Brand - Customer Relationship Building

Recommendation for a digital communication strategy for a luxury accessory label

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Introduction

*Consumers are in the driver’s seat when it comes to the interaction with their favourite brands*

*FashionUnited.de (2013)*

Digital Communication nowadays offers new ways for companies to engage in conversation with their customers and to get direct feedback regarding their products or their online presence. The Internet opens paths for interaction, enables people to take care of their daily duties online and forms new opportunities for companies and brands to be present in the life of their target groups.

Social media is creating a two-way communication that enables companies to get direct feedback from their customers, to approach new target groups and to explore different marketing instruments than known before. The new generation of customers is a generation of influencers that have the choice between interacting with a company – or not doing so. And whether they decide to follow a brand on Facebook, to engage in a conversation with a company on Twitter or to tag a product on Instagram – their decision will influence the people around them.

Therefore, considering the before mentioned reasons, having a digital communication strategy is crucial for the success of any company or brand: because it enables a company to build an actual relationship with their customers, to receive feedback from their target
This paper attempts to describe the research process that has been undertaken in order to deliver recommendations for the accessory label House of Cases on the optimization of their digital communication strategy in order to reach their customers, to establish a two-way communication between the company and the end customer and to increase brand awareness among the target group through digital media. From a literature review, which provided background knowledge on the key areas of digital communication, to a survey among the target group of the label that lead to deep insights on the opinions and point of views of the customers of House of Cases to a thorough analysis, which helped to establish an advice for the company; the research process resulted in recommendations to help the management to reach their customers more successfully via digital communication channels in the future.

Executive Summary

This research project, realized by a student from the Hanze University Groningen as her graduation assignment throughout February until June 2013 and in cooperation with the fashion label House of Cases from Hamburg, Germany, has been conducted in order identify the gap between the current and the desired digital communication situation and to draw up recommendations regarding the digital communication strategy of the cooperating company. The objective of this research was to make recommendations to the management of House of Cases on how to optimize their digital communication strategy in order to create brand awareness through the use of digital communication channels by making a diagnostic gap analysis in which the characteristics of the current digital communication strategy will be compared to the characteristics of digital communication described as crucial by the end customers of House of Cases.

The practice-oriented research is based on preliminary research that consists of an interview with the management of House of Cases and the study of relevant theories to the areas of digital communication strategy, communication channels and brand awareness and is supported by the conduction of a survey among a specific group of participants that
matches the target group of the label. A research framework (see appendix 1.0) and a conceptual model (see appendix 1.1) are used to demonstrate the reasoning of this research. In order to ensure the achievement of the research objective, a set of research questions and sub-questions are formulated.

Resulting from primary and secondary research, three main characteristics were identified that lead to a gap between the current and the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases: The creation of meaningful content to engage customers, the missing instrumentalisation of digital channels and the lack of brand awareness among the customers.

Based on these factors, an advice was drawn up that builds the basis to help the management of House of Cases to reach further implementation to achieve the desired digital communication strategy. The advice divides in a strategic part and a plan of action, providing the management with a clear path to follow. The main recommendations include that the choice of the most relevant communication channel for the brand and its customers as well as the creation of meaningful content will most likely lead to an increased level of brand awareness. House of Cases is advised to focus its main efforts following the research on observing and identifying the communication styles of its target group, including their preferred communication channels, and on the design of content that connects emotions and the story behind the label with the actual products. By following the given advice, the company will be able to optimize their digital communication strategy in order to increase brand awareness among their target group within a short period of time.
Organisational Context

The accessory label “House of Cases” with origin in Hamburg, Germany, was founded in 2010 by former stylist Laisa-Maria Mann. The label focuses on high-quality accessories for laptops, phones and tablets and is always up-to-date when it comes to the newest most fashion-forward movements. The products can be purchased either online or at exclusive national and international boutiques and department stores. House of Cases produces solely in Europe, focusing on highly qualitative materials and trendy colors and patterns.

The owner is solely responsible for the whole company and manages all online and offline business. She does not have any other employees, but works with external distributors, producers and agencies; her work is mainly based on contractors who are not part of the label itself. This affects the time and efforts possible to realize a digital communication strategy.

The whole management of the company takes place at the office in Hamburg, as well as part of the media relations and any organizational tasks related to the production and distribution of the products to stores as well as to end customers. Furthermore, the online store is organized from this office and the actual offline retail tasks are distributed among the manager and the warehouse in Kiel, Germany.

The company targets customers that expect high quality, long lasting materials and products that are up-to-date and match the fast moving trends in the fashion world, resulting in various changing collections throughout the year. The target group of the company is women and men from their late Twenties until late Thirties and with a steady financial background, who see the products as something that they can buy along the way when they are shopping for other items, such as clothes. A typical end customer of House of Cases acknowledges that the products would be a great addition to his or her closet, but
doesn’t limit himself/herself to owning only one I-pad case or only one I-phone case, but likes to own a variety of choices to match his/her lifestyle decisions (Mann, 2013).

Since the founding of the company, the label quickly developed and became well known among the end customers, as well as among journalists of fashion-related magazines who covered the products in their publications and exclusive boutiques who were interested in selling the products in their stores. Excellent workmanship, high-quality materials and quick adaptation to trends helped House of Cases to establish a fond customer base.

Today, in 2013, House of Cases is popular on the national and international fashion market and is seeking to establish a broader client base worldwide, starting with the client base in Germany. In order to reach this goal, communication with end customers for direct feedback and exchange is necessary.

Since House of Cases does not own any stores, a direct approach to the end customer has to be achieved differently. In the fast changing fashion world, fast communication, direct service and short ways of communication are necessary to create brand awareness and to build a relationship between the label and the end customer.

Digital communication plays an important role in the planned communication strategy of House of Cases. Since new products are designed constantly and expansion lines are in planning, it is essential to communicate these innovations and improvements to the end customers to increase sales and to create a higher level of brand awareness in the future. House of Cases uses various digital communication channels, such as Facebook or Instagram but is currently not following a clear path and does not own a communication strategy for digital channels so far.

The organization has only entered the market quite recently and does not possess a big budget for communication; therefore the marketing instruments to introduce new products or extension lines to the customers or to update them about any developments of the company is rather limited and leads to a need of a strong digital communication strategy in order to communicate any news successfully to the customers of House of Cases, since digital communication is usually much cheaper than traditional marketing channels.

Furthermore, the management wishes to achieve a higher level of brand awareness, which can be realized at low cost, if the digital communication is focused on brand awareness as a key point. Those aspects create the need for the label to own a strong digital communication strategy in order to inform customers and to enable them to communicate with the company.
Project Context

The research has been conducted by a student from the Hanze University Groningen as part of her Graduation Assignment. The project assignment has been designed in cooperation with Laisa-Maria Mann, the owner of the label. She will be further referred to as the management.

The management realized that there is the need for a clear digital communication strategy, since her company has been expanding and growing over the last year. The need for such a strategy has not been evident until now, when the owner realized that there is need for a clear concept (a “red threat”) when it comes to presenting her company digitally, since she is planning on expanding her product line in the future and needs to build a clear brand image that has to be communicated to the customers. The first step on the way of creating a clear brand image is to recognize the level of brand awareness. During preliminary research, namely the interview with the management (Appendix 2.0), it became clear that the level of brand awareness has to increase since the management wishes for the brand to be present among the customers before they actually enter a store and to be in their minds as soon as they consider investing in a new product that fits the product range of House of Cases.

Regarding the current digital communication, the channels of choice are Facebook, Instagram and a self-designed corporate website (including an online-shop). Nevertheless, a clear digital communication strategy does not exist, any news and developments are being communicated whenever they occur and communication in digital channels happens rather randomly instead of following a strategy. A clear message is missing, the desired image of the brand is not communicated through digital communication and exchange with the customers is lacking completely. The needs and wants of the target group have not been analyzed at all and therefore, the feedback from customers via any of the digital communication channels is missing.

The management wishes for a clear digital communication strategy that builds upon the already existing communication channels such as Facebook and Instagram, but that allows customers to gain a clear image of the brand and enables the company to transmit a clear message to the customers. The goal of creating a clear brand image has to be considered long-term since the level of brand awareness has to be considered first in order to define
whether or not the brand is present in the conscience of its potential customers. The management would like to know how it can reach its end customers via digital communication channels, what the customers expect from the digital communication strategy of the label as well as what their associations with the brand are, if they have heard from it. The management will furthermore communicate its own ideas and expectations of a feasible digital communication strategy in order to close the gap between the current digital communication and the desired digital communication situation and to create a higher level of brand awareness. Since reaching customers worldwide is not feasible currently, and since the online shop focuses on the German market, this research will focus on targeting the customers from Germany only.

**Research Design**

**Research Objective and Purposes**

The research was practice oriented, meaning that it is meant to provide knowledge that can contribute to a successful intervention in order to change the situation regarding digital communication of House of Cases from the current to the desired level (Dooreward & Verschuren, 2010). Since the problem had already been identified, the diagnostic stage of the intervention cycle appears to be the most suitable. A gap analysis is supposed to clearly identify the factors that can lead to the change from the current to the desired situation regarding the digital communication between House of Cases and its customers. Knowing this, the following objective had been developed:

*The objective of this research is to make recommendations to the management of House of Cases on how to optimize their digital communication strategy in order to create brand awareness through the use of digital communication channels (external aim) by making a diagnostic gap analysis in which the characteristics of the current digital communication strategy will be compared to the characteristics of digital communication described as crucial by the end customers of House of Cases. (internal aim)*
This research aims for enabling the company to successfully close the gap between the currently existing digital communication and the desired digital communication situation with regards to the role of brand awareness in the relationship-building process with the end customers of the label. Sub-goals included to define which factors are important for customers with regards to digital communication and to explore the important factors of digital communication for House of Cases to guarantee a focus on digital communication strategy in the future.

In the following section, first, the main focus areas of this research will be discussed. In order to demonstrate the reasoning, a research framework (fig.1) and a conceptual model (appendix 1.2) are used for illustration. Moreover, a set of research questions are formulated in order to ensure the achievement of the research objective. Furthermore, the research methods are outlined, specifying the means of data collection and data analysis in order to yield relevant answers to the research questions. Lastly, concrete conclusions and recommendations that have been derived from the relevant answers will be presented.

**Research Framework**

Based upon the two main parts of the research objective, the research framework has been established, which lays the ground for the further definition of the central questions. The following research framework had been constructed based on the key concepts of digital communication, digital communication channels and brand awareness, which have been chosen after studying relevant literature on those fields during preliminary research. The vertical arrows in the graphical version of the framework symbolize which factors have been confronted, while the horizontal arrows show where conclusions could be drawn from the confrontation.

The actual research undertaken builds upon a theoretical framework that aims for providing insights on the fields of digital communication, digital communication channels and the use of online content to create brand awareness. Those theories have been supported by an interview with the management of House of Cases, to identify the main characteristics of the gap between the current and the desired digital communication. This preliminary research provided the parameters for the research perspective, the desired situation as named in the objective (a).
Following, the conceptual model is used to be able to gather opinions of the chosen target group on the different key concepts (b). The established survey led to deeper insights on the gap between the current and the desired situation as well as the characteristics of a successful digital communication strategy from the point of view of the customers. Furthermore, the survey helped to gain a clearer picture of the needs and wants of the customers regarding the content and the way of communication online.

Opinions of the end customers of the label help to identify the level of brand awareness as well as their perception on the current digital communication of House of Cases. The opinion-research focuses on a very specific target group, which contains of women who are interested in fashion and who consider digital communication, such as social media networks, part of their lifestyle. As mentioned before, the research only aims towards a German target group.

The analysis of the literature, the interview and the survey create an overall idea of the main points that lead to the gap between the current and the desired digital communication of the brand. In the conceptual model, the parameters for the research perspective as well as the gathered opinions led to an interrelation of the findings. After an analysis and comparison of the findings (c), a recommendation for the management of House of Cases regarding the improvement of their digital communication strategy can be developed (d).

(Figure 1: Research Framework)
Central Questions

In order to remind the reader, the goal of this research was to make recommendations to the management of House of Cases on how to optimize their digital communication strategy in order to create brand awareness through the use of digital communication channels by making a diagnostic gap analysis in which the characteristics of the current digital communication strategy will be compared to the characteristics of digital communication analyzed as crucial by the end customers of House of Cases.

It has to be noted that in the following, the research questions are divided by the research methods, meaning that the first research questions refer to the literature review, while the following questions were used to investigate the opinions of the management of House of Cases and its customers regarding digital communication on the current and the desired level. In order to sub-divide the research framework, the so called TEA method has been used (Verschuren & Dooreward, 2010).

The first central questions concerns part (a) of the research framework and focuses on the sources needed in order to establish the research perspective.

The second question (b) relating to the opinion of the management of House of Cases is part of the preliminary research in the conceptual framework and entails the analysis of the data gathered on the objects of the research project in order to be able to identify the gap between the current and the desired strategy. Subsequently, the results of the analysis of the findings were compared and lead to the third central questions.

By using the method of subdividing the research framework by research levels as described by Verschuren and Doorewaard (2010, p.121), the following research questions had been derived:

1. According to theory and recent research, what are the key characteristics regarding the use of a digital communication strategy for companies/brands and end customers in order to create a higher level of brand awareness?
1.1 What is the perception on the communication strategy of House of Cases by the owner of House of Cases?

The following question is the second central question and refers to part (b) of the research framework. It entails an analysis of the opinions of the target group gathered with the surveys.

2. What is the opinion of the customers of House of Cases regarding the digital communication strategy of the company in order to create a higher level of brand awareness?

The third central question concerns part (d) of the research framework. The answer to this question shows to what extend the objective of the research has been achieved:

3. Which similarities and differences regarding the use of digital communication channels in order to create a higher level of brand awareness can be distinguished between the perception of the owner of House of Cases and the customers of the company and how can the analysis help to close the gap between the current and the desired digital communication situation of House of Cases?

Following the unraveling of the key concepts into central questions (see Appendix 1.2), sub-questions have been determined according to each central question in order to indicate which activities are needed during the research project to be able to answer the central questions. The third research questions does not need any sub-questions, according to the TEA method (Verschuren & Dooreward, 2010).

1a) What are the main characteristics that determine the successfulness of a digital communication strategy for a company/brand?
1b) How can a brand create awareness by using a digital communication strategy?
1c) Which factors of a digital communication strategy determine the increase of brand awareness?
1d) Which channels of digital communication can be used to increase brand awareness among the end customers of House of Cases?

2a) Are the currently existing digital communication channels being used by the customers of House of Cases and if yes, how do they use them?
2b) How can the customers of House of Cases be reached digitally?
2c) What do the customers of House of Cases expect from the company in regards of digital communication?
2d) Which communication channels lead to an increased level of brand awareness?

The above mentioned central questions as well as the sub-questions create a set of steering research questions that clearly indicate the areas of interest for the researcher, as reflected in the objective. The third central question focuses on the similarities and differences regarding the use of digital communication channels in the opinion of the customers and the management of House of Cases in order to establish an analysis that can help to close the gap between the current and the desired situation.

Research strategy & method

The following section describes the strategy of the research as well as the chosen methods that were used to conduct the research. It provides an overview about the various steps that have been undertaken and reasons the different methods that have been chosen in order to explicitly research each area that has been determined as a relevant key research area in the theoretical framework.

Strategy

The problem of the research had been clarified during an intake meeting with the client at the beginning of February 2013. The research is of a diagnostic nature. The actual research was a gap-analysis, practice-oriented, and based on a practical approach, real-life issues and
opinions. The chosen research strategy has been a combination of two types of research, namely primary and secondary. The secondary research or desk research provides a background on the study and helps to justify the research. The desk research (literature review) was used to provide deeper insights on the main characteristics of the use of digital communication strategies for companies and customers regarding general use and the creation of brand awareness specifically. Preliminary research is based on an interview to gain an understanding of the necessity of a digital communication strategy and to get deeper insights on the perceptions of the managers of House of Cases and supported by theories on the areas of digital communication strategy, brand awareness and communication channels.

The primary research is used to enable answering the research questions. This research consists of surveys to explore the opinions on digital communication by customers, according to the chosen research questions.

By using this combination, a Mixed-Method research approach has provided a wide overview of opinions and lead to a general image of the perception of the digital communication strategy of House of Cases among its end customers (Verschuren & Dooreward, 2010). The data collections tools per research area will be described in the following section (see Appendix 1.0 for the LRFM).

**Method**

The research was based on a background analysis of the current situation of the company regarding the digital communication, an interview with Laisa-Maria Mann to determine the desired digital communication situation of the management as well as the opinions of the customers regarding the digital communication between the company and the customers. A thorough analysis of the needs and wants of House of Cases as well as the customers in regards to the use of digital communication and on the level of brand awareness helped to gain insights and enable the researcher to recommend a digital communication strategy.

The research strategy includes that the following steps were undertaken in order to conduct the research, structured by research questions:
Research Question 1 and 1.1.

1. **Conduction of a literature review on communication strategies in general, on digital communication strategies in particular and on the characteristics and important factors for the management and the end customers in regards to digital communication in general, as well as on the use of digital communication channels and the use of digital communication to enhance the level of brand awareness.**

2. **Conduction of an interview with the owner of House of Cases, Laisa-Maria Mann, to analyse the needs and wants of the company and the aspired goals of a digital communication strategy. This helped to gain insights on the current digital communication as well as the desired future regarding digital communication. It furthermore allowed gaining knowledge about the feasibility of the planned digital communication strategy and any limitations.**

**Research Question 2**

2. **A structured and semi-structured web-based survey was undertaken to explore which factors are important for customers in digital communication with companies, if the already existent channels are used in general, how they are used and what customers expect from a company that uses digital communication, in relation to the increase of the level of brand awareness of the label.**

**Research Question 3**

4. **After the data has been collected, it was analyzed and the results were used to identify how House of Cases can successfully communicate digitally with its customers and increase its level of brand awareness among the target group, resulting in the recommendation of a tailored digital communication strategy advice.**

(please see Appendix 1.0 for an overview)

The literature review helped to determine the factors of digital communication that were needed to achieve the desired situation in comparison to the current situation. The chosen theories furthermore were the basis for the design of the survey questions, such as the
methods of Macala Wright in *How to develop your digital strategy* (Wright, 2012). The sampling technique chosen was purposive sampling, a group of non-probability sampling techniques, since this method enables the researcher to choose its objects from a group of interest rather than from the whole population (Laerd dissertation, 2013). Therefore, the group of interest has been limited to potential clients of House of Cases, that meet the target group of the label, as described by the management during the interview (Mann, 2013), in order to gather opinions that will prove helpful after the analysis. Furthermore, the channel of distribution of the survey was chosen carefully as a digital channel, since the response rate of the participants already allowed some further insights on the characteristics of the current digital communication strategy. Since the target group of House of Cases are young people who are aware of fashion and who like living a certain lifestyle, as described in section “Project Context”, it was desired to approach this group of users in particular. By focusing on digital communication strategy, the use of the already existent communication channels was supposed to allow some insights on if and how they are used by the customers. To make sure that the target group could be reached, the local corporate Facebook page of House of Cases was used to distribute the survey, ensuring to reach already existent customers. Furthermore, a German fashion forum was used to reach more members of the appropriate target group, who might not be yet aware of the existence of the brand. The survey aimed for reaching as many users as possible via the chosen channels.

The outcomes of the survey were analyzed and the results were compared with the results from the interviews with the owner of House of Cases. This enabled the researcher to clearly define the gap between the current situation of the label, the desired communication of the management and the opinions of the end customers regarding the digital communication of the label. Derived from the summary of the results, recommendations have been developed that will enable the client to use digital communication as an additional and strong way of communication with its clients. This strategy has been presented to the client and will be used for further implementation.
Limitations and Risks

Since the duration of the project was limited, not the whole scope of the area of digital communication has been covered and explored in depth, but the assignment should and was rather be understood as a basis for further exploration. Furthermore, access to all necessary company documentation was not be available and hindered the progress of the analysis, due to confidential information that the researcher did not have access to or information that has not been documented at all, since the company does not possess different departments that document each step of their work. Since the staff at the company is limited to only one person, some answers were delayed which slightly extended the needed time frame for a few tasks. Furthermore, since one person only provided an overview about the current situation, the opinion might not be entirely objective. Bias could also be an issue during the conduction of the survey, since friends or family of the owner of the label could participate and lead to non-objective results regarding the areas of brand awareness and communication strategy. The research results might not be applicable to any other company seeking a digital communication strategy, since the advice will be tailored towards the needs and wants of House of Cases and its customers.

Theoretical Framework

The key concepts present a demarcation of the components and dimensions which are included (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2010) to answer already established research questions.

The theoretical framework had been distinguished after analyzing the key concepts of the research. The theories reach from a rather broad approach on digital communication strategy in general to a very detailed theory on the use of digital communication channels. By gaining a general idea on digital communication strategy, the researcher was able to identify the key characteristics regarding the use of digital communication of companies/brands and customers and to determine the factors that lead to an increased brand awareness among customers through the use of digital media. The studied theory furthermore allows the researcher to gain an idea of the desired situation and use the
findings in the analysis to describe the differences between the current situation and the parameters necessary to create the ideal or desired situation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concept</th>
<th>Theories</th>
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<tr>
<td>Digital Communication Strategy</td>
<td>- Theory on digital communication strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Awareness</td>
<td>- Theory on the use of online content to create brand awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital Communication Channels</td>
<td>- Theory on the use of digital communication channels (in regards to companies and end customers)</td>
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Table 1.0

In order to be able to identify the characteristics of the desired communication strategy and to create a concrete idea of the chosen key concepts, a thorough analysis of current literature regarding the areas of digital communication strategy, brand awareness and communication channels was necessary.

Starting with a literature review on theories on digital communication strategy, a clear definition of the term “communication strategy” is provided by the communication experts at redant.com (Red Ant, 2010), followed by the 6C model of social media engagement by Parent, Plangger, & Bal (2010), which helps to identify the factors that lead to achieving a successful communication strategy.

Additionally, the strategy of Parent et al, The new WTP: willingness to participate will be explored deeper to help to understand the current situation of House of Cases and to identify the gap between a successful digital communication strategy and the already existing situation of digital communication by comparing the preliminary research results with the available theories. It is important to note that rather than a purely theoretical approach, some of the literature relies on rather practical ideas of marketing experts, which is more applicable to the research topic and will therefore be used for preliminary research,
as in the theory of RedAnt.com on *how to plan and manage a digital strategy* (Red Ant, 2010).

Finally, a theory on different ways of communication according to social styles by Merrill&Reid (1991) will help to further clarify the characteristics of the users, which will provide important knowledge for the brand on how to create a successful two-way communication with its customers, which can be considered one of the key characteristics of a successful digital communication theory.

The theories on the use of online content to create brand awareness will assist in examining the way a company can use digital communication to increase the level of brand awareness among their end customers. The theory of Keller will help to understand the value of brand awareness and provide practical information on how to reach a higher level of brand awareness, followed by the explanations of Heath, Brand & Nairn on the different approaches on the use of digital communication to increase brand awareness (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006).

Regarding theories on the use of digital communication channels, Macala Wright (2012) will provide insights on how to choose the right platforms for the company, supported by the method of “Channel Mapping”, explained by Ric Dragon in his book “Social Marketology” (2012). These two publications will help to understand how a company can find a digital channel that matches its needs and wants and how to unravel those channels in order to meet their purpose.

It has to be mentioned that the field of digital communication is fairly new and therefore, not many theories have been developed yet. Theories from psychology are used to help to identify target groups on that specific area of communication and already existing marketing theories have been remodeled to provide a match to this recent field of communication.

In the following section, each theory will be summarized, reviewed and explained further according to their context in the research strategy to create a framework for comparison between the research results and available theories later on in order to be able to write up recommendations for the management of House of Cases regarding their digital communication strategy. The theories build the framework for a successful research and enable the researcher to gain deeper insights on the main characteristics of the use of digital communication strategies for companies and customers regarding general use and the
creation of brand awareness specifically relating to the desired situation of a digital communication strategy.

Theory on digital communication strategy

This section will provide a review of theories on digital communication strategy, especially the characteristics that are required to lead to a successful strategy for companies in order to provide answers to the formulated central questions of this research.

The communication experts at redant.com published a whitepaper in 2010 on how to manage and plan a digital strategy (Red Ant, 2010). The paper defines digital communication in a company context as “the best way of achieving goals, normally promoting a brand or service, through electronic connected media” (Red Ant, 2010). It furthermore includes the emotional aspect of communication, assuming that digital communication can be used to build relationships between customers and companies by engaging the customers in a conversation with brands. This is also supposed to help the company’s offline reputation and perception. A successful digital communication strategy enables a company to be present in the minds of their customers, even offline. For the customers, this specific way of communication offers the great benefit of moving to a dialogue with companies, which can help companies to understand their clients better.

The 6C model of social media engagement explains the necessary factors to successfully establish a digital communication strategy, which is essential in this research process regarding finding the answers for the central questions.

Parent et al base their model on the assumption that users of social media favor personal conversations between themselves and companies over communications that is forced upon them by impersonal organizations. They characterize social media users as individuals that “seek greater engagement with their preferred brands and involvement in creating brand personalities” (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). According to this assumption, companies should follow the 6C model of social media engagement, which distinguishes various factors, that companies need to take into account in order to play a role in the world of social media.
Following, the illustration of the model clearly explains the relationship between each of the “C’s”. The company needs to create content, which is attractive to their customers. By creating this content, the creator has to be aware of the fact that once it is published, a loss of control has to be expected, since users will modify content and use it according to their own ideas. Once the content is created and published, it will reach a group of interested users, the community. This is the point where the communication becomes bidirectional, since users follow up on the content, change it, publish it on different platforms and adjust it to their own wants, leading to reactions from other members of the community.

![Diagram of Consumer Engagement](image)

**Fig. 1.0**

At this point, customers derive from the community, proving their different level of willingness to engage with a brand. Parent et al explain this with the *six progressive levels of participation*, moving from viewing to arbitrating. (see fig 1.2 in the appendix). A conversation circling around the social media content commences, which is considered the ultimate expression of engagement.

Concluding, the model results in three factors that are essential for the success of a company’s digital communication strategy. Firstly, companies need to see the need for continuous engagement, to stay in a conversation with their community and their customers. Secondly, research showed that content is the most important element when establishing a social media presence and therefore needs to be well planned. And thirdly, companies need to be willing to take risks and keep up-to-date with the movements in social media. (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011).

The following theory provides insights on the actual users and their different behaviors in digital communication depending on their personal social style.
Merril and Reid (1991) developed a theory that enables one to measure how people best communicate, according to their specific social style. This model shows three dimensions: assertiveness, responsiveness and versatility. Assertiveness was defined as “the extent to which other people perceive you as trying to persuade or convince them of your point of view.” (Merrill D.W., 1991). Depending on the level of assertiveness, specific characteristics could be defined, e.g. people who are highly assertive tend to react quickly and tell others what they think and like or dislike.

Responsiveness was defined as means “the level to which you are perceived as controlling or revealing your emotions.”(Merrill D.W., 1991). A low level of responsiveness characterizes people as rather task-focused and logical, instead of relationship-oriented and holistic as a high level of responsiveness would stand for.

In the theory, those two aspects lay the basis for a grid, which lead to four quadrants that show clear characteristics of certain social styles. They are divided in *driver*, *amiable*, *expressive* and *analytical*. With each type come certain characteristics as shown in the figure below:

![Figure 1.2 (Reid)](image)

Source: Merril and Reid (1999)

The third dimension, namely versatility is the level of which other people perceive you as willing to change your behavior in interactions, according to what makes others feel more comfortable. Depending on your level of versatility, you are more or less likely to change your actual social style depending to whom they are communicating with.

For a digital communication strategy this is important, since it defines how communication
with the customers should be approached. A brand has to be aware of the different social styles and identify its users in order to successfully establish a two-way communication. By being able to define which one of the users belongs to the influencers, the brand is enabled to turn towards the right people and to approach them directly, gaining back some of the control that the interaction in social media takes away from them. This theory focuses on a future approach that the company has to consider in order to achieve successful digital communication.

Ric Dragon explains various social media influence tools in his book *Social Marketology* (Dragon, 2012), that are supposed to allow a brand to track any interaction with potential influencers and that could possibly help to improve the relationship between the brand and the users (Dragon, 2012). The dynamics of influencers can be limited to sharing vs. creating, listening vs. participating, broad vs. focused and casual vs. consistent. By observing these dynamics closely, a brand will be able to identify the influencers and to act according to their behavior. The main characteristics of the customers can be identified and included in the development of a successful digital communication strategy. Furthermore, the analysis of these characteristics will allow a brand to adjust their digital communication strategy if necessary before the users act or react on any content posted via digital channels.

### Theory on the use of online content to create brand awareness

The value of brand equity has been recognized by more and more companies as an intangible asset. It is defines as a positive outcome that results from the behavior of customers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2004). One important part of brand equity is brand awareness, as stated by Keller in 2003: “*Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favourable, and unique brand associations in memory*” (Keller, 2003). Awareness can be divided into two parts. The first part relates to recognition, which describes the extent to which a customer is able to recognize a brand in the store if he has just been exposed to it shortly before, e.g. when seeing it on a TV commercial. The second part is recall, which relates to the ability of a customer to remember that brand when a purchase decision has to be made.

According to Keller, brand awareness can be created by increasing brand recognition through a higher level of exposure of the brand and creating strong associations with the
relevant product category for brand recall (please see appendix figure 2). He also states that experiences, feelings and the personality of a brand affect the brand equity in the long term. For a brand that is presented online, creating brand recognition is fairly easy. Well-placed advertisings, activities in social media networks and interaction through other digital media with the customers increases the exposure of customers to the brand and therefore leads to higher brand recognition (Keller, 2003). An increase in the level of brand recall could be achieved e.g. by using applications for mobile devices, since the brand name or logo will be the last thing that the customers saw and will therefore stick in their memory. But overexposure can turn into the opposite and stop people from taking certain purchase decisions, as explained in the following theory. Furthermore, if customers don’t know that a brand exists, they will not like its page on Facebook or follow its Twitter account. This means that there is an important connection between brand awareness and brand positioning. It is usually not sufficient for a brand to be recognized, but it has to occupy a salient position within the consideration of the target audience (Elliot & Percy, 2007), referring to the idea that a brand has to be linked to a motivating reason to consider it in the process of purchasing. Since motivation can be linked to emotion, the suggestion that emotional and not rational content in communication drives relationships, as made by Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (2011), leads to the assumption that emotional content can strengthen relationships between brands and customers. In a communication strategy this translates into the importance of content as a motivational driver for successful relationship-building with the community. A brand cannot steer the level of brand awareness but is able to create the ground to increase the chances of the brand to be recognized as well as recalled.

A study from 2006 was based on this assumption and chose the approach, that the strongest form of brand awareness is word-of-mouth, that customers recommend a brand to others (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). This relates to digital communication since any form of social media is a form of word-of-mouth communication. According to the study, depending on the level of brand awareness, a different approach to the use of digital communication can be chosen: If the stage of recognition is reached, establishing a dialogue with the customers enhances the relationships, e.g. by using a blog or a Facebook page. On the second stage (Recall), e.g. during the launch of a new product, the news can be spread using various channels. The message could be distributed to theme-related bloggers
who spread it among the target group. Regarding the content of the message, one
distinction has been made: If the message is emotional, it is more efficient if less attention
is paid to its content while a factual message is stronger, the more people react to it.
Emotional content gets weakened the more people find rational arguments that work
against the emotions. (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006). Resulting from this knowledge, the
survey design was adapted to explore whether or not the opinions of the actual target group
regarding the ways on how to increase brand awareness match the theoretical findings and
to establish insights about the stage of brand awareness, that the brand House of Cases has
had reached among its target group until today. The consequences of these results will be
explored further in the analysis section of this report.

Theory on the use of digital communication channels (In regards to
companies and end customers)

In order for a company to successfully establish a digital communication strategy, it is
considered essential to choose the right platforms that meet the purpose of the brand.
Macala Wright (2012) explains in her publication *How to develop your digital strategy* that
the choice of the right channel depends on five steps. The company first needs to define
how their customers seek information about their brand or their products, before identifying
the platforms that their favor. Since there are many different channels, it is essential to
focus on the ones that match the needs and wants of the company as well as of the
customers. This establishes a relationship to the “social style” theory (Merrill D.W., 1991),
since it shows the relevance of the characteristics of a user in regards to his/her choice of
communication channels as well as of the approach a company should choose in order to
engage its customers in conversation via the appropriate digital channels.
The third step is to define the exact purpose of the channels the brand chooses to
communicate with its target group. If a mobile strategy (e.g. an app for smartphones) is
supposed to be part of the digital strategy, the role of the chosen channels in regards to the
mobile strategy has to be recognized. The last step is the definition of differentiation from
the competitors. It is crucial to find aspects that distinguish the own brand from the other
companies to create a unique identity. Wright closes with the advice to create key
performance indicators for each chosen channel in order to be able to estimate the expected
return, which doesn’t have to be financially but can also be a higher engagement rate or awareness (Wright, 2012).

Based on these methods, Ric Dragon introduces his strategy of “Channel Mapping” (Dragon, 2012). He explains that there are different ways on how to choose the right channel. It is possible to choose either based on the size and the level of activeness of the users or to decide on a platform based on were the influencers that have been identified are most engaged. But he considers it essential that the chosen channel needs to be aligned with the purpose of the company. The following table is an example on how to allocate efforts to social media channels, a practical example of “channel mapping”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel Name</th>
<th>Percentage of overall effort</th>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Main objectives for this time period</th>
<th>Total hours available: 500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>Gain 100 more followers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foursquare</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Dragon, 2012)

By clearly identifying the channels that meet the purpose of the company as well as the ones the target group uses, a company increases its chance to be able to successfully engage with its customers.

In conclusion, three essential connections can be established: Firstly, a company needs to clearly define the needs and wants of its target group regarding digital communication. This includes identifying the social styles of the users and recognizing which digital communication channels are used most frequently and for what purpose ((Merrill D.W., 1991) (Wright, 2012). By observing the target group’s interaction on already existent channels, the communication style of the users can be named and the method of “channel
mapping” will help to define which digital communication channels meet the purpose of the company as well as the essential requirements of the customers (Dragon, 2012).

Secondly, one essential characteristic of a successful communication strategy is the creation of content (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). Attractive content helps to establish a relationship between the brand and the customer, especially if it creates an emotional connection (Red Ant, 2010).

Thirdly, the two above named characteristics of a successful digital communication strategy build the ground for an increase of the level of brand awareness. Keller states that experiences, feelings and the brand personality affect the brand equity in a long term and are therefore to be translated in content that leads to higher brand awareness (Keller, 2003). Watzlawick et al made the assumption that emotional content can strengthen relationships between brands and customers (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & De Avila Jackson, 2011) and therefore motivate the target group to engage in conversation with the brand.

Research Results and Analysis

This section of the report summarizes the results of the research and provides relevant connections between the results of each research method, justifying the relationship between the research objective and the research results.

The research results will be evaluated according to the three key concepts, as described in the problem definition, namely Digital Communication Strategy, Brand Awareness and Digital Communication Channels, in order to answer the central questions, grouped relating to each research area. The main characteristics of digital communication strategies that could be derived from literature will be named. Together with the results from the interview as well as the surveys, this section is the basis for the following chapter on the advice, since it will clearly distinguish the factors that characterize the gap between the current and the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases.

The following results combine the insights from primary and secondary research and are based on the interview with the management of House of Cases as well as the survey with the customers of the label. The survey that took place from April 24th to April 30th as a web-based version resulted in 82 participants. It was distributed through various digital communication channels, such as the Facebook page of House of Cases, fashion-related
forums and websites and the client database of the label. A thorough report of the results of the survey can be found in the Appendix (4.0).

Summarized, most of the participants were female and interested in fashion in general. More than 85% use Facebook at least once a day, while only 36% even use Instagram. Only eleven participants know the label “House of Cases”, and those mostly from actual stores or because a friend owns one of the products.

**Digital Communication Strategy**

The interview with the management of the company showed that House of Cases does not own a digital communication strategy in particular. It does use a few digital communication channels, but without a clear objective and without following a certain or planned strategy. Any updates on networks happen randomly, rather than well planned. According to Laisa-Maria Mann, direct communication with end customers does not happen online at all, there is no interaction except the order process in the online shop.

The web-based survey provided deeper insights on the opinions and point-of-views of the community and end customers of House of Cases. The results of the survey clearly show that customers have particular reasons why they would even engage in a conversation with a brand, including the desire to be always up-to-date on the newest information and developments of companies, to get access to exclusive vouchers or sweepstakes and, especially via digital channels, to show other people that they identify with this brand or company. It also showed clear reasoning why customers choose to stay away from an engaging communication with brands, namely because they don’t want to share too much personal information online, that they receive too many updates by companies or that they used to follow a company online but decided to end this conversation due to irrelevant content sharing from the company.

Regarding the content, the participants emphasized the importance of receiving “useful” and “meaningful” content.

**Brand Awareness**

The interview with the management of House of Cases could not lead to any insights regarding the level of brand awareness among the clients, since this field cannot be
evaluated by the management, but can only be researched by analyzing the responsiveness of the target group and their opinions through the surveys that had been undertaken. Solely the wish to reach a broader audience was expressed clearly. The survey showed that brand awareness is still difficult to achieve on an online basis only. Most participants stated, that they would only engage in digital communication with a brand that is already part of their real life. But on the other hand it was also mentioned that being exposed to a brand more often online leads to a higher chance of considering the brand during the decision-making process at the point of purchase.

Digital Communication Channels

According to the management of House of Cases, the only attempt to establish a digital communication channel has been made by establishing a Facebook page and an Instagram account. Both accounts are independent from each other, meaning they are not linked visibly for the end customer anywhere on the accounts, nor on the official website of the label. This decreases the chance that a customer would try to be connected with the label via different channels. Other digital channels, such as a blog, Twitter, Pose or Tumblr are not used at all. The results of the survey regarding the digital communication channels were of quantitative as well as qualitative value. Among the participants, the top three named digital communication channels of the participants were Facebook, blogs and Pinterest (a platform for image sharing). According to the results of the survey, the main reasons why customers enjoy being engaged in a conversation with a company include that they feel close to what is going on, they get easily informed and they can keep up with the newest developments and trends in a practical way.

In conclusion, the preliminary research and the conducted survey show a few relevant distinctions that helped to clearly determine the gap between the current and the desired digital communication strategy.

Relating the results from the interview of the manager of the company to the consulted theory, important factors of a successful digital communication strategy are missing:
The results of the survey regarding the digital communication channels show a clear distinction between the interview results of the management and the opinions of the customers. According to Wright (2012) and Dragon (2012), it is essential to choose channels that align with the purpose of the company and that are used by the target group of the label. House of Cases focuses on Facebook and Instagram as the channels of choice while the survey showed that 85% of the users do not follow any companies on Instagram (and only 36% even use Instagram).

According to the results of the survey, customers wish for relationship-building efforts from brands through different channels such as blogs or Pinterest. Those channels are currently not instrumentalised by the management of House of Cases, but offer benefits for the relationship-building with customers. By using various communication channels, the feeling of being close to a company can be increased and lead to a higher level of identification between the customers and the brand. Furthermore, by only using one or two channels, the chance to reach all potential or already existent customers is low and decreases the chance to get the chosen message across (Red Ant, 2010).

Secondly, according to Parent et al, it is essential to create content which is meaningful and important for the community and to keep the audience engaged continuously. The interview results show that currently, content is focused more on one-way communication rather than on building a conversation with customers. Secondly, the willingness to take risks and to stay always up-to-date is considered important. For House of Cases, this is currently not existent at all, since the chosen content is rather safe and only product-related and does not refer to any current events or movements in social media.

The preliminary research showed that various characteristics determine the success of a digital communication strategy for a company, including factors that are completely influenced by the customer. The loss of control once a company publishes content, as stated by Parent et al, leads to a certain level of engagement of the customers (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). By carefully choosing the target and identifying its characteristics, it is possible to carefully select the audience for each message that the label wants to get across and to reach the target group with a motivation to engage in a conversation (Merrill D.W., 1991). This method enables the company to clearly identify the influencers among the target group and to focus their efforts on them in order to achieve a higher rate of engagement. The content of a message has been stated as crucial when establishing brand-customer relationships (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011).
Watzlawick et al suggest that emotional content can strengthen relationships between brands and customers (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & De Avila Jackson, 2011). This is not explicitly stated in the survey results but the responses directed towards “meaningful” and can therefore be interpreted, since an emotional connection can be established through content that is considered meaningful by the users. This differs from the interview results, since the management focuses solely on product information and not on emotional content. This leads to an important characteristic of a successful digital communication strategy, that the label needs to implement in its strategy in order to establish a stronger relationship between the brand and the customers.

Regarding the concept of brand awareness, this key concept proved the most difficult during the research, due to the chosen time frame of the research. Brand awareness needs to be measured throughout a longer period of time and is difficult to measure through a survey only. The survey showed that most participants would only engage with a brand digitally when this brand is already existent in their real lives. Nevertheless, the possibility of starting to engage with a brand when being exposed to it frequently was also mentioned numerous times. As Keller stated, brand awareness can be created by increasing brand recognition through a higher level of exposure of the brand. In digital communication this means visualization of the logo of the label or its products, e.g. through ads in social media. Creating strong associations with the relevant product category is needed for brand recall and therefore for brand awareness. In digital communication, this could be achieved by using feelings or by engaging the customers in sharing their personal experiences.

**Conclusions**

After analyzing the interview with the management of House of Cases and the survey with the customers, as well as relying on theory, various characteristics that clearly show the gap between the desired and the current digital communication strategy regarding the use of digital communication channels, the level of brand awareness and characteristics of a successful digital communication strategy, could be derived and conclude in the following:
1.) Clear instrumentalisation of communication channels
   a. The management only uses two channels: Facebook and Instagram. The survey showed that most users don’t even use Instagram, only follow companies that they already know and like, and use the corporate page for any information or support they need. One important channel that has been named by the participants of the survey were blogs, since they provide more than just information regarding the sale of products but also deliver inspiration on how to combine the products and reach beyond the interest of selling to establish a personal relationship with the customers. The survey clearly showed that it is important for a company to be presented digitally, but that there is a fine line between being present and annoying the customer. The communication channels have to be chosen very carefully; since not every customer can be reached via the same channels (as the survey showed, only 36% used Instagram) and most participants chose to only follow brands on Facebook that they already know. Therefore, a relationship between the online and offline presence of the label has to be established first.

2.) Meaningful content to engage customers
   a. The label communicates rather randomly with its customers and does not follow a clear strategy. The survey showed that customers wish for up-to-date information that is relevant and are not interested in random information. Furthermore, they want to receive regular updates. By not following a clear path, House of Cases risks to lose customers on their digital platforms. The results of the survey as well as the theoretical background relate to the necessity of content that engages customers in a conversation.

3.) Lack of brand awareness among the target group
   a. The brand is not present in the digital world, since there are no advertisings or involvement in numerous channels. As preliminary research as well as the survey showed, in order to build a brand image, it is essential to create presence first (Elliot & Percy, 2007). The results show that the digital
channels that the management of House of Cases uses, are mostly used by people who know the brand from an actual offline store.

In relation to theory, two essential factors of successful digital communication strategies are therefore missing. Content is considered an essential factor to engage customers and to build strong, long-lasting and loyal relationships (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). It is important that a brand clearly communicates what it stands for and that enables its customers to identify themselves with this message. Furthermore, regular updates, up-to-date information and meaningful messages that go beyond the aim of selling a product lay the ground for a deep company-customer relationship. A sub-point of this factor could be the use of emotions as stated by Watzlawick et al (Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas, & De Avila Jackson, 2011). The use of emotions in the creation of a message could be helpful in establishing meaningful content, which will lead to a higher level of engagement of the customers.

The second factor is the instrumentalisation of digital channels. According to Merril and Reid, the choice of digital communication should be adjusted to the social style of the user (Merrill D.W., 1991). This also appeared in the survey results, since not all users chose the same communication channels and can therefore possibly not be reached via the options that House of Cases chose as primary channels.

Regarding the lack of brand awareness, the research showed that in order to be able to increase the level of brand awareness, the level of brand presence has to be established first. By creating a connection between the online and the offline presence of the label, the target group will allow the company to become part of their “digital life” (Keller, 2003), which has proved successful in the past as the research results showed. Furthermore, by choosing the appropriate communication channels and by creating emotional and meaningful content for the before clearly identified target group, the presence of the brand online will increase and lead to a higher level of brand awareness among its target group.
Advice

During the research project, the need for a clear digital communication strategy became apparent. Using digital communication channels enables House of Cases to reach to a broader audience without high investment of time or money. Since the budget is limited, there is no need to consult a specialist or invest in Public Relations, because the following advice is based on low-cost ideas, that only require little time investment at the beginning of the implementation process and will result in less effort the higher the quality of the digital communication strategy increases.

Concluded it can be said, that there are three main characteristics that lead to a gap between the current and the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases: The creation of meaningful content to engage customers, the missing instrumentalisation of digital channels and the lack of brand awareness among the customers.

Strategic Advice

This section provides a strategic approach on how to close the gap on the three identified main areas, based upon the research results and focused on achieving the set objective.

1.) Instrumentalisation of digital communication channels

In order to be able to instrumentalise the most relevant communication channels for the target group, the behavior of the target group has to be identified first. It is essential to understand, which channels the customers use, how they use them and how a higher level of brand awareness can be reached. Knowing the most important characteristics of the target group, the channels that are most beneficial to the company’s objectives have to be analyzed and compared with the defined needs and wants of the target group. This step enables the company to understand how they can reach their target group online, leading to the next

2.) Meaningful content to engage customers

It can be advised that the label uses its desired image and connects with its customers by creating a world that does not focus solely on the products but on the sense of exclusivity in
an affordable way that House of Cases wants to sell. In digital communication, storytelling could be one way of engaging the customers to see the label as more as just its products. Background features from photo shoots, reports about recent visits at magazines or “behind the scenes” stories about retail trade shows would provide the customers with a sense of “being close” and could lead to a higher identification with the label. The following “word-of-mouth” effect would possibly lead to an increase in sales, to a broader online audience and to greater brand awareness.

3.) Lack of brand awareness among the target group

Since the objective aims for an increase in brand awareness through a digital communication strategy, the management should consider analyzing their “digital audience” and its wants and needs further by closely observing the activities on its company Facebook page and using their already active “fans” to learn more about its target group. This will also help to define which channels the target group actually uses and how they can be reached. By closely observing the used channels, the influencers can be identified and the strategy can be adjusted to match their needs and to achieve a higher level of engagement. It is advised to clearly characterize the target group and to use the method of “Channel Mapping” (Dragon, 2012), in order to clearly define which digital channels offer the greatest benefit for the company in regards of achieving a higher level of brand awareness and satisfying the needs and wants of the customers.

Facebook e.g. offers a great way for a two-way communication and could be a helpful instrument for the company to create a brand image that will lead to an increased level of brand awareness. But since the results showed that most users only engage with brands digitally that they already know in their offline life, it is essential that the label creates a connection between its offline and online presence.

Plan of Action

There are various options for the company to implement the named advice. In this section, a concrete plan of action regarding the defined gap areas will be given.

In order to identify the characteristics of the target group and the channels they actually use; and therefore increasing the chance to reach them as well as the level of brand
awareness, the first step should be observation of the behavior of the target group on the currently existent digital communication channels within a set time frame. This could possibly be done by an intern and documented in quantitative as well as qualitative ways, e.g. which users are active more often, which content gets most attention by the users and which one of the existent channels results in an increase in sales (which could be measured by tracking the traffic on the online store by origin website).

The next step would be an adjusted method of “channel” mapping, as shown in the following image on the example of the two already existent channels, Facebook and Instagram:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Sharing content, providing up-to-date information to people, who are already aware of the brand</td>
<td>Fairly easy to use, different kinds of content (text, pictures, videos) can be shared quickly, followers can share our content with friends</td>
<td>Users can decide which content they want to access in their news feed</td>
<td>Providing the already existent users with content they want to share in order to gain more followers and create a higher level of brand awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Create a connection between the label and customers, enable them to “behind the scenes” content</td>
<td>Easy to handle, quick sharing method, by using hashtags people who don’t know the label yet can be reached</td>
<td>Not used by many of our customers, content could get lost due to the technical limitations of the channel</td>
<td>Create a number of hashtags that connect our label with other fashion-related topics to gain more followers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This method helps to gain an idea of the advantages and disadvantages of each channel. By creating a clear goal, the management can measure the success of the channels and decide if the chosen ones still fit the criteria of the label as well as the customers. This connection can be established by observing the behavior of the customers, as mentioned before. Once
the channels according to the purpose and goal of House of Cases have been chosen, the
next step is the creation of meaningful content to engage customers.
It is essential for the digital presence of a company to build strong relationships with the
customers. This can be established by showing the customer that his opinion is valued and
by inviting the customer into the world “behind the brand”. Furthermore, the timing of
sharing content via digital channels has to be chosen carefully. This can be achieved by
creating a plan for either each month or three months ahead that clearly outlines which
content will be posted at what date. By having a structure regarding the posts, the users will
see a clear line instead of only randomly viewing posts that do not refer to anything that has
happened before. The content could be part of a story, allowing customers to get some
insights on the background of the label, on making-of videos of the products or by getting
engaged in designing the perfect laptop case for Christmas.

A practical approach is the creation of a timeline, which outlines the main ideas and
connects them with the chosen channels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Channel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s Day</td>
<td>The perfect gift</td>
<td>“Two years ago, I decided to start my own label. The first bag that I created was a gift for my mother. It is the exact same model that you can find in our online store today (add link). What are you getting your mum this year?”</td>
<td>Create a connection between the brand and the story behind the label, reach at least 200 likes and 5 shares</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The section “purpose” allows the company to measure the success of the posted content and
to adjust its communication strategy according to the measurements.
After the relevant communication channels have been chosen and content has been created, the label can work towards increasing the level of brand awareness. The two before-mentioned steps might already result in a higher number of followers on Facebook or in increased sales. But since research showed that customers usually only connect digitally with companies that are part of their offline life, the brand has to create a connection between the communication channels, the content and its offline presence.

This could be achieved by e.g. posting emotional content, such as a video that says “Thank you mum” on Facebook and by handing out flyers with “Say thank you to your mum too on our Facebook page” in the stores where the products of House of Cases are sold. By connecting online and offline presence with emotional content, the label will be able to leave a lasting memory with its customers and possibly create a word-of-mouth effect among them, which will increase the level of brand awareness among the target group.

Concluded it can be said that the choice of the most relevant communication channel for the brand and its customers as well as the creation of meaningful content will most likely lead to an increased level of brand awareness. It can be therefore advised, that House of Cases focuses its main efforts during the upcoming time period on observing and identifying the communication styles of its target group, including their preferred communication channels, and on the design of content that connects emotions and the story behind the label with the actual products. By following the given advice, the company will be able to optimize their digital communication strategy in order to increase brand awareness among their target group within a short period of time.
References


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# Appendix

## 1.0 Logical Research Framework Matrix (LRFM)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Research Questions</th>
<th>Subsidiary Research Questions</th>
<th>Expected Outcome</th>
<th>Research Activities: (secondary)</th>
<th>Research Activities: (primary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. According to theory and recent research, what are the key characteristics regarding the use of a digital communication strategy for companies/brands and end customers regarding the level of brand awareness?</td>
<td>1a) What are the main characteristics that determine the successfulness of a digital communication strategy for a company/brand?</td>
<td>- Clear overview about the characteristics of a successful digital communication strategy</td>
<td>Secondary Research (Desk Research)</td>
<td>- Semi-structured interview with the management of House of Cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1 What is the perception on the communication strategy of House of Cases by the owner of House of Cases?</td>
<td>1.1a) Which factors of a digital communication strategy determine the increase of brand awareness?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1b) Which channels of digital communication can be used to increase brand awareness among the end customers of House of Cases?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1c) What is the current digital communication strategy of House of Cases?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1d) What is the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

- Clear overview about the characteristics of a successful digital communication strategy
- Overview of the channels that customers use to engage in communication with a brand
- Insights on the gap between the current and desired digital communication strategy
| 2. What is the opinion of the customers of House of Cases regarding the digital communication strategy of the company? | 2a) Are the currently existing digital communication channels being used by the customers of House of Cases?  
2b) How can the customers of House of Cases be reached digitally?  
2c) What do the customers of House of Cases expect from the company in regards of digital communication? | - Insights on the current digital communication strategy  
- Insights on the opinions of the customers of House of Cases regarding their preferred digital communication channels, the ways how they use them, the perception of House of Cases (if known), the level of brand awareness, expectations regarding the digital communication strategy from the company, especially content | Desk Research  
- Semi-structured, web-based survey among 82 members of the target group of House of Cases (mostly female, interested in fashion, reachable through digital communication channels) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 3. Which similarities and differences regarding the use of digital communication can be distinguished between the perception of the owner of House of Cases and the customers of the company and how can the analysis help to close the gap between the current and the desired digital communication situation of House of Cases? | - Clear definition of the gap between the current and desired digital communication strategy | Desk Research  
- Semi-structured interview with the management of House of Cases  
- Semi-structured surveys among the customers of House of Cases | --- |
### 1.2 Unravelling of the key concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key concept</th>
<th>Theoretical background</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Digital Communication Strategy** | 6 C Model of Social Engagement (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011) | 1. According to theory and recent research, what are the key characteristics regarding the use of a digital communication strategy for companies/brands and end customers in order to create a higher level of brand awareness? | 1.1c) What is the current digital communication strategy of House of Cases?  
1.1d) What is the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases?  
2c) What do the customers of House of Cases expect from the company in regards of digital communication? |
| **How to plan and manage a digital strategy** (Red Ant, 2010) | 1. According to theory and recent research, what are the key characteristics regarding the use of a digital communication strategy for companies/brands and end customers in order to create a higher level of brand awareness? | 1.1 What is the perception on the communication strategy of House of Cases by the owner of House of Cases? |
| **The new WTP: willingness to participate** (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011) | 1. According to theory and recent research, what are the key characteristics regarding the use of a digital communication strategy for companies/brands and end customers in order to create a higher level of brand awareness? | 1.1c) What is the current digital communication strategy of House of Cases?  
1.1d) What is the desired digital communication strategy of House of Cases?  
2c) What do the customers of House of Cases expect from the company in regards of digital communication? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Brand Awareness               | Strategic brand management: building, measuring and managing brand equity (Keller, 2003) | Brand Relationships: strengthened by emotion, weakened by attention (Heath, Brandt, & Nairn, 2006) | 1.1 What is the perception on the communication strategy of House of Cases by the owner of House of Cases?  
2. What is the opinion of the customers of House of Cases regarding the digital communication strategy of the company in order to create a higher level of brand awareness?  
3. Which similarities and differences regarding the use of digital communication channels in order to create a higher level of brand awareness can be distinguished between the perception of the owner of House of Cases and the customers of the company and how can the analysis help to close the gap between the current and the desired digital communication situation of House of Cases? |
| Digital Communication Channels| How to develop your digital strategy (Wright, 2012)                          |                                                                           | 1.1a) Which factors of a digital communication strategy determine the increase of brand awareness?  
1.1b) Which channels of digital communication can be used to increase brand awareness among the end customers of House of Cases?  
2a) Are the currently existing digital communication channels being used by the customers of House of Cases? |
<p>| | | |</p>
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<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2b) How can the customers of House of Cases be reached digitally?</td>
<td></td>
<td>2c) What do the customers of House of Cases expect from the company in regards of digital communication?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig 1.2 Six progressive levels of participation**

![Six progressive levels of participation](image)

**Figure 2**
Keller (2003): Brand equity

![Brand equity diagram](image)
2.0 Interview with the management of House of Cases

Interview management of House of Cases (Laisa-Maria Mann) regarding the current and desired digital communication situation with end customers of the company.

1.) How do you mainly communicate with your end customers?
   a. Well, we don’t have any stores but sometimes customers call us to ask for a specific product or send an e-mail. Otherwise, the only time I get in touch with an end customer directly is when they order something from the online store. Most of the time direct communication only takes place with business customers, e.g. during fashion weeks or when I visit them to introduce my products.

2.) Which digital channels do you use to communicate with your end customers?
   a. We use Facebook and Instagram, and of course, the online store. But I wouldn’t say that we really use them to communicate with the customers, I mainly just sometimes post stuff whenever something happens, e.g. if we are published in a magazine or if we have an event. Also, the accounts are not connected, so if a customer likes us on Facebook, he does not have direct access or a link to our Instagram account. Same goes for the official homepage, you can’t see a link to Facebook or Instagram there either.

3.) What would be your goal for digital communication between your company and your customers?
   a. To be honest, I don’t have much time to put a lot of effort in digital communication. But I acknowledge that it is an important way to reach our customers. I just don’t really know where to start, what to post on Facebook or how to get more followers. If I could choose, I would have an interactive platform that would help me to interact with my end customers directly, to get some feedback on products and on their wishes for future developments. My company is quite new, but my products have been covered by magazines and been very successful in retail. But the online shop could work more efficiently and the communication with end customers is not really existent.

4.) If you could choose one main objective, that you want to achieve through the use of digital communication channels, what would that be?
   a. I would want to use the channels to create more brand awareness. People mostly know us because they saw our products in a magazine or they stumbled upon them in the store. But they would probably never look them up just because the name comes to their mind when they need a new case for any of their items.

5.) How much do you know about your customers and the way they use any kinds of digital communication channels?
   a. I pretty much don’t know anything, because I am not in touch with them. I don’t get the chance to meet them in the store, because I don’t own my own store where I could have conversations with my end customers. I only get in touch with business to business clients, but they are not important for the digital communication, because I reach them through different ways. On our
facebook page, we don’t really get people involved and any other channels are not used. We don’t have a blog or do Twitter. I know my target group because I believe I am part of it. Young people, who consider beautiful products part of their lifestyle, who take one case “on the go” instead of thinking the purchase through.

6.) Why do you consider direct communication with your end customers as important?
   a. I need feedback from the customers. I see which models of our products sell very well, but for future developments I need to know more about what customers want, e.g. certain colors or if they would like to see a pattern on the cases. Maybe all they really want are purses and I just don’t know about it.

3.0 General online survey with representatives of the target group of House of Cases

Survey with representatives of the target group of House of Cases

This survey has been designed in order to learn more about the wants and needs of customers regarding digital communication. The results will be used to make recommendations for a digital communication strategy for an accessory label from Hamburg, Germany.

Age:
Gender:

1. Are you interested in fashion in general?
   Yes ()  No ()

2. How often do you use Facebook?
   a. At least once a day
   b. Every 2-3 days
   c. Once a week
   d. Less than weekly

3. Do you “like” brands or companies on Facebook?
   Yes ()  No ()

4. Please explain why you like/don’t like brands/companies on Facebook.
   ..................................................
   ..................................................
   ..................................................

5. Do you use Instagram?
   Yes ()  No ()

6. Do you follow brands or companies on Instagram?
   Yes ()  No ()
7. Please explain why you follow/don’t follow brands or companies on Instagram.
………………………………..
………………………………..
………………………………..

8. What other digital channels do you use? Name a few (e.g. blogs, other social networks)
………………………………..
………………………………..
………………………………..

9. How do you approach a company if you want to know more about their products or if you have a question?
   a. I call them
   b. I write an e-mail
   c. I use their Facebook page
   d. Other, namely………

10. Do you enjoy being always up-to-date of a companies newest developments via Facebook or any other social networks?
    a. Yes, because………
    b. No, because………

11. When it comes to digital communication, what do you expect from a company/brand? (Choose as many as you like)
    a. That they update their Facebook page regularly
    b. That they involve the customer, e.g. with sweepstakes, quizzes etc.
    c. That their channels are connected, e.g. on the facebook page I find a link to Instagram etc.
    d. That they respond quickly to my questions
    e. Other, namely………………………

12. Would you rather buy products from a brand that is part of your “digital life”?
    a. Yes, because……………
    b. No, because……………

13. What kind of posts would you “share” with your friends on Facebook? (e.g. a sweepstake)
…………………………………
…………………………………
…………………………………

14. Do you consider it important that a company is presented online? Why?
…………………………………
…………………………………
…………………………………
15. If you would have your own company, what would you do to present it at its best online?
…………………………………………
…………………………………………
…………………………………………

16. Do you know the label “House of Cases”?
Yes () No ()

17. If yes, how do you know the label?
   a. I own a product of the brand
   b. I like their Facebook page
   c. I follow the account on Instagram
   d. I read about it in a magazine
   e. I saw it in a store

Any additional notes?
…………………………………………
…………………………………………
…………………………………………

Thank you for your participation! For any further inquiries or questions please contact j.gresshoff@st.hanze.nl.

4.0 Results of the web-based survey
How often do you use Facebook?

- 85.37% at least once a day
- 1.22% every 2-3 days
- 1.22% once a week
- 3.66% less than weekly
- 8.54% other (please specify)

Do you "like" brands or companies on Facebook?

- Yes (62.2%)
- No (37.8%)
Do you use Instagram?

- Yes (36.59%)
- No (63.41%)

Do you follow brands or companies on Instagram?

- Yes (14.63%)
- No (85.37%)
How do you approach a company if you want to know more about their products or if you have a question?

- a. I call them: 4.76%
- b. I write an email: 40.48%
- c. I use their Facebook page: 26.19%
- Other (Please Specify): 28.57%

When it comes to digital communication, what do you expect from a company/brand? (Choose as many as you like)

- a. That they update their Facebook page regularly: 27.69%
- b. Involve the customer, e.g. with giveaways, quizzes etc: 16.41%
- c. We are connected, e.g. on the Facebook page I find a link to Instagram etc: 14.36%
- d. That they respond quickly to my questions: 37.44%
- Other (Please Specify): 4.1%
Do you know the label "House of Cases"?

- Yes (13.41%)
- No (86.59%)

If yes, how do you know the label?

- a. I own a product of the brand
- b. I like their Facebook page (40%)
- c. I follow the account on Instagram
- d. I read about it in a magazine (13.33%)
- e. I saw it in a store
- Other (Please Specify): (46.67%)