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LANGUAGE LEARNING ONLINE - PRIORITISED (CASE STUDY)

The article seeks answers for questions related to language learning in online environment in current pandemic period. The main point of interest is to study the newest trends in marketing languages and to make use of these and create a set of golden rules to be applied in online marketing via social media, especially via social networks. We also suggest a few easy to be adopted steps to improve customers' experience of language schools teaching in online environment only. At the same time, we come up with a few extra value services to be provided to clients so that they prioritise your language school ahead of the others on the market. Fighting competitors in the period when new business plans need to be set up can be difficult and for the purpose to simplify it, we bring data verified and acknowledged by a research executed among students of language schools and English language university students as well as English language teachers and lecturers.

Key words: *COVID-19 pandemic, interaction, language learning, learning platform, online learning*.

1. Introduction into the time set-up

The times we live in are challenging. Both because of how fast we live and how much multitasking we are usually doing, paying attention to different activities all at once. The fact is that the more the world is globalised the less we get the chance to enjoy it to the fullest. In 2020, the pandemic of COVID-19 (Coronavirus disease … https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports) has broken out and people were forced to undergo multiple changes. We can call 2020 the year of awakening as many of us have just realised what their true values are and what is necessary to preserve them. Related to human health and safety, governments of multiple countries have adopted more or less strict rules, so-called precaution measures, in order to safeguard their citizens and prevent the virus from spreading. The way the pandemic situation has been handled by various countries and their governments has shown that humanity, no matter how much we have tried, has not been prepared for such an outbreak respectively. One could argue that for such a thing it is very hard, if not impossible, to get sufficiently prepared. On the other hand, we have learned a lot throughout the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic and this, we would like to apply for upcoming cases related to health and safety incidents that will for sure occur in future worldwide. Speaking of business, most of businesses from all around the world and, especially those dependent on face-to-face interaction with clients, have suffered immense financial loses, though, on the other hand, some managed to use the situation for their own good and thrived for better position on the market thanks to their flexibility. Small entrepreneurs and businesses had no other choice but to switch from offline to online

speaking both of products and services, even though their greatest advantage was the fact that they were local and had good business-customer relationships. Those, who did not manage to keep the pace with their competitors sank irretrievably into deep waters of disloyal clientele.

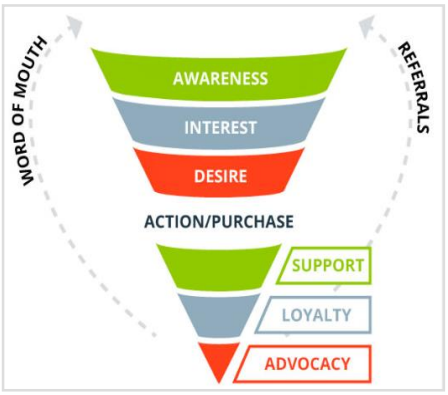
The main aim of our interest are language schools, as those, just like the whole education system, have probably suffered the most out of service providers. With limited resources and little interest of society at the time, education system lacked sufficient marketing when needed. As a result of fear for health and safety, change in schedules of daily activities and financial loses of their clients (both individual and company clients), language schools found themselves on the verge of collapse. Inability to teach in person and lack of will or skills of clients to switch to online environment made it nearly impossible to preserve language school usual profits and as such, their earnings have significantly decreased. The only way out was to switch from offline to online in extremely short time and still, the challenge has not yet been over as the clients needed to follow them. Now, having in mind that clients rarely like reaching out of their comfort zone, a scolding question arises: "*How to attract the clientele to online learning?*"

2. Theoretical background on language school marketing

Ahead of survey execution we had decided what the main aim of our study should be. We wanted not only to put attention on challenges linked with online communication for educational purposes that has risen at both ends of education string (teachers-students) but most of all we wanted to point out the very basic principles of successful marketing of language school products in online environment which are the following:

1. *Target the right audience*- the ability to target well is half of success. Creating a three layer funnel should be sufficient for targeting potential language learners (**Picture 1**). First layer consists of people who your advertising reaches out in order to raise awareness of your business. Some of them might be potentially interested in your language teaching service or adjoint services. The second layer reaches out to those who have already heard of your company, are aware of its existence but have not yet needed the need to learn a language by help of your company. The third layer, which is also the most critical one, are highly potential clients who know about your business and are currently looking for services of the same kind as your company provides (Kooij, http). All three layers are important in building up a stable clientele of a language school, but they have to be addressed by different advertising messages even if the communication channel stays the same (social media advertising via Facebook, Instagram, Google Ads, etc.)

Picture 1: Social media targeting funnel
Source: Digital marketing; Marketing mix. (online). (2020-09-25). Available at: https://www.fiverr.com/saleswhezard/create-high-converting-social-media-marketing-sales-funnel



2. *Be at the same spot as the audience is* – especially during pandemic Covid-19 and the partial businesses shut down, this became extremely important, if not vital, for businesses providing services. Businesses selling products, especially he ones having their online shop set up long ahead the pandemic did not feel the need to change their usual SaaS (Software as a Service) providers as their clients were used to purchasing their goods via this or that payment system operator. If they used PayPal prior to pandemic they would most likely stick to it during the pandemic, too. On the other hand, some service providers who were not pushed before the outbreak to further cooperation with SaaS partners found it were difficult to find reliable partners for their business. In case of language schools a very specific situation has happened. The teachers suddenly found themselves challenged by their employers to use various online communication platforms, more or less user friendly, to keep in touch with their language students. Some of them were not even ready to use them others lacked sufficient training and some even felt pushed to the corner by their employer's preferences. In fact, the only right answer to the question 'Which platform should be used by a language school for day-to-day communication with their students?'is quite easy. The best choice is always the one the clients use with other services, too. The most often used virtual communication platforms during Covid-19 pandemic were Zoom, Skype and Google HangOuts (Remote collaboration… https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/de/Documents/human-capital/Remote-Collaboration-COVID-19.pdf).

3. *Give extra value* – as the main aim of your clients is to improve their language skills, either to learn a new language from the scratch or to get better in foreign language they already speak, this mission is the same for all language schools on the spot. Your business must be different from your

competitors to be easily recognisable and wanted. In fact, the extra value of online classes and digital distant learning in general is during Covid-19 pandemic no longer an extra value of language schools already functioning in online environment. Teaching online has become a must, an inevitable supposition of survival of language schooling businesses. So, the extra value should be in time unlimited services, speaking of 24/7 online service. In fact, language school customers must sleep, too, so the business owner do not have to worry about being held online those proclaimed 24/7. Dividing online shifts among lecturers to be available so to say nonstop and cutting will not raise the costs tremendously but can make a difference for the final customer. They will get the perception that you care for them and are at full disposal. *Value-add*, also called *customer-centric marketing* is *"more than just offering a good product or staffing a contact center. It becomes a cultural way of life for the company and impacts everything from employee engagement to customer experience"* (Morgan, https://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2019/06/30/100-of-the-most-customer-centric-companies).

4. *Be consistent with your vision* – showing compassion and empathy in the challenging times has proven to be worth businesses' marketing efforts. In fact, a language school can do just the same by sharing their content for free or via special online sessions. The vision of truthful engagement with language learners and prioritising their individual needs (such as time of class preferences, studying methods, individual approach needed, etc.) is the one vision that never fades out. Consistency in regards to IMC (Integrated Marketing Communication) models is often referred to as harmonization. Generally speaking, two components of consistency are important for businesses seeking restructuralization of their marketing communication towards public. The structural view addresses actual clients and reviews competitor's marketing communication. Then the attitudinal component comes to picture. This is far more important for language schools' marketing as all parties present in the process must be willing to share their standpoint honestly (Fill, 2000). For this purpose, we researched both students and lecturers in our survey getting to know their opinion on online learning and their eventual acclimatisation to this process.

5. *Use social media for promotion* – a language school should profit from every occasion where you can advertise your visions, though, one must be very critical to choosing the right occasions and partners to cooperate with. Another thing is to provide your clients a valuable content via social media so that once they decide to follow you or become a fan of your page, they get exactly what they expect from the time spent reading your posts- new knowledge. Content management is crucial for keeping a stable audience on social networks. Being able to create a valuable content depends on multiple things, such as "*social media listening",* joining the right social networks groups, usage of relevant hashtags, cooperation with a reliable

geolocation service, etc (Korczynska, https://postfity.com/promote-language-school-using-social-media-8-social-media-marketing-tips-language-teachers-schools-case-studies). In fact, social media success of a brand is a continuous and never-ending hard work where the right content must be shared at exactly the right time via currently preferred channels. The very basic target of social media marketing of a language school is to get people engaged. For already existing client as well as potential clients it is ideal to nurture them with knowledge and encourage them to direct inquiries (Cross, https://www.slideshare.net/highereducationmarketing/social-media-strategies-for-language-schools-final-july-2019). Meeting followers' and fans' expectations, responding to their language related inquiries and providing them with meaningful and trustworthy feedback drive them towards their engagement in your business by creating certain feeling of community. Online *"word of mouth"* (sharing posts) is then surely spread well due to engaged and loyal clients and fans. Not to forget that creating any content on the internet helps to support business' SEO.

3. Survey methodology

We opted for quantitative and qualitative questionnaires as we had found it the most appropriate and effective way how to gather data about foreign language studies in the online environment. We actually run our survey in two waves as we targeted two different target groups at both ends-the students of foreign languages and the lecturers, teachers.

The first wave of the survey was executed by means of quantitative questionnaire in between April 22nd, 2020 and July 1st, 2020. The survey was anonymous and it was distributed to respondents in electronic form as well as in hard copies. We opted for Google Forms link sharing via social network Facebook and, to be able to reach out to slightly older respondents, too, via e-mail. We believed that only younger respondents would willingly click the link and fill in the questionnaire compared to older fellows who would most likely ignore it popping out on their home screen. On the other hand, sharing the questionnaire link via e-mail would have created certain pressure, a call for action, so we expected most of these to be returned filled in. With older respondents we decided to play the card of urging their action by reaching out to them directly and handing out hard copies of the questionnaire. This approach has already proven valid in other researches executed previously.

As a great part of surveyed respondents were university students, anonymity of the questionnaire was prioritised even if we would rather opt for non-anonymous survey where we would be able to reach out to any individual with creative, innovational or anyhow interesting ideas worth further investigation.

The method of quantitative analysis enabled us to reach a large number of respondents in quite a short time; 512 respondents responded to our call to take part in the survey in less than three months. 356 of them submitted

filled in online form and the rest, 156 respondents, handed in filled in hard copies of the survey. The subject of the study were people of various age groups and social backgrounds. The only thing that linked them was the fact that they all are currently listed as ESL (English as a Second Language) students and some of them have decided to study other foreign language, too.

The second wave of the survey was executed by means of in-depth interviews with English language lecturers and teachers. We handed out a list of open-ended responses to 10 questions enabling 17 of our colleagues to provide their non-limited feedback on their teaching experience from quarantine time when they were forced to teach only online. We asked them various questions related to their material, psychological and other experience of pandemic teaching online. We encouraged them to take part in our survey for the purpose of creating certain set of rules and advises that would simplify the second pandemic period teaching as it is believed and expected that the second wave is about to break out in autumn 2020. Due to long enough period of time we managed to speak in person, via a phone call or video chat with all 17 chosen colleagues. The second wave of our research is relevant to further studies of the topic.

In the first wave, we instructed our respondents to provide as truthful responses as the closed questions would enable them to do. Here we list all survey questions we posed to our respondents along with short notes (more detailed instructions) we posted to them for some questions:

1. What's your age? (This was the only demographic question we asked our respondents as we wanted the survey to be a good stable base for further investigation on language studies furthermore.)

2. What was your motivation to start to learn the language? (Choose the possibility that fits the best your primary motivation.)

3. How much time have you been studying the language? (Please note the overall time in months, years that you have been trying to learn the language.)

4. How would you evaluate your overall knowledge of newly acquired language? (Try to be objective, do not be too critical in evaluating yourselves.)

5. How would you evaluate your individual language competencies?

6. Do you still enjoy learning the language? Would you start learning it again if you had to choose again?

7. What do you think is the most common reason why some people do not succeed in acquiring language competencies throughout their learning? (What is your and your fellows' experience?)

8. Which way of 'staying in touch with the language' do you prefer for the purpose of learning it?

9. Given current pandemic security measures, F2F (face to face) schooling is not possible; would you join online schooling as a full-featured

substitute to F2F schooling?

10. If you have already had experience with online communication platforms such as Skype, Google HangOuts, etc., please, share your opinion on their functioning, your capabilities to use them, experience with technical issues, internet connection, etc.

11. Please specify what bothers you the most about online communication platforms usage. (Provide feedback only in case you find something extremely hindering.)

12. Please specify what is the most positive feature of online communication platforms usage (Provide feedback only in case you find something extremely efficient.) (See Remark 1).

The response time was not anyhow limited and there was always left efficient space of several lines to provide extra feedback in case of open-ended questions. The respondents profited from this and provided a lot of efficacious feedback.

The second wave of questions for teachers and lecturers consisted of the following pre-set questions, even though the most relevant feedback resulted from further discussion of lecturers' ideas.

The original questions were the following:

1. How familiar are you with social networks? (Let's talk about how often, to what extent and which ones you use both for private and work-related purposes.)

2. After having experienced online teaching. What do you prefer-online or offline? If both, what is the ratio and why.

3. Do you find online learning during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic period beneficial to your students?

4. Do you find teaching online (compared to offline) better (more efficient, less stressful, more flexible, etc.)? In which aspects? Name the aspoects.

5. How do the students approach online schooling in general? Do they find it attractive/ boring/ (in)sufficient/(non)interactive? (Speaking of your direct experience on your own classes.)

6. Do you feel students interact with you more/less/to the same extent as on F2F classes?

7. What kind of channels do you use to teach your English classes curriculum (what channels, media, social networks and applications do you use/ recommend for teaching).

8. Do students do their homework and which channels do they use to post it back to you?

9. Do you find your students the same way motivated to learn languages now, when they have experienced online classes? (Please, do not hesitate to compare their results now and then how you perceive it.)

10. Please, specify all positives and negatives you encountered from your perspective as a language lecturer while teaching only online.

After having obtained feedback from both hard copies (processed by means of in person checks) and soft copies (processed by means of Google Forms charts and pies evaluation system) and by taking notes from recorded in person meetings, phone calls and video chats, we gathered data and evaluated it.

4. Survey findings and resulting summary

After having examined the survey results and gathered data into comprehensible charts and pies, pining up the most outstanding ideas of English language teachers and lecturers, we have cross-checked them with our original aims and primary expectations based on theoretical background. The results are hereby listed.

The first wave of the survey:

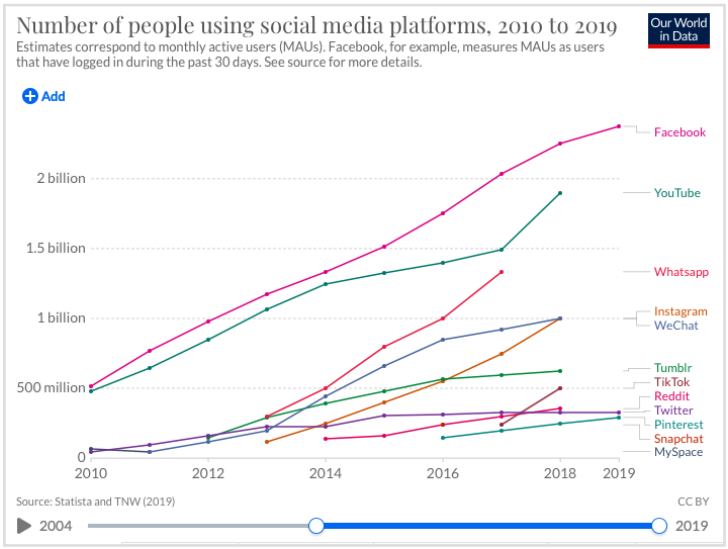
75% of our respondents were students in between 15 and 25 which means we successfully targeted the most productive people of nowadays whom are at the same time the most relevant and one of the most interesting language school clients from financial and time-related points of view. At the same time generation Z is the one to target to as they have ahead of them the longest productive life cycle and are exactly the ones already in need for language schooling, as they will lead their productive live in multinational / multicultural environment where knowledge of foreign languages is a must.

Targeting the audience is as such a mission easily accomplished however finding the right social media, to reach out to the youth is a harder task. In fact, above mentioned data related to the most favourite social media designated for sharing ideas in COVID-19 pandemic period do not provide us with sufficient and reliable data as we would expect the research results would vary tremendously from one job field to another and schooling would be no exception. For this purpose, we align data on how quickly the most popular social media could have attracted their users in the chart below.

To be able to reach out to language learning customers a convenient for both sides platform should be decided upon however the very first step should be reaching out to audience of potential customers and those are on social networks. So the information that Facebook is still rising in popularity and that it is followed by YouTube and WhatsApp as the other most popular social media platforms is worth considering. Whatsapp along with ever-present YouTube and TikTok, a newbie on the spot, are the quickest rising platforms as to number of users. This directs language schools to keep posting on this most popular social network and taking closer and better look at their business fan page, too. Facebook advertisement is worth spending

money on, too. Subsequently, YouTube and Instagram stay the other two platforms for content sharing, as proven by studies.

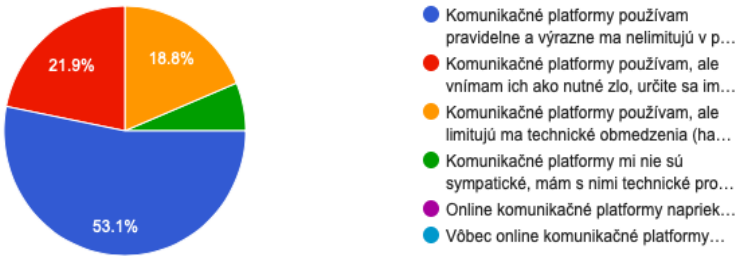
Picture 2: Number of people using social media platforms, 2010 to 2019
Source: ORTIZ-OSPINA, E.: The rise of social media. (online). (2020-09-27).
Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/rise-of-social-media



There appeared two questions in our survey related to willingness of language school clients to overstep their comfort zone and reaching out to their lecturers via internet during lockdown at the time of COVID-19 pandemic. We gathered data supporting our initial supposition that people who keep on getting in touch with social media platforms and social networks because of their work are more willing to work with them for language learning purposes, too. They are already used to online platforms and feel no or only limited aversion to their usage during lockdown unlike those whom came from other than white collar working environment. More than 53% of asked people have already been using communication platforms and find these quite efficient without feeling any outstanding feeling of distaste for these. Nearly 22% of our respondents claimed they use communication platforms but they consider their usage inevitable at this point o time and they expressed themselves by proclaiming they will prevent using them in future in such an extent. For these respondents who could be a quarter of potential market share for language schools we would suggest the business to target them with marketing message via communication platforms of everyday use rather than via specialised ones. That would mean using Viber and Whatsapp should be ok once the language school owns their data available for marketing purposes sharing (either thanks to their own CRM or as an acquisition for third party users). Sending out a message or sharing a GIF announcing basic information about an event would most likely considered to be OK. As fellow lecturers mentioned, students preferred Viber, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger for instant communication

compared to suggested platforms such as e-mail communication, communication via Google Hangouts or Edmodo.

Picture 3: Survey results
Source: Author's own processing via Google Forms.



Investigating into the topic of added value for language learners was a far more difficult topic.First of all we asked the students about their motivation to start learning the language and then if they still enjoy learning/ studying the language after getting used to their learning system.We were interested in the fact if it does not get boring. At the same time, we investigated their learning habits and which channels they use to stay in touch with the language. The most common responses to question related to motivation were that students liked the language (how it sounds), they became excited about the culture of people speaking the language or they liked travelling to the country where the languages spoken. 37,5% of respondents started learning the language because they liked it. Another 31,3% opted for learning the language because they expect this soft skill to improve their chances on the job market. Knowing this, we would suggest a language school to share via social platforms content linked to interesting facts about the language itself, the countries where it is spoken and its culture. In fact, as proven multiple times in advertising, a great picture is worth thousand words. We would suggest a school to post information with very specific descriptions in the language available for sharing so that the content can be re-posted by their fans.For those, who find a foreign language utile for their job, sharing data such as information about possibilities how to obtain a language certificate or useful tips and hacks for international recognised tests along with institutions and dates when these are available. Of course, supposing the language school has available trained courses for such certificated and are themselves licensed in teaching these.

Another thing is that some 40% of our respondents claimed that they study the language rather to preserve the actual level of their soft skill. From experience we may claim that posting interesting tips for podcasts, series and movies would stick in the minds of language school fans and they would gladly repost them to their peers.

Being consistent with language school's vision meaning keeping the pace with primarily set goals. Going online with teaching could have been difficult due to technical difficulties (around 17% of respondents mentioned technological, either software or hardware issues and slow internet connection as well as huge time lapses), the fact that both lecturers and students needed to step out of their comfort zone, etc. Though, being consistent with language school vision (such as preserving schedule of online classes, regular posts on social media and common distribution of homework and checking it up) and showing genuine interest in your actual as well as potential customers could likely gain their attention and interest in your services.

At last, the respondents expressed their willingness to learn online however they all mentioned hat they are looking forward F2F classes, too, as the most positive thing about online is the fact that they save time and money they would otherwise spent travelling. However, most of the respondents (76%) also suggested that they are likely to get bored as they miss certain features of direct, in person communication, such as gestures, eye-contact, pitch of voice variation… They also fear getting bored (37%) and being unable to preserve their motivation for learning.

For this purpose, we would suggest the lecturers reaching out to their clients in their free time, too, as they miss the opportunity to create connection one with another. By sharing simple, funny, leisure activities from lecturer's private lives with their students online (via Facebook or Instagram stories) in foreign language they would enforce the business image and engagement which would be helpful in strengthening the language community, too.

5. Conclusion

Altogether, the survey has proven that students are willing to study online even though they perceive a lot of negatives related to language learning via digital tools. What they miss the most is interaction via direct in person communication and ideas sharing. In fact, building a trustworthy brand who would have an image of an engaged and caring communication partner creates a sense of community that is nowadays the strongest and most persuasive marketing tool in online environment. People who find themselves estranged from their co-workers, friends, civic communities, deprived of social connections would welcome to create a sense of community at least in online environment, now. For this purpose, they are willing to overstep their comfort zone and learn how to use various social media into greater extent that they used to by now. At the same time, marketing to those people gets in fact more effective in targeting as you know exactly where in online environment you may find them.

As many businesses fear, going fully online would cause extra costs to them and will throw their budget into red numbers. It may seem true,

however cutting the costs of outdoor advertising to 0 and using numerous discounts and free-of-charge services from world-wide providers can help the language school to expand their clientele as no more boundaries exist in online environment, now. Software moguls enabled their services for limited costs or totally free of charge and especially small businesses should profit from it. There are numerous benefits online provides compared to offline- it saves time, costs, human resources... At the same time, it requires expertise and that should be seen as the greatest investment and benefit of COVID-19 experience for entrepreneurs and businesses.

Remarks:

1. Survey is available online (2020-09-20) at https://bit.ly/2KqQzHG

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