A Comparative Facebook Content Analysis between Romanian and Western European Airline Carriers

Bogdan AVRAM[*]

Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu

This research aims to investigate the different social media strategies adopted by the airline companies from two European regions. In the attempt to land more customers on their social media runway, drive more sales from social media content, increase customer satisfaction through a high response rate or increase their brand awareness, the airlines combine creativity and high-quality ideas to better promote their products and services to customers all around the globe. The paper analyses the content (number of fans, posts, number of likes, the dynamics of comments, response rate) on the Facebook pages of Tarom, Blue Air, Wizz Air, Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, KLM International and Air Europa on a one week period (10th February – 18th February 2014) and successful practices on social media. The paper also aims to provide solutions for airlines to better connect with their passengers and effectively use the social media environment to increase sales and customer satisfaction.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, social media, social networks, airline companies, response rate, Facebook,, Tarom, Blue Air, Wizz Air, Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines, KLM, Air Europa.

JEL Classification: M11, M30, M31

1. Introduction

In the last 2 years, the fast-growing industry of technology has developed opportunities for companies to create and implement different communicational strategies by using social media networks. For an industry like aviation, communication is essential in establishing a win-win relationship for both the company and the customer, eventually increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty. The increase usage of smartphones, tablets or any other devices for communication, changed the way customers search for information, how airline companies promote their services or products and most important the way in which information is shared and how it gets to the customers. Social media is seen as an advantage for the aviation industry, mainly because information gets to the customers in short time and at low costs for the airline companies. Living in a tech-geek era, people tend to spend a huge amount of time on social networks in search for more information on their favorite topics and this includes following the airline companies for offers, latest news or even to take part in different competitions.

From the customer perspective, social media has created a link between them and the airlines. Time being precious, the customers want their problems to be solved in the less amount of time possible and with

great accuracy, therefore increasing loyalty and trust for that particular brand. From the airline perspective, social media is a huge chance for getting real-time feedback from its customers, solve any question addressed to the social media team with the single purpose to differentiate the brand, building a profitable customer relationship. Also, from this perspective, social media can change the customers' faith in the brand, creating a belief in their decision when choosing the airline. Credibility comes from taking part and interact with the customers on the social media page, speaking their language, and often including different games and competitions so that the customers get to know the service and finally create a positive desire for flying. To achieve success, social media for airlines often implies active audience and engagement-worthy posts.

2. Literature Review

Becoming a modus vivendi of the 21th century, social media has facilitated a strong growth interaction between companies and customers all over the world. To understand social media as a marketing tool, we must first acknowledge what Web 2.0 is, a term that describes a new way in which end users use the World Wide Web, a place where content is continuously altered by all operators in a sharing and collaborative way (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Social media, also called consumer-generated media are a sub-group of new media defined by three characteristics: (a) they integrate telecommunications, data communications and mass communications into a single platform, (b) their content is interactive and (c) they are available in a digital form (Van Dijk, 2006). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) define social media as Internet-based applications that carry consumer –generated content which encompasses media impressions created by consumers, typically informed by relevant experience and archived or shared online for easy access by other impressionable consumers. Same authors divided social media into (a) virtual communities, (b) reviews, (c) blogs, (d) social networks and (e) media sharing sites. *Virtual communities* are online places where users share their knowledge and experience in fields of common interest, *reviews* are online websites focused on rating and reviewing places, products and services, *blogs* are personal online journals intended for general public, where authors analyze situations from their personal lives and present their opinions on various topics. *Social networks* are web-based services that allow individuals to construct public or semi-public profile with a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by other within the system. The last sub-group of social media are media sharing websites such as Youtube (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

All of these media can be used for communications between airlines, customers and the public. Taking into account the direction of communications, three groups of social media can be identified (Grancay, 2013): (a) bidirectional social media, enabling mutual communications between airlines, customers and the public. Facebook and Twitter are social media that allow all users to add content and all users can reply. For example, airlines inform public about important latest news and other users can share the information and also comment it. In this case, all users can ask questions regarding their problems and airlines as well as other users can reply ; (b) airline-to-public social media, also known as A2P are those used for one-way communication from airline to the public, in which customers cannot leave any feedback but can share, re-post or even email airline's posts; (c) public-to-public social media, also known as P2P which is similar to A2P, but instead of an airline, the page is administered by a different user who can post airline-related content. In this category, blogs, virtual communities, airline rating websites and media sharing platforms can be included.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) define social media as a „group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content". The unique aspects of social media and its immense popularity have revolutionized marketing practices such as advertising and promotion (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). Social media has also influenced consumer behavior from information acquisition to post-purchase behavior and due to the disadvantages of social media in connecting businesses to end-consumers directly, in a timely manner and at a low-cost (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) in influencing customers perceptions and behavior and in bringing together different like-minded people (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) it has become the center of attention in different industries. The much higher level of efficiency of social media compared to other traditional communication channels prompted industry leaders to state that companies must participate in Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and other in order to succeed in online environments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

It is vital for retailers and marketers to be aware of the factors that affect consumer attitudes and motives because consumers and increasingly creating content about brands, something previously controlled solely by companies (Heinonen, 2011). Chu (2011) also found that users who are Facebook members maintain a more favorable attitude towards social media and advertising. Di Petro and Pantano (2012) found that the

fun provided by Facebook, as well as the opportunity it provides users to ask for suggestions in an easy and entertaining way, motivates individuals to pay more attention to the products or services promoted on Facebook. Facebook promotes a consumer to consumer approach, exploited by consumers to share experiences and create a common knowledge on products and services, on the other it provides managers a direct channel for communicating with clients through a business to consumer approach. Companies tend to improve their Facebook pages appeal by adding games, contests and interactive applications, which attract more users.

3. Research Methodology and Data Collection

The purpose of this research is to analyze the comparative content of the Facebook pages of the Romanian-based airline companies and western European carriers and the different marketing strategies adopted by each airline. For the Romanian companies, there was no criteria established, proposing Tarom, Blue Air and Wizz Air for analysis. For the western European companies, two selected airlines must operate on at least 2 airports in Romania with its branded-aircrafts and not being in the same airline alliance as Tarom, selecting Lufthansa and Austrian Airlines for analysis. For the last two western European companies, one company must operate on at least 1 airport with its branded-aircrafts, while being in the same alliance as Tarom, proposing KLM International for analysis and for the last company, it must operate in Romania through codeshare agreements, while being in the same alliance as Tarom, proposing Air Europa for analysis. The data was collected using own research, Socialbakers and Quintly website, on a one week period, from 10th of February – 18th of February 2014 and it aims at analyzing the number of likes, daily posts (category), average number of posts, average likes, comments and shares, response rate and wall posts.

Table 1. Total number of fans per page (10th February 2014 – 18th February 2014)

| Airlines/ Date	10.feb	11.feb	12.feb	13.feb	14.feb	15.feb	16.feb	17.feb	18.feb
Air Europa	57361	57426	57487	57538	57593	57625	57661	57702	57758
Austrian Airlines	201945	202092	202254	202444	202595	202706	202869	202990	203103
Blue Air	36919	36925	36945	36964	36981	36986	36999	37007	37033
KLM	5095038	5119793	5144297	5174614	5199363	5215k	5232k	5249k	5266k
Lufthansa	1526457	1527506	1528562	1529744	1530777	1531k	1532k	1533k	1533941
Tarom	30547	30584	30612	30640	30696	30782	30819	30842	30875
wizzair.com	273715	274090	274395	274801	275137	275333	275517	275728	275959
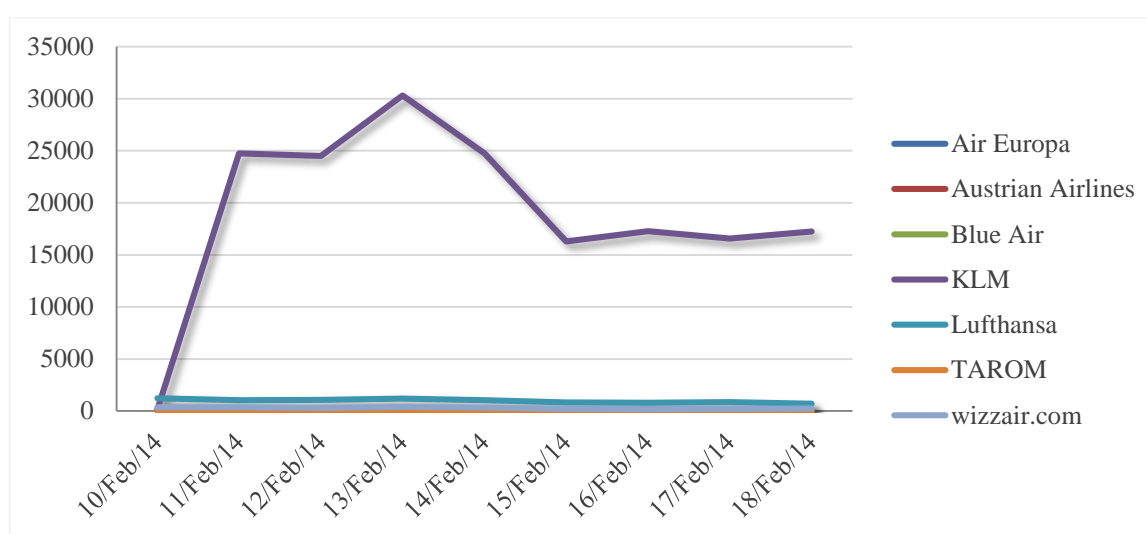
Figure 1. Number of fans - growth (absolute)

In the analyzed period, Tarom recorded the lowest number of fans on Facebook while KLM recorded the highest number of fans, passing 5 million. Both Romanian-based companies, Blue Air and Tarom recorded under 50.000 fans on Facebook while Wizz Air, with headquarters in Budapest, but strong operations in

Romania recorded over 250.000 fans on Facebook. For the western European companies, KLM, Austrian Airlines and Lufthansa overpassed 200.000 fans, while Air Europa could be included in the same category as Romanian-based airline companies. The highest growth (absolute) of fans in the period was recorded by KLM on the 13th of February, 30.317 more fans, followed by Lufthansa on 10th of February, 1.229 more fans on Facebook. The other companies recorded around 100 more fans on their Facebook pages, with Blue Air being the lowest performer with just 5 more fans on the 13th of February.
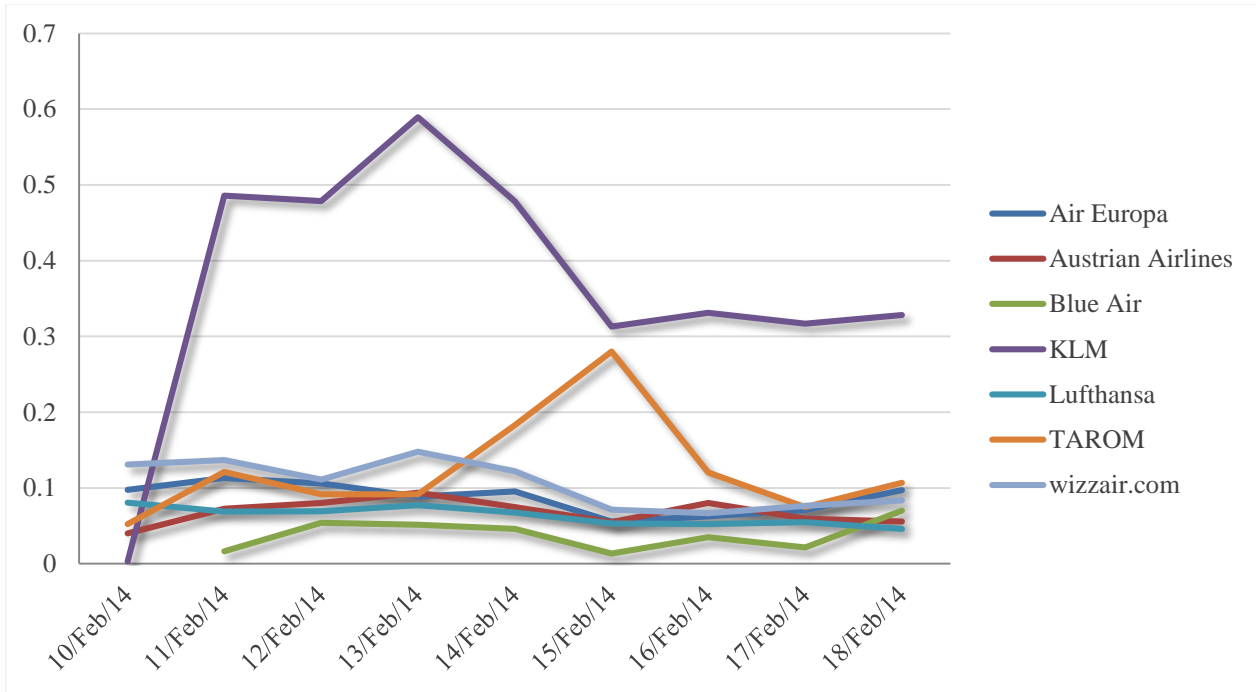
Figure 2. *Number of fans - daily growth (%)*

The strongest performer based on the daily growth is again KLM with the highest growth recorded on the 13th of February, 58.93%. The weakest performs are Blue Air, Austrian Airlines and Lufthansa with a growth below 10%, while Tarom highest growth was 28.01% recorded on the 15th of February 2014.
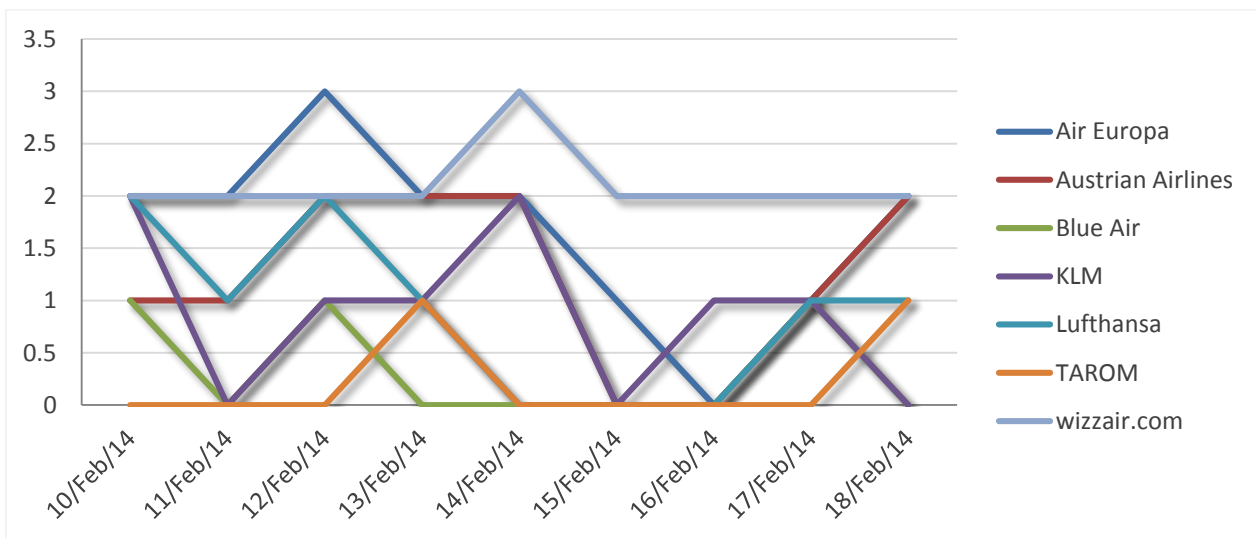

Figure 3. *Daily number of posts (absolute)*

In the analyzed period, 66 posts were recorded on the Facebook pages. Air Europa gathered 15 posts with at least 2 daily posts, Austrian Airlines 11 posts, Blue Air 3 posts, KLM 8 posts, Lufthansa 8 posts, Tarom 2 posts with Wizz Air being considered the strongest performer with 19 posts. Again, there is a clear cut

distinction between the usage of social media between Romanian and western European airlines, the Romanian airlines (except Wizz Air) are the weakest performers when the number of posts is taken into account.

Figure 4. Type of posts

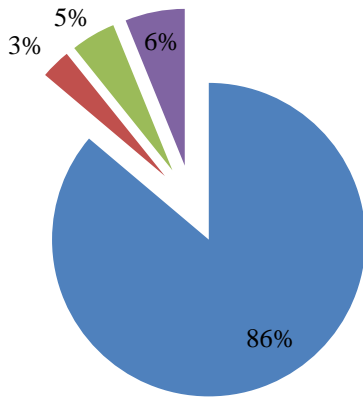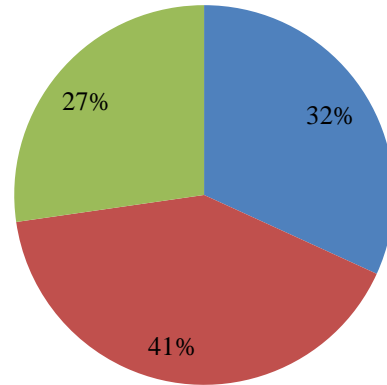*Figure 5*. Number of posts in categories
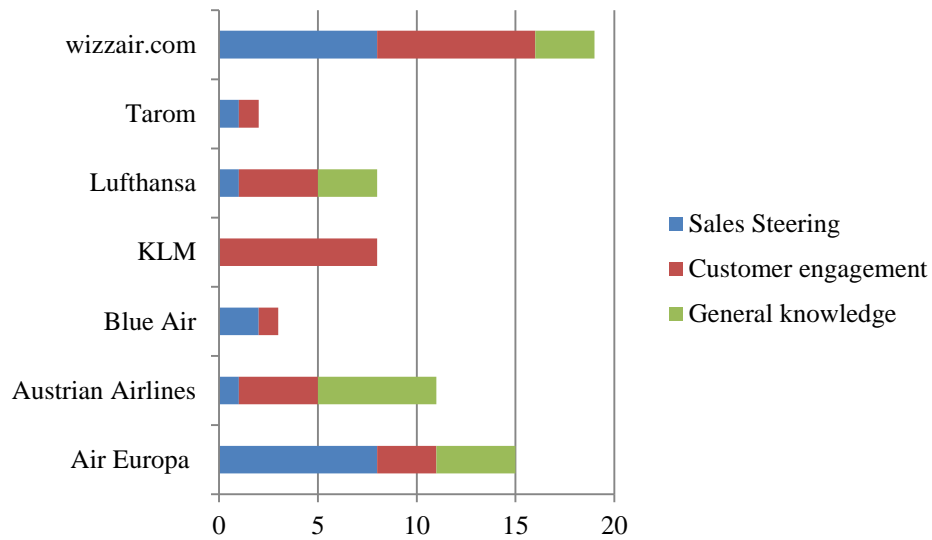

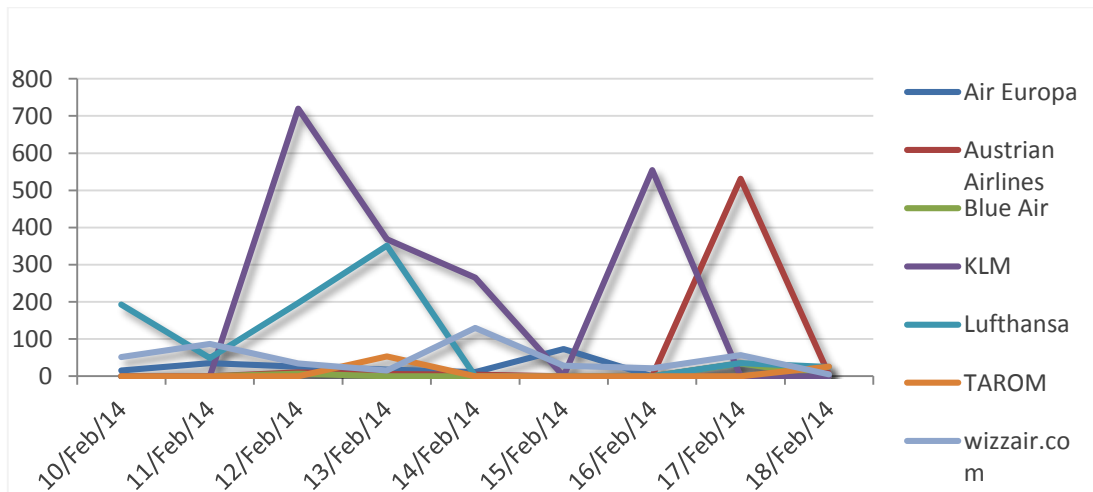*Fig 6*. Type of posts – airline analysis
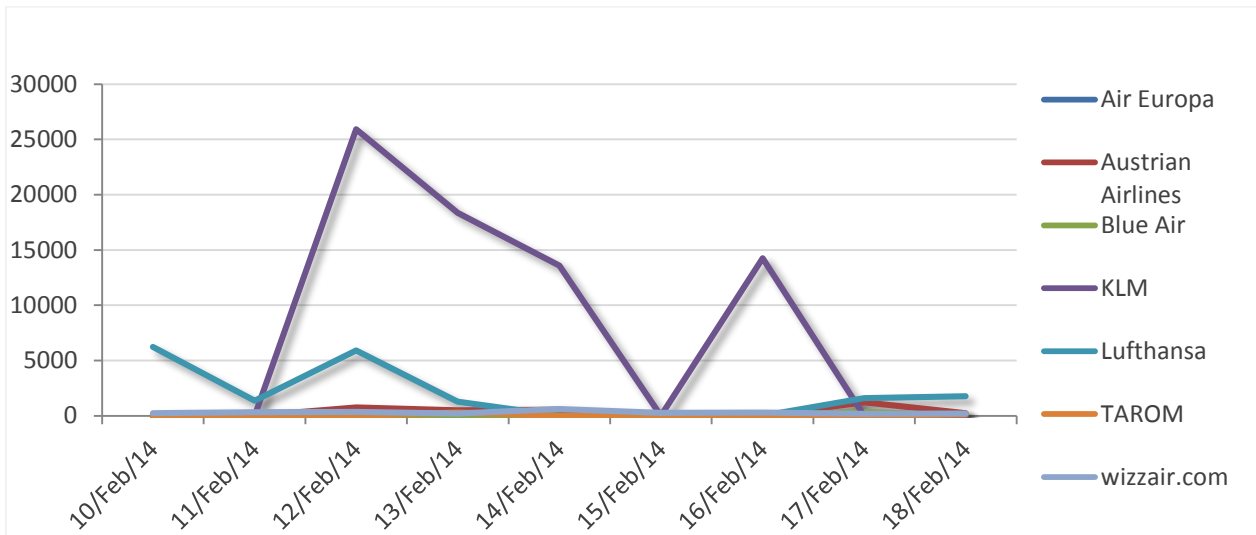

Figure 7. Number of comments
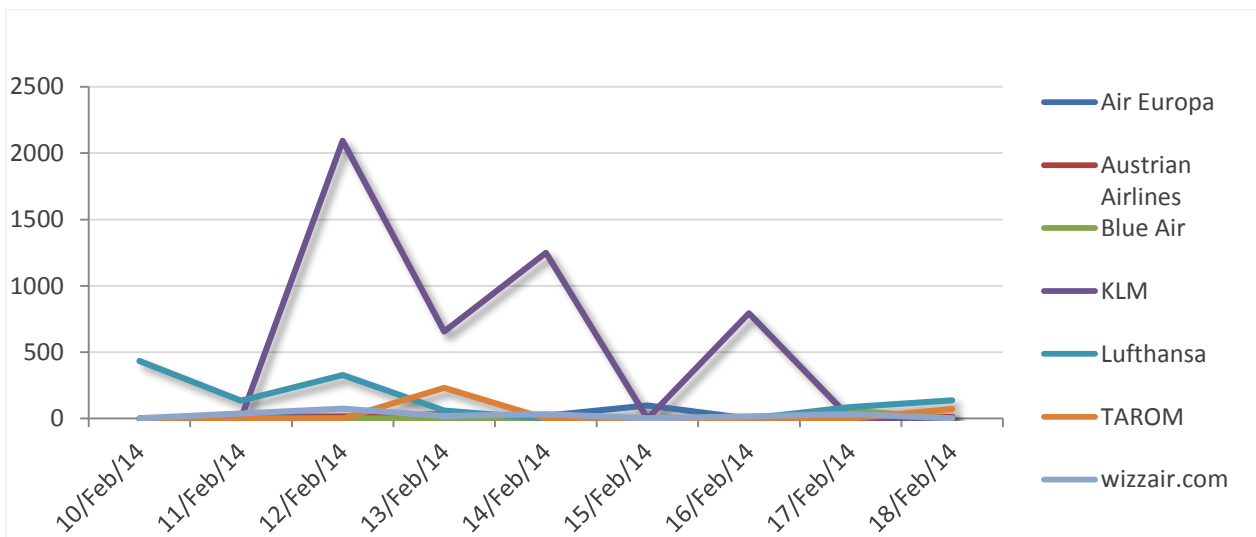
Figure 8. *Number of likes*

Figure 9. *Number of shares*

In the period analyzed, the airline companies in their Facebook online marketing strategies used photos (86%), videos (6%), status (5%) and last links (3%). The total number of posts were divided into 3 categories: sales steering (destination promotion, new route announcement, discounts) – 32% of the total posts; customer engagement (quotes, questions, fleet presentation, service promotion, prize competition) – 41% of the total posts; general knowledge (aviation facts, activity presentation, job offers) – 27% of the total posts.

Considering the type of posts by every airlines, Wizz Air strategy focused on sales steering and customer engagement rather than general knowledge, Tarom strategy focused on sales steering and customer engagement in a balanced way, Lufthansa focused on customer engagement and general knowledge rather than sales steering, KLM only on customer engagement, Blue Air on sales steering and less on the other categories, Austrian Airlines focused on general knowledge and customer engagement and less on the sales steering and Air Europa on sales steering and general knowledge and less on the customer engagement.

Analyzing the number of comments, KLM and Austrian Airlines are the top performers with posts reaching over 500 comments, followed by Lufthansa with around 300 comments for its viral post. KLM is the top performer when likes and shares are analyzed, reaching over 25.000 likes and almost 2.100 shares on 12th of February 2014, considered a peak day for viral posts. Lufthansa is the next performer with almost 5000 likes and roughly 400 shares on a top day. Even though Wizz Air has the highest number of posts, it reached only 75 shares on the 12th of February 2014 and 342 total shares on the same day. The Romanian companies performed less than western European companies, Tarom reaching only 307 likes on the 13th of February 2014

and 230 shares on the same day while Blue Air reached only 355 likes on the 17th of February 2014 and 59 shares on the same day.
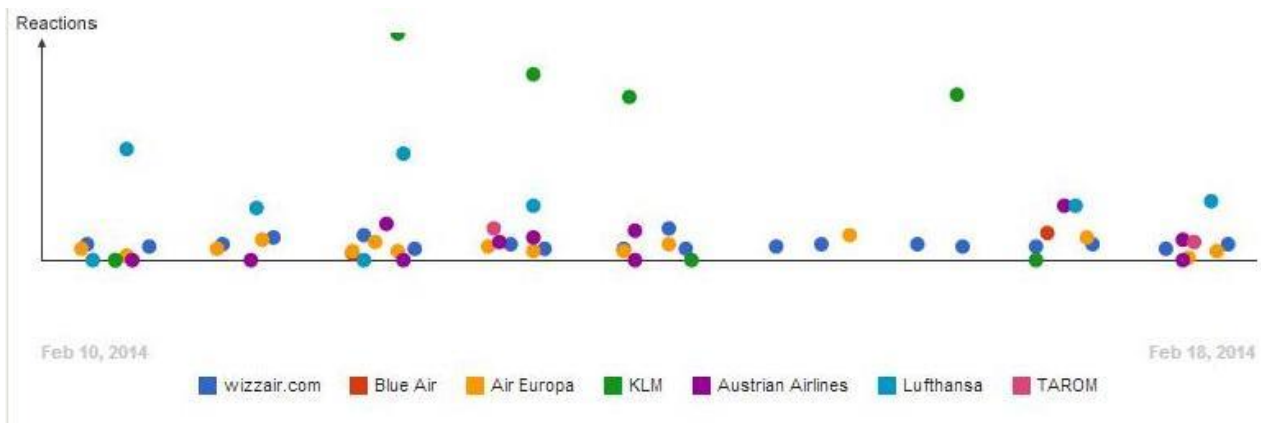

Figure 10. Engagement matrix

Figure 11. Posts reaction

The engagement matrix shows a higher usage of pictures, which triggers a higher customer engagement. The posts reaction clearly shows that KLM's and Lufthansa's posts triggered more reactions than any other company. The higher the dot, the more reaction the post triggered.

4. Results and Recommendations

Tarom's usage of Facebook is extremely low and doesn't have a specific strategy given the low number of posts. The company doesn't allow its customers to post on the page wall but rather comment the posts, which doesn't create any sense of loyalty and the brand doesn't deliver its promise to the customers. Given the high number of foreign travelers, the company posts are mainly in Romanian language and should focus offering in both English and Romanian languages. The response rates is extremely low, around 30% (Socialbakers analysis) and with a response time over 4 hours. The Facebook page offers application for online reservations, promotional offers and offers the possibility for customers to send private messages.

Blue Air usage of Facebook resembles to Tarom's page, offering posts just in the Romanian language, with a low response rate, around 30% (Socialbakes analysis) and a response time over 4 hours. The Facebook page offers application for online reservations, offers the possibility for customers to send private messages or write wall posts for a better communication.

Wizz Air, the company with the highest number of posts, is not offering the possibility to send private messages or write wall posts. However, posts are available in English and some customized posts for regional

areas such as Bulgaria or Serbia are written in the local language. The response rate is 100% (Socialbakers analysis) with a response time just under one hour to increase customer satisfaction. The page offers application for complaints or compliment, find an available job or prize competition.

Lufthansa usage of Facebook is well-organized, focused on customer engagement with no possibility to send private messages but offers the chance to write wall posts. The response rate in 100% (Socialbakers analysis) with a response time under 2 hours available only in English and German languages. The page offers application such as Ask Lufthansa, Flight track Collection or Prize Competition for a better brand awareness.

Austrian Airlines usage of Facebook is well-organized as Lufthansa, focuses more on general aviation knowledge with the possibility to write wall posts, send private messages, with a response rate of 100% (Socialbakers analysis) and a response time under 2 hours available in both English and German languages. The page offers applications for online reservations, newsletter subscription, red blog guide, reviews and prize competition.

Air Europa usage of Facebook is customer-oriented with at least 2 daily posts, with the possibility of sending private messages, write wall posts, with a response rate of 100%, but with a time response of over 4 hours. Posts are only available in Spanish, focusing on a single region, but with the possibility to receive feedback in both Spanish and English languages. The page offers application for complaints but no possibility to book a ticket via Facebook or subscribe to a newsletter.

KLM is probably the best airline company on Facebook when it comes down to innovation and creativity. With over 5.2 million fans, the page does not offer the possibility to send private messages but allows wall posts, with a response rate of 100%, a response time around 1 hour and a 24/7 online assistance. The posts are only in English (the company has other regional pages) but responses are offered in 10 languages to assist as many nations as possible. The page offers applications such as book a trip via Facebook in under 5 minutes, flight status, KLM Trip Planner, Videos, KLM Passport or even application for reviewing Fly Magazine.

The difference between the Romanian-based companies and western companies derives from high social media penetration in Western Europe with more technology-oriented companies with a high desire to understand customers and a most deep understanding of the market and the desire for a fast communication. Tarom and Blue Air, along with Wizz Air should focus on their customer desire for a high response rate, increase brand-awareness by adding mind-blowing posts which encourages customers to engage in certain conversations with the company and other travelers. Unlike the western based companies, Tarom and Blue Air lack creativity and should better connect with their passengers by adding value to their pages, involve passengers in different prize competitions, offer responses in at least 5 languages to meet fast-growing travel demand and review online strategy by adding daily posts to decrease dissatisfaction, deliver the brand promise and finally have happy customers with a strong desire to fly with the company. Facebook strategies for Romanian-based companies should focus on sales steering, increase brand trust by promoting how the company works for the passengers, how safety is promoted and how flying with them will change perspectives. Contests and free tickets are no longer enough to drive engagement, and every airline with a desire to perform will have to stay ahead of the competition by identifying key business goals, like loyalty. A new bridge between social media and real-world relationship needs to be built as customers are more connected to social media than ever. Airlines should build a strong relationship with the connected traveler, especially when it comes to having in-flight Wi-Fi on-board the aircraft, meaning that travelers are well-connected throughout their journey. If a passenger experiences something unpleasant during the flight, he is likely to post it on Facebook, along with a photo and the social media team should be able to respond properly and be connected even during flight. In this way, customer service is delivered in a manner close to real-time in order to maintain brand affinity. Romanian companies should build face-to-face relationships with online users that they have been interacting with, mainly because real-world relationships can go a long way in building online advocates. For a successful strategy, social media should build a bridge between the company and the real-time travelers who want problems to be solved as quick as possible, while maintaining a strong and efficient interaction.

5. Conclusion

In a world that craves for better connectivity and fast communications, airlines try to adapt to the market changes and build a long-term relationship with its passengers on both online and offline environments. A highly competitive market such as the aviation industry where the switching cost between airlines is non-existent for the customers, requires a well-based social media strategy to create a favorable environment for communication. The base of success for every airline is a fast response rate on social media, creativity, mind-blowing ideas. Every front-runner adopts innovation in its strategies to make a difference on the market and

allows its passengers to be a part of the company, an important key for better changes in the industry. Social media for airlines and passengers means efficiency, interaction and most of all emotional needs, states, attachment and aspirations.

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