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## WINE WEB VALUE: WEB MARKETING STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY BUSINESSES

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### ABSTRACT

The goal of this research project is to deepen and expand the web marketing strategies used by family businesses (FB) and to identify the role assigned to websites and the online communication strategies implemented through them.

In order to examine the content of the information found on the website of selected FBs, an “*ad hoc*” analysis model was designed and validated with the support of marketing and industry experts through an inspecting focus group (Mich, 2007).

The observation of the FB websites showed that family-run Italian wineries use their websites mainly to present information about the business and as a relational tool through edutainment-style activities; FBs yet neglect the potential of e-commerce.

Although this path has allowed the traits essential to launch effective online communications for FBs, the small number of businesses surveyed (10) does not permit a theoretical generalisation of the results. Thus, we expect to integrate the information obtained from this preliminary study with in-depth interviews with the digital strategists for the companies examined or by increasing the number of FBs studied. In addition, the results could be compared with those from Italian businesses in the wine industry which are not family run and which meet the selection criteria (turnover, etc.).

The study highlights the importance and the attention that FBs, among others, should dedicate to the role of web communication within their communications strategy. It also provides a list of contents to consider when creating a website which should be customised with the brand’s specific details.

**Keywords:** *website; family business; wine industry; web communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

Although with a slight delay with respect to foreign competitors, the Italian wine industry has adopted the changes taking place and businesses have, in recent years, begun to use an internet-oriented approach for company communications (FleishmanHillard and the E-commerce Observatory of the Politecnico di Milano, 2015). That innovation, given the strong interference of the decision-

making organ in communications and the high incidence of family-run businesses in the wine industry worldwide (IFERA, 2013; Culasso *et al.*, 2013; Morck and Yeung, 2004; Astrachan and Shanker, 2003; Faccio *et al.*, 2002; Claessens *et al.*, 2000; La Porta *et al.*, 1999) and within Italy (Corbetta *et al.*, 2015), generates an interest in understanding the characterization of *web communication* for the above-mentioned wine producers.

The goal of this research project, then, is the expansion of online communication strategies used by *family businesses (FB)* with the purpose of identifying the role assigned to websites in company communications and the strategies implemented by such businesses, as well as tracing their distinguishing elements.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to take advantage of the opportunities which derive from the introduction of the internet in consumers' buying and consumption habits, the company has to be able to design and implement the appropriate *web marketing strategy*, understood as "*the strategic process of creating, distributing, promoting, and pricing products for targeted customers in the virtual environment of the Internet*" (Pride *et al.*, 2007).

The digital strategy has to carry out traditional marketing activities using the web and should be based on a pre-established *voice* and with precise behavioural rules with the intention of increasing *brand awareness*, influencing potential consumers, increasing word-of-mouth marketing and improving the brand's reputation (Fiocca and Sebastiani, 2015).

Although there are numerous tools available for the creation of a business's online communications, the website is often one of the first steps (Rios and Pablo, 2014). In fact, it is the hub as it simultaneously constitutes the company's main promotional "window" and the essence of its *online presence* (Toma and Marinescu, 2012; Kung and Zhang, 2011).

Like other industries, the growing tendency for consumers to use the internet as a means to find information about winemaking brands and products before making a choice has also brought about changes in *wine businesses'* communication strategies. This is also taking into account the fact that the website rises to become the first and only point of contact between the business and current or potential consumers (Velikova *et al.*, 2011).

The academic literature, favouring various analytical methods, often has focused on investigating the strategies implemented by wineries and wine producing regions, examining the way company websites are used in particular (Duquesnois and Gurău, 2008; Begalli *et al.*, 2008; McNeill, 2007; Stricker *et al.*, 2007; Bruwer and Wood, 2005; Sellitto and Martin, 2003; Gebauer and Ginsburg, 2003; Sellitto, 2002; Giraud-Héraud *et al.*, 2001; Stening and Lockshin, 2001).

Such studies have supported the finding that the perceived value of a product increases through use of the internet (Giraud-Héraud et al., 2001), as the company co-creates value for the consumer, acting upon two levers: the wine's quality and direct contact online. Using the tangible and intangible elements of the product (in a *service-dominant* logic; Vandecandelaere, 2006), the business generates a user experience based on his preferences (discoverable thanks to the awareness developed by the company on the web). This allows the company to involve him, satisfy his expectations, create loyalty and establish a long-term relationship (*relational approach*; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; O'Neill and Charters, 2000).

In particular, Guraū and Duquesnois (2011) summarise the process of co-creation of value through the web, trying to understand how to enhance the commercial offer (focused on various assets, such as the product's quality, the *brand's reputation*, and the *value proposition*) and the value co-creation process. In addition, the authors highlighted a few i) marketing strategies which can be launched through online tools (such as *direct marketing*, *relational marketing* and *wine tourism*) and ii) functionality able to increase the value of the consumer's experience (in internet marketing, it's given a central role, especially in small to mid-sized businesses).

Richardson (2002) posited the existence of three main website types, distinguishable according to their purely informative qualities, on the presence of pre-established *forms* on the site used to request and purchase products, until reaching more complex platforms which allow the consumer to make purchases with entire autonomy. The main goals of the websites studied, then, were divided into four points: i) *direct sales*, although not always measurable; ii) *direct marketing*, in which the descriptions of the wines, the history, the production process and tasting instructions (*value added*) of the product act as support for the representatives for the promotion of the brand and its products, especially in foreign markets; iii) *tourist promotion*, by way of the virtuous circle that connects a visit to the wine cellars and the places of production, as the *wine tourist* is considered "*a valuable potential customer to be educated and exploited*"; iv) *indirect marketing*, in which the web is used as a means to convey up-to-date and credible information, substituting brochures, and thanks to which *wholesalers* can show clients, businesses and the end user what is offered and the winemaker's partners.

According to the strategies that the business decides to implement, summarised above, and the *features* that the website includes (Taylor et al., 2010; Madill and Neilson, 2010; Begalli et al., 2008; Ness, 2006; Winters, 1997; Yuan et al., 2004), its role may vary and can be traced back to a few key objectives (Notta and Vlachvei, 2013; Madill and Neilson, 2010; Palmatier et al., 2006; Heide and Wathne, 2006; Haag et al., 2006):

- a) to provide information, as it is possible to find the brand history, the producer's bio, the company's *mission statement*, the wine production and products (certifications, awards, etc.), news

and *educational opportunity* and more details consumers are interested in (Taylor et al., 2010);

- b) to sell the product without an intermediary (e-commerce), for which companies have to publish privacy and security policies, payment methods and product delivery methods (Nielsen, 2000; Schlosser *et al.*, 2006) as they allow consumers for a proper assessment of the website;
- c) to develop dynamic, creative activities which directly intercept the end consumer to generate *engagement* and then establish a long-term, interactive, loyal relationship with users (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2006) or better with a *community* of company's fans.

The importance of the proper organisation discussed up to this point, in terms content and interaction with the end user, determines the perception that the consumer will have about the website's quality, which is an important *predictor* of the increase in trust in the winemaker and the perception of the quality of its wine (Nowak and Newton, 2008).

1. Informational level				
1.1. Company information	1.2. Wine production information	1.3. Offer information	1.4. News and events	1.5. Awards
1.1.1. History about producer/winery 1.1.2. Mission and vision statement 1.1.3. Governance model 1.1.4. Contacts	1.2.1. Vineyards 1.2.2. Facilities 1.2.3. Certifications	1.3.1. Product information 1.3.2. Brand information		
2. Interactive level				
2.1. Educational opportunity	2.2. Activities at winery	2.3. Activities linked with territory	2.4. Newsletters	2.5. Social media integration
2.1.1. Food&wine combination 2.1.2. Wine tasting information		2.3.1. Accommodation facilities 2.3.2. Restaurants 2.3.3. Local tourist attractions		2.5.1. Facebook 2.5.2. Twitter 2.5.3. Youtube 2.5.4. LinkedIn 2.5.5. Instagram 2.5.6. Google+ 2.5.7. Pinterest 2.5.8. Flickr 2.5.9. Tripadvisor 2.5.10. Forums 2.5.11. Blogs 2.5.12. Wine club subscription
3. Transactional level				
3.1. E-commerce availability				
3.1.1. Payment methods 3.1.2. Delivery time 3.1.3. Delivery costs 3.1.4. Privacy				

Table 1. *Content organisation of the Family Business website*

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on an analysis of the academic literature identified in the above paragraph, the elements chosen to evaluate the contents' architecture and the usage level of *wine business* websites have been identified and are proposed below (see table 1).

The presence of the identified elements primarily allows us to understand the strategies adopted by the wine producers, closely linked to the role assigned to the website in company communication (Notta and Vlachvei, 2013; Sun *et al.*, 2012; Madill and Neilson, 2010; Vescovi, 2007; Canavan *et al.*, 2007; Palmatier *et al.*, 2006; Heide and Wathne, 2006; Haag *et al.*, 2006).

So, the role of the website can be categorised as follows:

- **informative** ("1. Informational level" in the table 1): the website supplies information on the business, its production process, its products, as well as news, awards and recognitions, and even offers contact information and the company's location (e.g. telephone number, address, email);
- **interactive** ("2. Interactive level"), by which the business establishes a relationship with the user, offering him the *educational opportunity* to expand his knowledge as *wine enthusiasts*, activities held at the winery to promote wine tourism and activities in the region to incentivise a visit, the subscription to a newsletter and the website's integration with social media to create an online community;
- **transactional** ("3. Transactional level"), in which a platform for the promotional marketing and sales of the winemaker's products is provided.

In accordance with the literature and considering the proposed theoretical framework, this work is thus intended to respond to the following research question: *What are the contents of the Italian, family-run, wine business's websites and the role entrusted to them? What are the communications strategies pursued over the Web?*

## EMPIRICAL SURVEY METHODOLOGY

To respond to the research question, the methodology described below was used.

### *Identification of the businesses to be part of the survey*

To define the analysis sample, it was assumed that the adoption of suitable online marketing and communication strategies could increase the visibility and awareness of a brand, in particular, about its highly cognitive products (Notta and Vlachvei, 2013, Stricker *et al.*, 2007, Mattiacci *et al.*, 2006) such as wine, and that the latter reflect upon the business's performance. Adopting a *benchmarking* logic

(Camp, 1989; Lankford, 2000), the top thirty Italian wine producers, those who demonstrated the highest numbers of sales in the industry from 2010-2014, were chosen.

In this regard, the criteria reported below were input into the AIDA database (<http://www.bvdinfo.com>) on 16 May 2015:

1. the ATECO (2007) code 11.02, which refers to companies which produce wine from grapes;
2. the geographical location within Italy.

For each of the years studied (2010-2014, comprehensive) the top 30 businesses in terms of turnover were selected. The dataset returned by AIDA was integrated, where necessary, with data from a report titled "Indagine sul settore vinicolo" (A Survey on the Wine Industry) by Mediobanca in 2015. From that dataset of 30 businesses, those not present in every year of the five-year period studied were eliminated. As such, the sample size was reduced to 22 businesses.

Finally, from the list being examined, only businesses classified as "family owned" were selected, for a final number of 10 cases analysed (see table 2).

	Company name and place	Company website
1	ANTINORI Firenze - Tuscany	<a href="http://www.antinori.it">http://www.antinori.it</a>
2	CASA VINICOLA BOTTER CARLO & C. Fossalta di Piave (Ve) - Veneto	<a href="http://www.botter.it/it/">http://www.botter.it/it/</a>
3	CASA VINICOLA ZONIN Gambellara (VI) - Veneto	<a href="http://www.zonin1821.it">http://www.zonin1821.it</a>
4	COMPAGNIA DE' FRESCOBALDI (°) Florence - Tuscany	<a href="http://www.frescobaldi.it/it-it/home.aspx">http://www.frescobaldi.it/it-it/home.aspx</a>
5	CONTRI SPUMANTI Cazzano Di Tramigna (Vr) - Veneto	<a href="http://contrispumanti.com">http://contrispumanti.com</a>
6	ENOITALIA San Martino Buon Albergo (VR) - Veneto	<a href="http://www.enoitalia.it">http://www.enoitalia.it</a>
7	FRATELLI MARTINI SECONDO LUIGI Cosasno Belbo (CN) - Piedmont	<a href="http://www.fratellimartini.it">http://www.fratellimartini.it</a>
8	CAMPARI Group (§) (wines) Milano - Lombardia	<a href="http://www.camparigroup.com/it">http://www.camparigroup.com/it</a>
9	GRUPPO SANTA MARGHERITA Fossalta di Portogruaro (VE) - Veneto	<a href="http://www.santamargherita.com/it/">http://www.santamargherita.com/it/</a>
10	MASI AGRICOLA (°) S. Ambrogio Di Valpolicella (Vr) - Veneto	<a href="http://www.masi.it">http://www.masi.it</a>

Table 2. *The family-owned wineries examined*

Legend: (°) Consolidated balance.

(§) Wine division, which only includes: «Riccadonna», «Cinzano» (vermouth and spumante), «Mondoro» (spumante), «Odessa», «Sella & Mosca», «Enrico Serafino», «Teruzzi & Puthod», «Château Lamargue» e «Liebfraumilch».

Please note that, in compliance with current legislation on privacy protection (D.Lgs. n. 196/2003 - Codice in materia di protezione dei dati personali), the value of turnover is omitted, although for consolidated groups it is available on their websites.

#### *The organisation of a focus group and analysis of the online communication content*

In order to validate the analysis model and the attributes identified in the academic literature (see table 1), adapting them for the cognitive demands of the *case studies* used, an examining focus group was organised (Mich, 2007). A few experts in the winemaking industry (two sommeliers, two entrepreneurs) and in business communications (two university researchers, a sociologist, two *digital strategists*) participated in the meeting, held 5 June 2015. The focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes and involved two *steps*: 1) presentation of the research objectives; 2) discussion and validation of the model to adopt for the websites' analysis (see table 1).

The last step was the analysis of the online communications of family-owned wineries through a study of the contents and organisation of their websites.

## FINDINGS

The study of the selected websites (see table 2), was carried out by observing each of the sections found in the table previously analysed (table 1); the presence of the elements proposed in the aforementioned table in at least 50% of the businesses studied allowed for the identification of online communication strategies which are mainly used by *family-owned wineries*.

In relation to the *Informational level (code 1.)*, we focused our attention on the main information categories around which the company website is organised.

The company description (*company information, code 1.1.*) is characterised by the presence of a "Family" section, where one can find the narration of the *history* (100% of the cases; code 1.1.1.) and the explanation of the *mission statement* and of the *vision* (90%; code 2.1.1.2.) which is connected not only to the company, but to the family itself. Antinori, for example, separates the "Family" section from the company section. Zonin, in addition to having "Company" and "History" sections, has another header titled "Family" where the family members and their roles are presented (see figure 1).



Table 3. *The Zonin family*

In terms of the *contacts* category (*code 1.1.4.*), on the homepage, the wineries display the address of their legal headquarters (50%) and supply other details in the dedicated section (called “Contacts”), which contains the business email address also.

The *wine production information* (*code 1.2.*) is concentrated on the initiatives, which create added value for the end consumer, such as certifications (70%; *code 1.2.3.*) or information related to “sustainability” (which thus include the concepts of quality, health, safety, protection of biodiversity, less waste of resources such as water and fewer carbon dioxide emissions).

Campari, for example, under the “Sustainability” header lists “*Sustainable Campari, Marketing and Responsible Practices, QHSE-Quality, [...]*”, considering the concept of the company’s social responsibility (taken up by Enoitalia also). Zonin dedicates a page to “Sustainability” in the “Company” section, dividing it into: “*Water Resources, Co2 Emission Reductions, Biodiversity and Reforestation, Energy Resources, Research and Development*”. Frescobaldi focuses on “Sustainability” (see figure 2), explaining the various certifications held, such as *AgriQualità*, as further proof of the pursuit of “*Sustainable Agriculture*”, and the “*Forest Certification*”. These are joined by the numerous activities undertaken (including the implementation of “*Green Energy Sources*”) which make theirs “*Sustainable Production*”.



Table 4. *Frescobaldi and sustainability*

The *Offer information* (code 1.3.) is focused on the presentation of the product portfolio (70%; *Product information*, code 1.3.1.), in which the main information is reported, such as: type of grape used, origin, alcohol by volume, serving temperature, description of the organoleptic characteristics and food pairings (this is true for Antinori, Fratelli Martini, Contri, Botter and Santa Margherita). The remaining part (30%; *Brand information*, code 1.3.2.), on the other hand, presents the partner brands and the products (think of the Campari Group categories or of Enoitalia brands logos', which act as links to each label's website).

The *News and events* section (90%; code 1.4.) is generally not kept up to date, with two exceptions (Zonin and Masi). This section summarises the events organised by the wineries, initiatives as well as recognitions received. The latter, along with the *awards*, can also be rediscovered in the wine descriptions or, as in 50% of the cases examined, in dedicated sections of the website (*Awards and recognitions*, code 1.5.). In addition, in the *News and events* section, 50% of the businesses examined (Masi, Zonin, Fratelli Martini, Frescobaldi and Antinori) promote visits to their cellars, and only two of them reserve a special section dedicated to wine tourism through a link to an external website.

Moving our attention to the *Interactive level* of the website (code 2.), 60% of the winemakers launched *Educational opportunities* (code 2.1.), focused in particular on proposing food and wine pairings (60%; *Food and wine pairings*, code 2.1.1.) and wine tastings (40%; *Wine tasting information*, code 2.1.2.). The goal being pursued is that of assisting the consumer in the choice of wine, especially if he is inexperienced, supplying selection criteria such as the name of the wine, the *cru* of origin or food pairings, through specialised *tools* integrated with the website or in the form of smartphone apps or tasting videos.



Table 5. *Masi Agricola's customised offer for the consumer*

In this regard, Frescobaldi and Masi's solutions (see figure 3) are similar, as both customise the consumer's search with browsers within the website, called "Find a wine". These browsers allow for the selection of a product offered by the company based on the name, the cru of origin and other characteristics, thereby simplifying the choice the user has to make (especially for non-experts), with an additional criteria: "food pairings" (suggesting, for example, the ideal wines for an aperitif or for meat dishes, fish dishes or desserts).

Finally, it is worth noting the websites' low level of integration with *social networking sites* (*Social media integration, code 2.5.*); from the study of family-owned wine businesses, it is clear that the preferred platforms are Twitter (60%), Facebook (50%) and YouTube (50%) exclusively.

The transactional level is absent in the whole sample examined.

## THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES PURSUED OVER THE WEB

The research carried out demonstrated that family-owned wineries in Italy use their websites to:

- a. Supply general information about the business (*informational level, code 1.*), concentrating on the history, the *mission* and the *vision* of the company, according to its characteristics. The creation of *brand awareness* is based on the typical elements of the wine industry, customised according to the company's essence;
- b. Involve the user (*interactive level, code 2.*), through suggestions for wine tastings and food pairings, especially by way of *edutainment* (Walldén and Soronen, 2008) through special applications for *smartphones* or through *posts* on the main social media websites (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube).

The elements stated above demonstrated that the main goals of the websites (Guraū and Duquesnois, 2011; Richardson, 2002) are, on one hand, the promotion of the brand and its products, domestically

and internationally, using *direct* and *indirect marketing* strategies and, on the other, *relational marketing*. Proceeding in this way, such approaches play a fundamental role in the creation of a high level of satisfaction in the *customer experience* (Shanka and Taylor, 2004; Dodd, 1999) as they allow the company to obtain a high level of involvement with consumers (*Involvement*), based on the needs they express (*Personal needs*). This generates a dialogue which keeps consumers up to date on promoted initiatives, events and products at the winery, which then stimulates them to visit (*Motivation*). In addition, the use of social media sites, useful not only for the presentation of what the company has to offer (Velikova *et al.*, 2011; Pitt *et al.*, 2011; Watts *et al.*, 2008; Olsen *et al.*, 2008), allows the business to intercept the end consumer and establish a long-term relationship with him, creating trust and loyalty to the brand (Quinton and Harridge-March, 2006), thus highlighting the wineries' *marketing oriented* approach (Velikova *et al.*, 2011).

The analysis reveals the absence of a specific call to e-commerce (*transactional level 2.3*), that is, the policy of selling products online (Richardson, 2002). This last aspect seems to be of particular interest since it highlights the modest amount of attention that individual companies pay to online product sales (*transactional level, code 3.*).

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project was designed to examine the types of communications found on the websites of *family-owned businesses* in the wine industry, with the goal of understanding the details of the models used and their related competitive strategies.

A close examination of the contributions of managerial literature on the theme (Duquesnois and Gurău, 2008; Begalli *et al.*, 2008; McNeill, 2007; Stricker *et al.*, 2007; Bruwer and Wood, 2005; Sellitto and Martin, 2003; Gebauer and Ginsburg, 2003; Sellitto, 2002; Giraud-Héraud *et al.*, 2001; Stening and Lockshin, 2001) allowed for the creation of an evaluation model to effectively organise the websites' content. This, with the aim to not only provide information about company, products and events to users (*Informational level*), but also to involve them (*Interactive level*) with contents which are able to generate a dialogue that keeps consumers up to date, in order to stimulate them to visit the winery and its website (*Motivation*) and to buy its products (*Transactional level*). Moreover, the application of this model to the *Italian, family-run, wine business*, validated thanks to the support of participating experts, permitted to observe its usefulness as a self-assessment tool for the evaluation of the corporate communicative system; in fact, the analysis highlights that wineries often don't complete the communicative path because of the absence or the wrong collocation of specific contents (e.g. low level of integration with social networking sites, lack of transactional level).

The limits of this study are attributable to the small number of wineries examined (10), which does not allow for a theoretical generalisation of the results. However, the analysis carried out identifies the model of *web communication* adopted by the *family-owned business* in the Italian wine industry. This information may be usefully integrated with an additional level of *web content analysis* based, for example, on the experience – that is, on the textual content of the websites examined (using *text mining*). In addition, it would be useful to compare the results obtained for the family-owned wineries with non-family owned businesses in the industry which have similar characteristics (turnover, etc.) as our sample.

This research leads to the elaboration of a few observations regarding possible managerial implications. The importance and the attention that the wineries should dedicate to the role that *web communication*.

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