

"The Impact of Social Media on the Brand Awareness of Local Small Businesses: The Case Study of Georgia"

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Social media has become an important part of today's business environment, which has developed not only as a communication channel, but also as a factor that determines customer loyalty and brand awareness. For small businesses that have limited marketing and financial resources, the use of social media is a good way to compete and establish direct relationships with the target market.

The empirical part of the study is based on a survey of 20 small business representatives from food and fashion to tourism and service sectors. The results showed that the use of social media platforms is positively related to both brand awareness and customer engagement and sales growth. Absence of a digital strategy and the lack of analytical skills – challenges were identified.

In 21st century, social media became an importance not just for communication but also for marketing and economic strategies. It is a key tool to improve market position, to interact with customers, and to increase brand awareness, especially for small businesses that have limited resources.

Small businesses play a leading role in the Georgian economy, and therefore are a significant source of employment. In such conditions, the integration of information technologies and social networks into the marketing strategy of small businesses has become not only a choice, but a necessity.

The aim of the study is to investigate how social media affects the brand awareness of small businesses in Georgia, what are the specifics of this process in the local socio-economic environment, and what challenges or opportunities arise for small businesses.

This is especially important in the Georgian reality, where small businesses are gradually transitioning from traditional advertising to digital platforms, although this process often occurs spontaneously — without a plan, targeted segmentation, and analysis of results.

1. Theoretical basis of brand awareness

The ability of a consumer to remember and recognize a particular brand among competitors is defined as brand awareness (Keller, 2013). It is one of the main components in the brand equity model and creates distinctiveness in the market. According to Keller's model, brand awareness includes two dimensions: brand recognition and brand recall, which are directly related to interaction with content and consumer engagement in the context of social media.

Brand Recognition in Social Media

- Through slogans, hashtags, logos, or color, brands are identified by customers in a social media ad or post.
- Customers are more likely to respond, to discuss, or save the post for later, when they recognize the brand

Brand Recall

- When a consumer mentions a brand at a specific time of need, on their own initiative, without prompting, it leads to active engagement: comment, share, story tagging.

2. Social Media as a Marketing Ecosystem

Social media is defined as an internet-based platform that allows users to distribute and create content. Social media marketing focuses on building relationships with consumers and two-way communication (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

This approach is significantly different from traditional marketing, as consumers are not just recipients of information, but also they create, share, and evaluate brand content. This creates trust in the brand and social capital (Tuten & Solomon, 2020).

3. Benefits of social media

The main advantages of social media for small businesses are high reach and low costs. With the right social media, small brands can compete with large brands (Durkin et al., 2013).

By social media we can:

- Increase brand awareness;
- Collect customer feedback;
- Increase sales through targeted audiences;
- Increase number of loyal customers;

4. Theoretical Models: Engagement and AIDA Frameworks

The AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) describes how a consumer moves from awareness to action (Strong, 1925) and is one of the most widely used theories in marketing. The model is modified in social media marketing - *Attention* is achieved through visual content, *Interest* is created through interaction, *Desire* is created through emotional imagery of a brand, and *Action* is created through recommendation or online purchase.

Engagement theory emphasizes the active involvement of consumers as an important source of brand value (Brodie et al., 2013). Social media platforms have become an environment that fosters this engagement, where the consumer is not just a spectator, but a participant.

5. Small Business Research in Eastern Europe and Georgia

Research conducted in Eastern European countries shows that small businesses actively use Instagram and Facebook to increase awareness, although the culture of measuring results and analytics is low.

Despite the fact that social media is technologically accessible, unfortunately in many cases small businesses do not have a systematic strategy on how to use it. In Georgia, most businesses use social media marketing only to some extent. This means they sometimes use it just to get customer feedback or promote a product, but not for long-term branding.

A qualitative method is used for the study, to investigate the effect of social media on small business brand awareness in Georgia. Detailed descriptions, perspectives and experiences are allowed by this approach.

The sample included 20 small business marketing managers and owners from Tbilisi, Kutaisi and Batumi. 6 owners - from food, 5 - from fashion, 5 - from tourism, and 4 - from services were included in this mix. The geographical variety reflects the digital marketing experiences in different areas. Criteria for selection were active social media use in the past 12 months, regular content posting, and ensuring customer engagement.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with small business owners/marketing managers. This is a data collection method based on asking questions within a predefined thematic framework.

Questions:

1. For increasing brand awareness, do you use social media?
2. Can you name the platforms that work best for you.
3. To improve brand awareness, what do you recommend from customer engagement strategies?

4. Explain challenges, you face when using social media?

5. Have you examples of successful practices?

1. Purposes of using social media

All respondents admit that the main purpose of using social media is to increase brand awareness in various ways:

- In food sector - videos, photos and the story format
- In fashion sector - brand communication and promotions
- In tourism sector - customer comments and visualization of experiences
- In service sector - customer feedback and demonstration of service quality

For example, a respondent representing the food sector noted: "The systematic posting of Stories on Instagram as part of a weekly thematic campaign has significantly increased engagement. Users have the opportunity to ask questions directly, and accordingly, we get the result of increasing the company's awareness."

2. Platform Effectiveness

- Instagram is the most effective medium for visual content and for reaching a younger audience;
- Facebook is used primarily for customer feedback;
- TikTok is particularly successful for small campaigns and for promoting new products;
- LinkedIn is identified as effective for B2B communication, particularly in tourism and services sectors.

70% of respondents noted that a Story or one-time post led to higher engagement than regular and structured content, that also demonstrates the importance of experience.

3. Customer Engagement Strategies

- Responding quickly to comments
- User-generated content (UGC)
- Games, contests, surveys - interactive campaigns
- Customer reviews integrated into brand posts or stories

A respondent from the fashion sector mentioned: "We collect photos taken by customers every month while using our products and then post them on Instagram Stories. This increases audience trust and engagement."

4. Managing social media (challenges)

1. Most respondents mentioned that they do not have a targeted campaign or a specific content plan.
2. There is a lack of technical knowledge, because many entrepreneurs do not use analytics.
3. Limited resources - there is a lack of time and human resources
4. Significant challenge in managing negative feedback - approximately 30% of respondents mentioned that they find it difficult to manage negative comments.

A respondent from the service sector mentioned: "Sometimes big response is caused by a single negative comment, however, because there are limited resources, we cannot respond to customers in a timely manner."

5. Best Practices

- Regular Story Posting
- Promotion of specific products;
- Relationship with micro-influencers;
- Integrating creative user content;
- Using customer feedback for improving products and services.

Social media impacts not only brand awareness but also customer trust, long-term loyalty and a solid business strategy – categories that were identified in the analysis showed this result.

Conclusion:

- Platforms like TikTok, Facebook and Instagram help to build brand trust, long-term loyalty and to make customer engagement.
- qualitative research showed that success relies on actively engaging customers through consistent use of visual content and effective feedback management.
- Limited financial resources, structured strategy, time and analytical skills are existing challenge that prevent achieving optimal results on social media platforms.

Recommendations:

- Small businesses can create a detailed content plan, for example - monthly campaigns and audience segmentation.
- Clear goals must be defined for each platform. For example Facebook for - user feedback, Instagram - for visual content and TikTok - for interactive campaigns.
- For younger audiences they can actively use - videos, stories, and photos.
- Businesses must respond to comments and messages in a promptly manner.
- Businesses can develop interactive campaigns, like – surveys, games and contests, to boost user engagement.

We can conclude that social media is a strategic and versatile tool for small businesses that requires resources, knowledge, planning and a creative approach. Effective social media management can help to boost brand awareness, build long-term customer trust and ensure financial success.

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