Social media as a marketing tool for extreme-sport oriented companies

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Abstract

Marketing in social media has been studied extensively in recent years, but not specifically for extreme-sport oriented companies. Even though most of the extreme-oriented companies are using social media for marketing, only a few pay special attention to its risks and possibilities. The purpose of this study is to identify extreme-sport oriented companies’ practices to use social media as a marketing tool. I interviewed eight extreme-oriented companies and athletes. In addition to interviews, I also performed a four weeks observation in social media, mostly in Facebook and Twitter, and made notions about companies’ practices in using social media for marketing. Almost all interviewed companies (88%) were using social media. They usually posted updates about once a week and did not have a marketing strategy. However, it is possible that larger companies, which were not directly interviewed in this study, have a clear strategy for marketing in social media. Interviewed companies used social media in an improvised and unplanned manner. However, through trial and error, extreme-sport oriented companies have found their way to use social media effectively. Writing posts in social media about new products, upcoming events, offers, extreme-sport pictures or films and up-to-date information about the company seemed to be a good way to use social media for marketing. Most of the extreme-sport oriented companies can find social media a very useful marketing tool, but only if they have resources and time to invest to be active on social media.

Keywords: extreme sports, Facebook, marketing, social media, Twitter
# Contents

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 1  
Contents ................................................................................................................................................ 2  
1. Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 3  
  1.1 Background .................................................................................................................................. 3  
  1.2 Extreme sports and marketing in social media .............................................................................. 3  
  1.3 Research question and purpose of the study .................................................................................. 4  
  1.4 Structure of the study .................................................................................................................... 5  
2. Related studies within marketing in social media ............................................................................ 6  
3. Methods .......................................................................................................................................... 8  
  3.1 Choice of methods ........................................................................................................................ 8  
  3.2 Method criticism .......................................................................................................................... 9  
  3.3 Literature selection and source criticism .................................................................................... 9  
4. Results ........................................................................................................................................... 11  
  4.1 Social media as a marketing tool .................................................................................................. 11  
  4.2 Applications ................................................................................................................................... 12  
  4.3 Use of social media ....................................................................................................................... 13  
  4.4 Strategies ..................................................................................................................................... 15  
  4.5 Risks ............................................................................................................................................ 16  
  4.6 The future ..................................................................................................................................... 17  
  4.7 Observation results ....................................................................................................................... 17  
5. Analysis ......................................................................................................................................... 18  
  5.1 Method for analysis ....................................................................................................................... 18  
  5.2 Applications in social media ......................................................................................................... 18  
  5.3 Use of social media ....................................................................................................................... 18  
  5.4 Strategies ..................................................................................................................................... 19  
  5.5 Risks ............................................................................................................................................ 20  
  5.6 The future ..................................................................................................................................... 20  
6. Discussion ....................................................................................................................................... 21  
7. Conclusions ..................................................................................................................................... 23  
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................................. 24  
References .......................................................................................................................................... 25  
Attachment ......................................................................................................................................... 28  
  Interview questions ........................................................................................................................... 28
1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The development of Internet from a platform where individuals created and published content (Web 1.0) to versatile interaction where all users can create and share content (Web 2.0) has enabled interactive applications like Facebook and Twitter (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O’Reilly, 2005). This has not only created a new way of marketing, but also changed the marketing philosophy: the consumer is now the starting point for marketing activities (Nakara et al., 2012).

Popularity of social media has been constantly increasing. Facebook alone has more than 1 billion active users (Facebook, 2013a) and according to Nakara et al. (2012), a web user spends an average of 5.5 hours in social media every day. Companies have also found this as a new way of marketing, and in 2012, as many as 73 percent of Fortune 500 companies had a Twitter account, and 66 percent had a Facebook site (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013). Also, according to the McKinsey & Company report (2011), one euro invested in online marketing brings back 2.5 euros. The Internet has reached a second place as a marketing power, right after the TV (Nakara et al., 2012).

With such figures, it is easy to concentrate on positive sides of social media and see it only as an efficient and free marketing tool. Several authors praise social media as a perfect marketing tool without any critic or mention about its risks (Coyne, 2012; Stern, 2011).

Arguably, the potential of free marketing is huge. Still, the companies that use social media may not fully understand how social media works. Marketing in social media differs quite a lot from other forms of media, as customers can affect companies' public image by for example posting to companies’ Facebook site (Nakara et al., 2012). One single bad customer service experience can quickly turn into a massive negative "advertisement". The same snowball effect that is the base for marketing in social media may actually work even more effectively the other way round: people are even more eager to share and "like" if someone receives bad service from a company. This kind of “hate sharing” is very common and accepted, because it is thought to be an act of justice to expose problems with companies (Paavilainen, 2013). For example, the supermarket chain ICA's Facebook page is constantly "attacked" by angry customers, who give feedback about bad service or products directly to the Facebook page. These posts receive a lot of likes and people also like to share these comments on their own Facebook page (Facebook, 2013b). The old phrase “all publicity is good publicity” might not be true today.

1.2 Extreme sports and marketing in social media

Marketing methods in social media are much more versatile for extreme-sport oriented companies than for “normal” companies. For example, in extreme sports it is common to make low budget videos about the sport and share them in social media. Extreme-sport oriented companies have found this a very effective tool for marketing. For example, a Red Bull-sponsored base jump from the space was widely reported both in social media and in more traditional media (Tierney, 2012). It is common that a high-end, sponsored athlete uses a head-cam or an extra photographer while he or she performs. The performance can be
for example a base jump, a solo ascent to a mountain, or downhill cycling. The sponsor company has the right to use this video for marketing in social media. When the company publishes the video, it spreads out fast, as athlete's fans “like” and share the video forward in social media. The athlete becomes even more popular and the sponsor company receives a lot of visibility, for example in the form of visitors on their social media sites.

Publishing home-video quality action videos in social media is not beneficial for more traditional companies for several reasons. Traditionally, companies have used videos for marketing that are of as high quality as possible, both technically and content-wise. Traditional marketing, for example in TV, is so expensive that it is not reasonable to make a low-budget video to show as a TV-ad. Even though social media has enabled "free broadcasting", most of the older companies have already built up their image with high quality advertisement. Marketing with low-quality videos might feel as a step backward. Another reason why traditional companies cannot use low-quality extreme sport videos for marketing is quite obvious. To be able to use this kind of marketing, it seems that company needs to be extreme-sport oriented in some way. Companies that use these low budget extreme videos are usually developing the sport in one way or the other. Companies that offer training places, manufacture gear for extreme sports, or sport magazines are obvious users of such marketing, but even companies that have nothing to do with extreme-sports can use this method if they have created an “extreme reputation” by using extreme sports in their advertising. Good examples are energy drink companies that are profiled as extreme sports even though their own product, the energy drink, has actually nothing to do with extreme sports. The energy drink giant Red Bull has taken this even further by having developed their extreme sport relation from event promoter to one of the biggest multi-sector companies in the world. They have even invented some totally new extreme sports (Red Bull, 2013).

1.3 Research question and purpose of the study

Many extreme sport-oriented companies are using social media in some way, but it seems that only few pay special attention to its possibilities and risks. It looks like the companies want to be in social media but do not have a rational marketing plan. This can be a dangerous path as it is not always possible to control discussions and company's public image in social media.

This area is interesting to study in order to get a closer look on how extreme-sport oriented companies are using social media. How they actually use it and benefit from it, and how do they take into account the threat of negative publicity. More specifically, this study tries to answer the following question:

How can extreme-sport oriented companies use social media effectively and safely in marketing?

The main purpose of this study is to identify extreme-sport oriented companies' practices to use social media for marketing. The results of this study can give useful information to extreme-sport oriented companies if they use or have planned to use social media for marketing. Moreover, this study is unique in the sense that social media as a marketing tool
for extreme-sport oriented companies has not been studied before, and as social media is constantly developing and changing, most of the comparable studies are hopelessly out of date.

1.4 Structure of the study

In this study, I first review the use of social media within extreme sports and introduce previous research on the use of social media in marketing. Extreme sports were chosen as a focus of this study for my personal interest in them, and because they are widely present both in social and traditional media. In Methods, I explain the technique used in this study, a questionnaire combined with social media observations. The most important results are presented in Results and analyzed further in Analysis. In Discussion, the findings are examined with respect to previous research and future research topics are identified. Conclusions sum up the most important findings.
2. Related studies within marketing in social media

Extreme sports, which usually refer to sports associated with a considerable physical risk, have become more and more mainstream. Traditionally, extreme sports have been practiced by a small number of people who have dedicated a large amount of time and passion for their sport. Today, commercialism has enabled even complete novices to practice extreme sports, as people can pay a company to take them to try extreme sports. An increased interest in extreme sports has also opened markets for extreme-sport oriented entrepreneurs (Palmer, 2002).

Marketing in social media has been studied quite a lot (e.g. Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Nakara et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013), but not specifically for extreme-sport oriented companies. Of the more generic studies, Kaplan & Haenlein’s article (2010) describes different forms of social media and how companies could and should use them for marketing by presenting 10 marketing advices. The most important findings are that companies should be interesting, active, humble and honest while operating in social media. The article also discusses the difference between terms used in the field, such as Web 2.0 and Social Media. Web 2.0 is often incorrectly used as a synonym to Social Media. However, the term Web 2.0 was originally used to describe a platform where content and applications are no longer created by individuals but instead are continuously modified by all users. Although Web 2.0 is also considered a new version of the World Wide Web, it actually does not have any groundbreaking new technical specification. It refers more to the development of software developers' and users' use of the Internet. Social Media, in turn, is a group of internet-based applications that build on the technological platform of Web 2.0 where users can share, create and exchange information.

Weinberg & Pehlivan’s (2011) article is a quite similar study in the sense that it also presented different methods for marketing in social media and also discussed terms as Web 2.0 and social media. The study considers that social media could be used in basically three different ways. The first way is similar to traditional marketing channels (e.g. television, radio, print). The second is an experimental way by testing and learning to discover effective method, and the third way is to use social media more as a human voice instead of the corporate voice. The article also identifies two factors that explain the variation in social media. These factors are half-life-information and the depth of information. Half-life information is a function of both the medium and the content. In other words, it refers to how long the information is available on screen. Depth of information refers to the richness of the content, and the diversity and number of perspectives. For example, half-life-information in Twitter, which is an online social networking service or a "micro blog" service that allows users to send messages up to 140 characters long, can be quite short, especially if the user is following several other users. Facebook, which is the most used online social networking service, on the other hand, can bring together a relatively large amount of rich, involving information on an interesting topic.

Even though marketing in social media has not been studied for extreme-sport oriented companies, small companies have similar possibilities and freedoms in marketing in social media as extreme-sport oriented companies do. Nakara et al. (2012) studied how small companies could use social media for marketing. Small companies can easily personalize
their brand in social media and sharing funny photos about staff feels more natural for a small company than a company that has 200 employees.

Leung et al. (2013) studied how social media could be used as a marketing tool in hotel industry by comparing Facebook and Twitter. The important finding of the study was that different social media sites show the same marketing mechanism in the marketing effectiveness model. Thereby, companies can employ the same marketing strategy and tactics in using different social media applications.

A common feature to all previous studies discussed is that disadvantages and risks in social media are covered only superficially and warning examples are not presented. On the contrary, positive sides in social media are highlighted. Therefore, disadvantages and risks are one of the important focuses of my study.
3. Methods

3.1 Choice of methods

The research question of this study could be possible to approach using different methods. Literature research could have been one way to study the subject, but as there are not many studies about how extreme-oriented companies could use social media for marketing, this method was not really a good option.

A focus group, consisting of extreme-sport oriented companies’ owners or employees could have been an alternative method for this study. A focus group is a form of qualitative research where a group of eight to ten people are monitored as they can freely discuss about the decided topic. Focus groups are used mostly on testing new products or concepts. Usually two or more focus groups are needed to provide comparisons between groups (Edmunds, 2001). However, for practical reasons this was not a good option for my study as most of the companies I wanted to interview operate abroad. Internet-based focus group in Skype could have been possible in theory, but as most of the interviewed persons are owners of a company, it would have been be hard for them to speak openly about marketing strategies when surrounded by competitors.

One method could have been a quantitative study in the form of a "check the box" - questionnaire (Palgrave, 2013) that was sent to a large amount of companies. This would have been an effective way to collect quantitative data, but follow-up questions would have been impossible. In addition, such an extensive questionnaire is more difficult to coordinate and verify whether the person filling in the form is appropriate to do the task.

Another method could have been to interview only 1 or 2 carefully selected companies. Minimal number of interviews would have enabled longer and deeper interviews. However, companies use social media in different ways and there is a risk that this method only gives information about certain companies and their habits to use social media, but neglects the larger field of "extreme-sport oriented companies".

Some quantitative data is quite easy gather directly from websites and applications such as Facebook and Twitter, as these show directly how many "likes" or "followers" a company has. It is easy to follow how companies are using social media, and how their customers respond. Still, to gain more thorough qualitative data, interviews are better alternative (Holme et al., 1997).

I decided to approach the research question by interviewing eight extreme-oriented companies and athletes. I chose to interview two indoor climbing walls, two mountain guides, two sponsored extreme-sport athletes, one gear store and one expedition organizer. I interviewed companies that operate in Finland, Norway, France and Sweden so an internet-based interview was a logical solution. I sent question forms with 16 questions (see Appendix) via e-mail and Facebook. Eight of the questions were "check the box" -questions to gather quantitative data and eight were "written response" -questions for qualitative data (Holme et al., 1997). As I have good contacts to all of these companies, interviewed companies were extremely helpful and it was effortless to ask follow-up questions for more information when needed. The possibility to ask follow-up questions was important as this made the interviews more like a traditional, face-to-face interview. In some cases I asked
follow up questions in order to get more accurate answers. For example one of the companies said they believed Facebook is going down. I asked if they could motivate their answer. I also asked why some of the companies were using Vimeo instead of the YouTube. However, the companies chose not to answer this question.

I also performed hidden observation (Holme et al., 1997) about interviewed companies and athletes in social media, mostly in Facebook and Twitter, for four weeks and made notions about their practices in using social media as a marketing tool (Nakara et al., 2012). This was an important part of the study, as it both verified the data received from interviewed companies, and also allowed me to observe how customers interact on companies' Facebook-sites and other social media. I chose to observe without telling the companies about the observation. The reason for this was to be able to observe companies' behavior in social media without it affecting the results. Data from observation was analyzed with a focus on the main research question: How can extreme-sport oriented companies use social media effectively and safely in marketing?

3.2 Method criticism
The method used was chosen partly because of practical reasons. Traditional face-to-face interviews could have been a somewhat better option for this kind of study than the internet-based interview. In such a situation, clarifying comments and feedback would have been easier to give. A direct conversation could also have encouraged the respondent towards a deeper analysis of the question. Unfortunately, personal interviews were not practically possible, as I wanted to interview companies from several countries. On the other hand, as I was able to ask follow-up questions by e-mail and even easily make a phone call to ask for more information, the used method felt like an effective enough solution for this study.

3.3 Literature selection and source criticism
Marketing in social media is a relatively studied field considering that social media has not been widely used in Europe for more than five to six years. Still, the specific subject of how extreme-sport oriented companies can use social media as a marketing tool is an almost completely unexplored field. This reflects to the selection of literature. As similar studies have not been done previously, comparable studies and defined background in this field was hard to find.

Because of the lack of similar studies, I decided to look for articles about marketing in social media for companies that can be considered similar in their marketing as extreme-sport oriented companies. Small companies have similar freedom in marketing in social media as extreme-sport oriented companies do, as their image is strongly personal as well. Consequently, "small companies" is a relatively large group and it was quite easy to find articles on how small companies could use social media for marketing.

One problem with the literature references is that social media is constantly developing and changing. Majority of the articles available today are from the time when social media was a new form of interactivity. Applications, the ways to use them, and net etiquette are constantly changing and studies on social media become outdated quickly, making published studies less useful today.
Articles about extreme companies in general are quite rare, and articles about their marketing possibilities in social media practically nonexistent. Most of the references in this study are therefore about social media, and only a handful specifically about extreme sports.

I wanted to interview companies from several countries and companies within several different extreme sports to be able to have a wider perspective. I also wanted to interview companies that I personally have some kind of connection with. This was an important matter, as I believed it could be hard to get answers from random companies. This decision turned to be a good one, as all companies replied instantly, and only one (a sponsored athlete) refused to answer questions because of his tight schedule. He travels around the world constantly because of competitions, film-projects and other events, so it is understandable that he had little time for this. On behalf of the study this was not a problem. I asked another sponsored athlete for the interview and as he agreed, I had now eight companies again for the study.
4. Results

Results are from internet-based interviews and from four weeks observation in social media. I interviewed eight extreme-sport oriented companies that operate in Finland, Sweden, Norway and France. I also observed these extreme-sport oriented companies in social media, mostly in Facebook and Twitter.

4.1 Social media as a marketing tool

Social media seems to be quite common tool for marketing among extreme-sport oriented companies. All interviewed companies except one use social media for marketing (Figure 1). The company that did not use social media said that social media, and especially Facebook, is probably a good tool for marketing, but felt that being in social media takes too much time. The company was also a bit worried about privacy issues and questioned whether the most important applications are going to be free in the future.

![Bar Chart: Does your company use social media as a marketing tool? (n=8)](chart)

*Figure 1. Does your company use social media as a marketing tool? (n=8)*

Interviewed companies had used social media for quite a long time. Most of the companies had used it for 3-4 years or more, which means companies had started to use social media quite soon after applications like Facebook and Twitter became popular (Figure 2). The only company that said 1-2 years had started the business about a year ago.
Figure 2. How many years have your company been using social media for marketing? (n=7)

4.2 Applications
Mostly used applications in social media were Facebook and Twitter (Figure 3). Facebook was clearly the most used application and all companies that used social media for marketing, used at least Facebook. This was expected, as Facebook is the most used social media application in the world. Less frequently used applications were Vimeo and BlogSpot. None of the companies used the most popular video application YouTube, but some of the respondents used its alternative Vimeo instead.

Figure 3. How many different forms of social media does your company use? (n=8)
4.3 Use of social media

Most of the interviewed companies used social media approximately once a week (Figure 4). This was also verified in the four weeks’ observation period in social media. Companies used social media mostly as a newsletter. Upcoming events, new products, offers and up-to-date information about the company were main reasons for posting in social media.

![Figure 4. How often does your company post on social media? (n=7)](chart)

*We had a blog when we were building up (a climbing wall) and showed what we were doing and what kind of services we are going to offer to customers. This way we reached hundreds of people and sold 100 memberships even before we opened door to the public.*  
(climbing hall)

*My company’s main marketing tool is social media alongside with company website. Main way of using social media is by regular intervals directly telling the audience what we have been doing lately, what is going on right now and what is happening soon. We also link to interesting up-to-date news from our co-operating companies, organizations and like.*  
(expedition organizer)

Videos and photos about extreme sports were also commonly posted. Smaller companies posted pictures and videos by themselves, but bigger companies, for example energy drink companies, used sponsored athletes for this as well. Sponsored athletes posted to sponsors’ Facebook pages about twice a month. Usually these posts were greetings from journeys with a picture or a video. One respondent mentioned that it was a requirement from the sponsor to post on Facebook page on due dates.
All interviewed companies considered social media as an important channel for marketing. 57% of companies said social media is quite important for marketing, and rest 43% said it is very important (Figure 5). The only interviewed company that did not use social media did not reply this question. However, many of the companies mentioned it is difficult to measure how they have benefitted from marketing in social media.

![Figure 5. How important do you see social media for marketing? (n=7)](image)

*I guess we've benefitted by spreading the information wider and faster. But it's a bit hard to calculate. We should make a campaign which had some kind of special tag we could later measure the benefits.* (climbing hall)

Social media was considered as an efficient tool for making the company known. Marketing in social media was said to be really fast, as it takes almost no time to cover a great deal of customers. Sponsored athletes felt that social media has enabled them to continue their sponsoring contracts and they saw it as a good way to be in contact with sponsors as well.

All companies found social media as an easy marketing tool (Figure 6). However, ease of using applications appears to have raised some other problems. Even though it seems quite effortless to post something in social media, it was mentioned that these posts should be regular and hold up some kind of quality. As one of the respondents said, "spelling mistakes do not give a professional look of the company". Furthermore, regular posting seems to be more laborious than companies expected when they started to use social media. This was also one of the main reason for one company not to use social media at all.
Figure 6. Do you find it difficult to use social media as a marketing tool? (n=7)

Although it was considered quite easy to gather a certain amount of “fans” in social media, spreading wider was mentioned to be a difficult task. Certain amount of fans does not automatically show how many people actually receive the company's feed. For example in Facebook, users can easily block company's posts if they feel the information is not what they want to receive in social media. A certain kind of style is also important to have, and this can be difficult, especially if there are several employees posting in social media. Some of the companies used strong dialect to stand out from the huge mass of information in social media.

4.4 Strategies

Most of the interviewed companies did not follow a marketing strategy. In fact, 43 % of respondent did not have any kind of marketing strategy at all (Figure 7). However, few respondents said they had a schedule for posts. Sponsored athletes seemed to follow more advanced marketing strategy from their sponsor companies.
4.5 Risks

Most of the companies did not see social media as a dangerous marketing method but were aware of some risks around social media (Figure 8). Companies were a bit concerned about privacy and copyright issues. One sponsored athlete mentioned she always has to think carefully what kind of information she wants to publish about herself on sponsor's Facebook page. However, interviewed companies did not see customer's possibility to publish negative comments in social media as a problem of any kind.

Figure 7. Does your company have a marketing strategy for marketing in social media and how carefully do you follow it? (n=7)

Figure 8. Do you think marketing in social media is dangerous? (n=8)
I think that social media keeps us better on our toes and makes us work harder to be better at what we do. (climbing hall)

Still, some of the companies said it is important to be online almost all the time to be able to answer to questions and critique as fast as possible.

4.6 The future

All companies were convinced that social media is going to be around for good. However, the most popular application at the moment, Facebook, was not considered to be the main marketing application in the future.

Facebook as a marketing channel is going down because the “share and win” –stuff. While Facebook is a powerful media, I think that word of mouth is still the best marketing media. (climbing hall)

Social media will stay, but it will cost much more. (mountain guide)

The next thing in marketing in social media is definitely Instagram. This bends marketing to even more so to a direction where the aim is not to directly sell services but to create an image and a brand through real-time “feels and vibe’s.” (expedition organizer)

4.7 Observation results

Four weeks’ observation period confirmed the results from interviews. Companies posted on the average once a week, which is in accordance to their own statement. Some of the companies used Facebook combined with Twitter. Posts were either published in both applications individually and shortened to fit Twitters 140 character limit if needed, or forwarded automatically from one application to another. One of the companies used Twitter as the company’s main marketing tool, and posts were forwarded to Facebook automatically. This company had more Twitter followers than Facebook fans, which was unusual. Most of the companies had many times more Facebook fans than Twitter followers. One of the smaller companies did not have a Facebook site, but the owner of this one-man company used his own Facebook- page for marketing.

Interviewed companies, especially bigger ones received quite a lot of questions, wishes and some critique about company’s website and services via company’s Facebook page. Companies answered quickly and customers seemed to be satisfied with answers, as they did not continue conversation.
5. Analysis

5.1 Method for analysis
Analysis has been done by analyzing the answers from the interviews and examining how they associate with the research question. In other words, I have analyzed how results from interviews answer to the research question of this study.

5.2 Applications in social media
Most of the interviewed companies used social media for marketing, as expected. Even though I excluded "normal" companies from this study, according to Thomas (2011), approximately 50% of all companies are using Facebook for marketing. Social media have become even more used tool for marketing in latest years. Still, based on the fact that as high a percentage as 88% of the interviewed companies were using social media, and most of them had been using it for several years, it can be said that extreme-sport oriented companies do not seem to be afraid to use new marketing methods.

Mostly used applications were Facebook and Twitter, which was expected as these are the most used applications in social media (Ebizmba, 2013). Other applications, like Vimeo and BlogSpot were used so rarely that their use as a marketing tool was marginal, and they acted more as a support for Facebook and Twitter.

Interesting, however, was that even though Vimeo is in general less popular than YouTube, it has several features that makes it ideal for company use. For example, Vimeo has no advertisements in videos and the fact that a large number of users have paid to use the application limits some of the pointless videos from the application. Owners have also an option to download the original file back if needed. Furthermore, even though social networking is technically quite similar both in YouTube and Vimeo, users are using these applications differently. In YouTube it is common that anonymous users insult other commentators or the author of the video in the comment field. It seems that in Vimeo users are more polite and comments about videos are usually more encouraging than comments in YouTube. YouTube's 1 billion unique visitors per month (YouTube, 2013) do not help the company if the users are not potential customers. Networking in Vimeo is quite close to Facebook and this means that viewers in Vimeo are more likely to be local customers, than the viewers in Youtube. Youtube allows users to "dislike" videos which is not always a good thing for companies (Cartwright, 2012; Noguchi, 2013). Possibilities to illegally use copyrighted music might also be a reason for Vimeo's popularity, as such is not allowed in Youtube. On the other hand, using copyrighted music without permission might not be good for the company's image.

5.3 Use of social media
Efficient marketing in social media requires regular posts. Interviewed companies posted on average once a week, which seems to be quite good interval. This keeps the company visible in the social media but will not be too annoying for customers. As one of the respondents said, annoying posters are easy to block from the news feed in social media. Customers might have "liked" the company in Facebook, but it does not automatically mean
they will continue receiving posts. Finding something interesting to post once a week seemed to be a big problem for companies.

Old-fashioned marketing methods like advertisements on TV, radio or magazines give companies more time to consider what they really want to publish. For example, if a company uses e-mailing lists for marketing, it is quite easy to know which customers receive the messages. In social media, it is much harder to know how many people actually receive the posts. Social media is also a poor tool for more limited marketing. Spreading volume depends mostly on whether the customers want to share the original post forward or not. This can cause difficulties for example when companies arrange events with limited seats.

However, one expedition organizer used Twitter daily during expedition. Hard conditions and limited time reduced possibilities for longer post in social media during the expedition, but Twitter was a perfect tool for him to update shortly how expedition is going. This was exactly the kind of information his customers wanted so it did not matter that he posted daily. Between expeditions, updates came about once a week, which again was not considered too often to irritate customers.

Social media was considered an important tool for marketing. This alone indicates that companies have benefitted from social media in some way, even though all of the companies could not more specifically specify how they have benefitted from using social media. Furthermore, as respondents considered social media easy to use, it is not a surprise that the companies continue to use social media.

5.4 Strategies

Interviewed companies did not have a marketing strategy, which was a disappointment on behalf of the study. Without a strategy, it might be difficult to use social media effectively and safely. Lack of strategy can be to also a reason why some of the bigger companies have received plenty of bad publicity, as in the case of a post order company Hobby Hall, where a single case of one bad customer service received an incredible attention in social media. Discussion between customer and the company received thousands of "likes" and about a hundred comments (Paavilainen, 2013). Of course the reason for this incident can also be pure ignorance on how social media works. If companies treat customers badly in social media without thinking it's effect on company's image, consequences can be devastating. One of the interviewed companies in my study reminded that it is important to follow social media and understand how net etiquette changes. This again reminds that marketing strategies in social media do not necessarily have a long lifespan.

Even without a marketing strategy, some of the companies had a schedule for posts. Interestingly enough, it was quite carefully scheduled how the sponsored athletes should post on their sponsors’ Facebook site. It seems that bigger companies have a more serious marketing strategy, while smaller companies use social media without a real marketing plan. Unfortunately I did not interview bigger companies so this is hard to verify. Also, as extreme-sport oriented companies are usually managed by a extreme-sport athlete, they simply might not care that much about marketing strategies.
5.5 Risks

Marketing in social media was considered as a safe marketing method. 88% of respondents said marketing in social media is "not dangerous at all" or "not really dangerous". However, example from Hobby Hall (Paavilainen, 2013) demonstrates how careless actions in social media can easily ruin the company's public image. As most of the respondents considered marketing in social media safe, I did not receive a lot of opinions on how to act safely in social media. One sponsored athlete, however, considered marketing in social media "quite dangerous" and was concerned about her privacy. She seemed to use social media much more carefully and thoughtfully than most of the interviewed companies. She pointed that it is good to remember that everything that is published on social media can spread out and be used against the publisher.

As interviewed companies had no major problems or disadvantages from using social media, it can either mean that they have handled critique and other potential problems before these have turned into a real problems, or that they have been lucky. Based on the four weeks' observation period, companies handled potential problems well by answering to customers' critique fast, but it seems companies have also been a bit lucky, as the received critique did not raise more negative publicity.

5.6 The future

Social media was considered to become even more popular and more expensive in the future. For example, a few years ago Facebook was completely free, but today it is possible to buy more visibility for updates. Considering how much information comes from average of 303 friends (Webster, 2013), buying visibility in Facebook and in other social media might be the most logical solution for effective marketing in the future. Interviewed companies also believed social media is going to be around for good, but one interesting comment was raised about sociality in social media:

*Does people start to be more concerned about their privacy? Have we already reached the high point of sociality? (climbing hall)*
6. Discussion

Extreme-sport oriented companies are a quite marginal group and as marketing in social media is a relatively new marketing method, it is not a surprise that studies about marketing methods in social media for extreme-sport oriented companies do not exist. However, comparison between, if not similar, but corresponding studies are possible and worth to explore. For example Nakara et al.’s (2012) research about how small companies are using social media for marketing reveal similar results to this study. Small companies also considered social media as an efficient and important marketing method, although they had not measured it. Also, small companies that did not use social media for marketing were usually managed by a bit older people. This was also the case with extreme-sport oriented companies in my study. Similarly, marketing in social media was unplanned and improvised also among small companies.

Even though the results of this study are informative and identify special issues in the use of social media for marketing, only small and mid-size extreme-oriented companies were investigated. Comparisons between larger extreme-sport oriented companies and "normal" companies was not possible to do from the data from interviews. This was clearly a shortage in this study. Another potential problem is the fact that I had personally good contacts to interviewed companies. From the point of view of practical matters this was a good thing as I could easily contact the companies, but it is difficult to know if this has affected the results of the study in some way.

Looking backwards, the interview questions could have been improved as well. Now, data from interviews mostly reveals how extreme-sport oriented companies are using social media for marketing instead of answering directly to the research question. Furthermore, as interviewed companies were not too worried about safety issues, information about how to use social media safely was not directly answered. The problem could have been avoided by asking directly: "How does your company take safety issues into account while marketing in social media?" or "What has your company done to make sure marketing in social media is as safe as possible?"

Apart from the safety issue, efficiency of marketing in social media was the other important part of this study. A clear question on how the companies could use social media for marketing as efficiently as possible could have given more direct answers to the research question than the now used questions about companies' current marketing methods. Assumption was that the companies were already using social media as efficiently as possible, but for example the "like and share" marketing trick on Facebook that was highly popular only a year ago, has turned against companies as the users have become frustrated with such marketing. Theoretically this is still a very efficient way of marketing, but today the companies may avoid this method because customers find it annoying and thus, using it can ruin the company's image.

Based on this study and comparable studies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011; Nakara et al., 2012; Leung et al., 2013), marketing in social media seems to be a difficult subject to study as it changes constantly. Yesterday's effective marketing method is annoying tomorrow and can easily ruin the company's reputation.
Customers have clearly understood the power of social media and know how to use it against companies (Paavilainen, 2013; Facebook 2013b). People seem to even use social media as a weapon in their personal arguments. A good example is a recent discussion on an extreme-oriented company's forum, where the owner, also acting as a chief editor, of the company insulted people. This raised a large boycott against the company. The boycott was widely hyped in social media. Facebook pages (Facebook, 2013c), blogs (Malm, 2013; Stenlund, 2013), e-mail lists and even companies that had nothing to do with the case were pulled into the discussion as their public Facebook pages were used to promote the boycott (Facebook, 2013d). An "official" petition, which was easy to share in Facebook, was also started against the company (Skrivunder.com, 2013). The organizer of this riot also contacted other companies, which were sponsoring the boycotted company. He contacted them both via e-mail and also by writing on their public Facebook pages, questioning them on how they could be sponsoring this kind of a company (Facebook, 2013e). Some of the companies did actually pull their logos away from the boycotted company's page, until the owner of the company admitted his mistakes and stepped aside, hiring another person to continue his work as a chief editor (Brändström, 2013). However, at least one of the companies refused to pull their logos from the boycotted company's website. The next day, the organizer of the boycott started to spread a rumor in his personal Facebook page how the company who had refused to pull their logos down had threatened him. True or not, but suddenly this company was boycotted widely in the social media as well.

In future research it would be interesting to compare differences between large extreme-oriented companies and small ones in more detail. It is possible that larger extreme-oriented companies plan their marketing strategies more carefully. To investigate risks of social media more thoroughly, it could be a possible approach to directly contact companies that have experienced negative effects of social media.
7. Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that social media is often used as a marketing tool in extreme-sport companies without a real marketing strategy. Usage is generally improvised and unplanned. However, through trial and error, extreme-sport oriented companies have found their way to use social media effectively. Posting in social media on the average once a week about upcoming events, offers, new products, extreme-sport pictures or films and up-to-date information about the company seems to be a good practice to use social media. Extreme-sport oriented companies’ methods are similar to small companies methods.

To use social media safely, companies should be online all the time to be able to handle questions and critique as fast and discreet as possible. Companies should also listen to their customers, follow their behavior and how they react to company’s posts. It is also important to keep up with the development of social media and think about the worst-case scenario if posts are understood wrongly. Strong opinions, bad language and posts that could insult customers cause usually only bad publicity for the company.

One of the most risky methods to use social media is having an open platform for comments and critique, for example a Facebook page, but not using social media actively. If company does not post regularly on Facebook, company’s Facebook page can be forgotten easily. Furthermore, if a company does not use social media actively, it is difficult to handle critique and questions on their public page. It is possible that the company does not even know about the criticism.

Social media has become an important tool for marketing, but with the rapid development of both social media and net etiquette, it is difficult to use social media as safely and efficiently as possible. Most of the extreme-sport oriented companies can find social media a very useful marketing tool, but only if they have resources and time to invest to be active on social media. One of the respondents formulated the use of social media descriptively:

*I am thinking that certain style of use of social media is beneficial in making your company known. However, I think it is crucial to use it as a supporting tool rather than your main way of increasing sales and bookings. Social media is meant for leisure and fun. It should only provide news about your recent events, work as a “spirit-lifter” and a way of hooking up with your audience. For my company, whose services and ways of doing business might not be conservative, social media gives a perfect tool to tell the audience what we really do. (expedition organizer)*
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References


Attachment

Interview questions

There are many forms of social media, but here is one description:

*Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content."

1. Does your company use social media as a marketing tool? (including all forms of social media)
   Yes / No (If no, go straight to question 12)

2. How many different forms of social media does your company use?
   (1) (2) (3-4) (5=>)

3. How does your company use social media? (A bit longer answer is highly appreciated)

4. How many years have your company been using social media for marketing?
   (less than a year) (1-2 years) (3-4 years) (More than five years)

5. How important do you see social media for marketing?
   (Not important at all) (Not really important) (Quite important) (Very important)

6. Have your company benefited from using social media in some way? How? Is it possible to measure in some way?

7. Do you find it difficult to use social media as a marketing tool?
   (Not difficult at all) (Not really difficult) (Quite difficult) (Very difficult)
8. What is the difficulty in marketing, if there is some?

9. How often does your company post on social media? (All activity in social media)
   (many times in a day)  (once a day)
   (many times in a week)   (once a week)
   (many times in a month)   (once a month)
   (less frequently than once a month)

10. More specific: (for example, Twitter: every day, Facebook: once a week...)
   1)
   2)
   3)
   4)
   5)

11. Does your company have a marketing strategy for marketing in social media and how carefully do you follow it?
   (Don’t have a strategy)   (Not really carefully)   (Quite carefully)   (Very carefully)

12. Do you think marketing in social media is dangerous?
   (Not dangerous at all)   (Not really dangerous)   (Quite dangerous)   (Very dangerous)

13. What kind of risks or dangers do you see in marketing in social media?

14. If you use social media for marketing, have you confronted some concrete disadvantage by using it?

15. How do you see the future of marketing? Companies are using social media more and more. Do you think this trend will continue? What is the next thing?

16. Any comments, further thoughts about the subject?