited previously in the third chapter. The steps taken to carry on the proposed solution are shown in Figure 11.

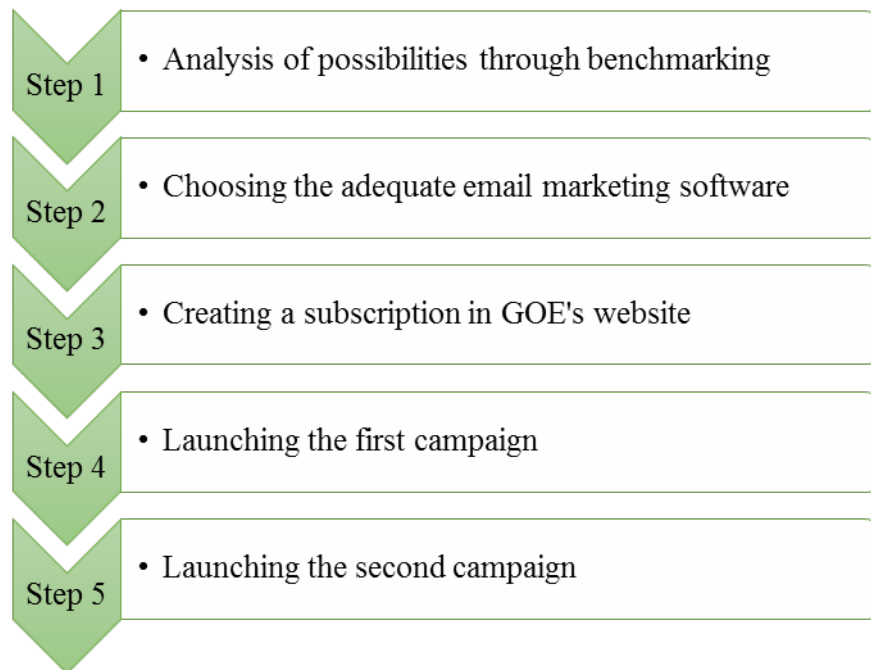


Figure 11: Steps of designing and evaluating the newsletter campaign

6.1 Steps description

First step: Benchmarking of email marketing softwares

Before adopting a solution, it is important to compare different possibilities. In fact, MailChimp was an email marketing software proposed by a manager that he is using it and showing a high level of satisfaction in regards to automation and tracking features. Taking into consideration this option, we went further through a deep online research and we selected the following email marketing softwares: MailerLite, AWeber and ConstantContact. Table 6 presents benchmarking of the different email marketing softwares chosen.

Table 6: Benchmarking table



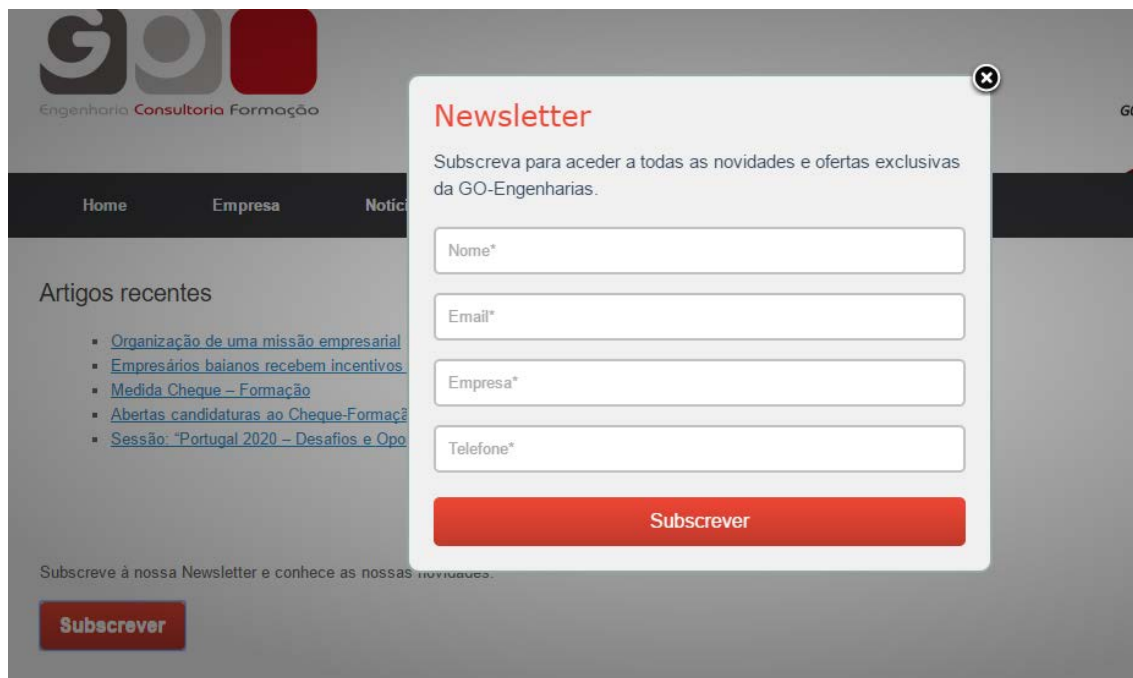
	mailer lite	MailChimp	AWeber	Constant Contact
Pricing	Free up to 1000 subscribers and unlimited emails	Free up to 2,000 subscribers and 12,000 emails per month	There is no free plan	There is no free plan
Features				
Drag-and-drop Editor	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mobile friendly emails	✓	✓	✗	✗
Click map	✓	✓	✗	✗
Subscribe & Unsubscribe notifications	✓	✓	✓	✓
Subscriber Management	✓	✓	✓	✓
Segmentation	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tracking and campaign reports	✓	✓	✓	✓
Webforms	✓	✓	✓	✓
Autoresponders	✓	Only in paid plans	✓	✓
Auto Resend	✓	✗	✗	✗
Customer support	24/7 support by Email & Chat	No support for free plan Email, Chat 8 am - 6 pm ET	Email & Chat support 8 am - 8 pm ET	Email & Chat support Monday through Friday 7am - 11pm ET Email support on weekends

Second step: Choosing the adequate email marketing software

Based on the benchmarking done in the previous step, it has been noted that only MailerLite and MailChimp provide free plans. Taking into consideration that we are in a trial phase, we will go through adopting a free solution. Although both of these softwares provide several interesting features such as subscriber management, tracking and campaign reports, the free plan of MailChimp is strongly limited in terms of automation features. Therefore, MailerLite is the best solution for GOE.

Third step: Creating a subscription form in GOE's website

This step aims to convert the website 'visitors to newsletter' subscribers. That is why, a subscription form was created through "mailerLite" asking the visitors to provide their name, email address, company name and their phone number.

The image shows a screenshot of the GO-Engenharias website. A modal form titled "Newsletter" is overlaid on the page. The form contains the text "Subscreva para aceder a todas as novidades e ofertas exclusivas da GO-Engenharias." followed by four input fields: "Nome*", "Email*", "Empresa*", and "Telefone*". Below these fields is a red button labeled "Subscrever". In the background, the website's header includes the logo and navigation links "Home", "Empresa", and "Notícias". A section titled "Artigos recentes" lists several articles with blue links. At the bottom of the page, there is another "Subscrever" button.

Fourth step: Launching the first campaign

Based on the survey results, it has been noticed that sending a newsletter is interesting for GOE clients. Therefore, this step aims to launch a first campaign in order to get better insight into clients who are willing to subscribe to GOE's newsletter. First, a list of 60 clients was asked from the Commercial department. After exporting that list from PHC to .csv format, it has been uploaded to MailerLite subscription list. Then, we design our newsletter that aims to build our primary list of subscribers. In order to increase brand awareness and spread WOM communications, we integrated a Facebook button in the newsletter. In fact, these two objectives can be achieved by 'liking' and 'sharing' the post.

Finally, the newsletter was sent to the sample. The first newsletter can be seen in the annex.

The effectiveness of an email marketing campaign can be measured in terms of its delivery and open rates, link clicks, and brand website traffic (Bash 2015). In fact, the MailerLite report shows that 71.4% of the respondents open the newsletter against 57,14% who clicked. We can conclude that this first campaign is effective. Therefore, this result motivates us to launch a second campaign.

Fifth step: Launching the second campaign

In this step, a second marketing campaign was launched targeting only the clients who already subscribed in the first newsletter described in the previous step. This second campaign aims to promote the opening of projects' application. The newsletter is joined in the annex.

6.2 Discussion

According to the survey findings, clients use more frequently their e-mail. Furthermore, a study by Muller et al. (2008) showed that e-mail marketing increases the involvement of customers with a brand, consequently increases purchase intent and positive WOM. That is why, the strategy adopted was to design a newsletter campaign which promote the opening of projects 'application.

The results show that the effectiveness of newsletter campaign depends on the number of the subscribers. In fact, it is crucial to convert the clients or website visitors into subscribers. Therefore, GOE is challenged to find new solutions to increase the number of subscribers. In the other hand, MailerLite gave the newsletter a new approach which is getting an insight about the customer behavior through tracking its traffic in the website. For instance, now it is possible with MailerLite to know what exactly the services that attract more each client. As a result, GOE is able to better understand its clients and provide them with more personalized services according to their interests. This result is in accordance with the study conducted by Bash (2015), which found that the email marketing offers the firm a straightforward and cost-effective way to strengthen customer relations. Taking into consideration the importance of WOM communications in B2B services context (Datta et al., 2005), it is very important to integrate the newsletter with Facebook because simply 'liking' a post generates WOM communications (Kunal et al. 2013). In fact, when a user clicks the Like button and engages with a message post, the message is likely to instantaneously appear in his/her friends' feeds (Facebook, 2011a). Liking is therefore analogous to WOM because users automatically share the messages they like with each other. Beyond affecting WOM, the Like button indicates the popularity of a message by displaying the number of people/friends who liked the message and encourages user engagement (De Vries et al., 2012).

7 Conclusion

There is dearth of literature focusing on how Portuguese B2B consultancy companies use properly the digital communication channels. From this perspective, this project explored firstly how GOE Company can take advantage of the different digital channels, secondly proposed to design a digital communication strategy. The research questions have been revisited and are given as follow:

RQ.1: The value of social media communication channels in B2B consultancy business.

From B2B perspective, spreading positive WOM communications, attracting new customers don't rely necessarily on the active presence of a company in social networks. In consultancy context, clients trust more on face-to-face meetings taking into consideration the experience and the proofs that company has. Therefore, social networks can be a powerful marketing tool to create customer brand engagement only if it is properly managed. In other words, the company's profile has to be up-to-date through sharing posts, making connections, commenting.

RQ.2: What digital channel(s) most enhance WOM communication in a consultancy B2B context?

Enhancing WOM communication is crucial for the surviving of a consultancy company. From B2B perspective, e-mail is the most used communication channel by clients. Therefore, email marketing based on newsletter campaigns is an effective strategy for Portuguese consultancy companies. In fact, an online email marketing software is a cost-effective tool to spread positive WOM and to get better insight into clients' preferences through the tracking reports that give the opportunities to marketers to strengthen the customer relations. Furthermore, a newsletter campaign combined with Facebook campaign might be a good opportunity for SME's to generate more WOM communications and attract new customers. In fact, the newsletter can be built with links either to the website or to the Facebook page. It is important to know that the effectiveness of a newsletter is measured by the open-rate, link clicks, and brand website and depends strongly to subscribers' number. Thus, SME's are challenged to find new solutions in order to increase the number of subscribers.

The findings of this study should be interpreted in the light of some limitations. First, as with any case study, the results are limited by the study context. Second, our findings are not necessarily generalizable to Portuguese SME's in consultancy field because of our sample of 60 companies. Thus it is recommended that future research examine the importance of social media in other industries in B2B market so more clear insight is obtained for this digital communication channel in B2B market.

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APPENDIX A: Survey

Study of digital communications channels value from clients' point of view

Caro cliente, este inquérito visa averiguar o grau de satisfação dos serviços GOE e ficar a conhecer a importância que o marketing digital representa para a sua empresa .
Por favor tire alguns minutos para que desta forma possamos servi-lo(a) melhor.
O inquérito é anónimo, sendo apenas perguntada a área de actividade que exerce.

1. Como é que teve conhecimento dos serviços GOE?

- ☐ Website
- ☐ Página do facebook
- ☐ Através de outro cliente
- ☐ Jornal
- ☐ Empresa Local
- ☐ Autre : _____

2. Tem ou teve algum serviço contratado connosco? Se sim, qual?

- ☐ Não
- ☐ Projetos de Investimento
- ☐ Formação
- ☐ HST
- ☐ Sistemas de gestão

3. Qual é a sua área empresarial?

- ☐ Têxtil
- ☐ Metalomecânica
- ☐ Serviços
- ☐ Logística e Transportes
- ☐ Plásticos
- ☐ Farmacêutica
- ☐ Alimentar
- ☐ Outro:| _____

4. Qual é o seu critério para a escolha de uma empresa de consultoria? (Escolha 3 opções)

- ☐ Notoriedade/ Imagem
- ☐ Experiência/ Provas dadas
- ☐ Por recomendação
- ☐ Um bom website
- ☐ A sua presença nas redes sociais (FB, linkedin, youtube ...)
- ☐ Autre : _____

5. Considera importante a utilização de meios de promoção e divulgação digitais?

- ☐ Sim
- ☐ Não

6. A sua empresa utiliza ou está representada nas redes sociais?

- ☐ Sim
- ☐ Não

7. Se sim, qual?

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Autre : _____

8. Com que frequência usa as redes sociais ?

- ☐ Numa base diária
- ☐ Mais que uma vez por semana
- ☐ Uma vez por semana
- ☐ Raramente
- ☐ Não utilizo

9. Quantas vezes verifica o seu e-mail por semana?

- ☐ Uma vez
- ☐ Três vezes
- ☐ Cinco vezes
- ☐ Mais que sete vezes

10. Conhece o site da GOE?

☐ Sim

☐ Não

11. Conhece o facebook da GOE?

☐ Sim

☐ Não

12. Si sim, qual o seu grau de satisfação para cada um deles? *

	Não sei	Insatisfeito	Pouco satisfeito	Satisfeito	Muito satisfeito
Website	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Facebook	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. Qual a utilização que faz/fez do site da GOE?

☐ Apenas para conhecer a empresa

☐ Utilizo como portal informativo para saber informações acerca dos projetos de investimento

☐ Autre : _____

14. Com que frequência visita o site da GOE?

☐ Mais que uma vez por semana

☐ Mais do que uma vez por mês

☐ Uma vez por mês

☐ Raramente

☐ Não tenho por hábito visitar o site da GOE

15. Quão benéfico considera receber newsletters da GOE periodicamente?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Pouco Benéfico	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Muito Benéfico

16. Que tipo de conteúdos gostaria de receber na newsletter?

17. Considera a estratégia de promoção e divulgação da GOE pertinente?

	1	2	3	4	5	
Pouco Pertinente	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	Muito Pertinente

18. Considera a GOE um dos principais parceiros para os seus projetos futuros?

☐ Sim

☐ Não

19. Qual o nível de satisfação com os nossos serviços?

☐ Insatisfeito

☐ Pouco satisfeito

☐ Satisfeito

☐ Muito satisfeito

APPENDIX B: First newsletter



APPENDIX C: Second newsletter

