

## Social Network Applicability in Air Transport

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### Abstract

Marketing communication is one of the main tools for customer acquisition. Today's digital world allows companies to exploit all available IT technologies, especially in today's very popular social networks. Especially the use of social networks becomes the means for active and effective communication with customers. For this reason, it is important that airlines also act actively on individual social networks and provide customers with up-to-date information about their products and services. The article describes social networks and the possibilities how to use them in air transport. It analyses the use of social media of selected air carriers with an impact on their effective operation on the aviation market.

**KEY WORDS:** *social network, air transport, marketing communication*

### 1. Introduction

Social networks are currently the most widespread means of communicating not only among people, but also in the enterprises' communication, especially as a tool for companies to communicate with customers. For the survey they have taken people of different age categories and there are only a small percentage of people who do not use the most well-known social networks. In particular, the younger generation represents the majority of followers using these networks. Operating on these networks provides the opportunity for airlines to bring the airline business closer to potential customers.

Social networks are an ideal environment for viral marketing. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ allow you to share posts on your homepage. This is the form in which the viral management (a post) can be spread on the social network. Another form is the possibility to directly forward this viral message to other users.

A social network is a term that designates an internet system allowing internet users, in its internal environment, to connect, build and keep online contacts with their friends, loved ones or acquaintances. On the social network each of these users creates a profile (a self-information page) and social networking environment linking their profile to other users of this network. This way they share, forward, publish information and some contents, make them available to the public and to a whole range of persons who are a part of the social network.

### 2. Social Networks

Social media bring together and develop social contacts. Their advantage is that any registered users can create, edit or comment their content. Thus, they provide a great deal of space for creativity and ideas which are then easily spreading among the users themselves [3].

There are currently a number of social network operators that become more or less a part of the business environment, and to a large extent also in air transport companies. The most commonly used social networks include:

**1. Facebook** - This social network is the most widespread, most popular among all social networks serving to communicate among users and to share multimedia data. The Facebook name originated from paper flyers called "facebook" which are distributed to freshmen at American universities to get acquainted. The founder of the company is Mark Zuckerberg. [10] Users registered on Facebook have the ability to create different groups, but they can also become their fans. Through this social network it is possible to promote and offer products for sale, different kinds of services, or just to inform others about the activities. It is just to register and create a so-called "Fan page". Airlines often use Facebook to inform fans of news, offer flights to new destinations, airport news, and more.

**2. YouTube** - is a content-targeted social network. It allows millions of people to find watch and share original videos. YouTube provides space for people-to-people, information and inspiration around the world. Most of the Slovak users know and use YouTube primarily for viewing and sharing videos, to a lesser extent, for publishing their own videos and creating channels. Viewed videos can be included in their own playlists. Mark "Like me" or "I do not like it", share and comment. With regard to downloading of the users' content it is possible to download the entire content of

the profile or only individual user's channels [2].

**3. Twitter** - we can call it a microblogging social network. This is the website of the American company Twitter Inc. the founder of which is Jack Dorsey. It is a social network that is becoming more and more aware in the last period of time. It's similar to the Facebook social network. But the fundamental difference lies in the fact that we do not need permission to see someone and get them to the home page. Users are trying to keep track of "as many people as possible". In Slovakia, Twitter is less widespread. Currently, over 4,000 users are estimated in Slovakia, 249 of them are companies.

**4. Google +** - is a social network similar to Facebook, so it's one of its biggest competitors. It was created in 2011. All users have their own wallpaper on their home pages, where you can see news from friends [2, 9].

**5. Instagram** - founded in 2010. It has currently accounted for over 200 million active users per month [12]. This photo social network is aimed at sharing photos and new videos as well. It's basically an application that allows you to edit photos already done, uploaded from the gallery or taken directly. Editing videos is the current innovation. These photos, videos can be marked as favourites and can be commented on. The application does not compete with other social services, but enables to share photos on social networks like Facebook, Twitter, etc. [2].

**6. LinkedIn** - is a social network, is a place for connecting people who have similar interests. It's a professional network for people who need a job or an employee. It offers the opportunity to influence your professional life. For companies it is the place where they can publish job listings. Additionally, there are several types of paid advertising on LinkedIn. There are over a million groups on LinkedIn, "Groups". Each of them has its own discussion, news section, and job offers [13].

### 3. Research on Use of Social Networks by Air Carriers

Social networks are currently enjoying great popularity in general public. Each airline had to decide on which social network, or networks would work, whether on the most popular ones like Facebook, Twitter, Google + or other social networks. The number of registered users on social networks and other social media presents potential users for air transport. One of the ways to address them is to clearly promote their companies, services, offers, shares through social media.

In 2016, a survey was conducted to compare the use of social media by air carriers. The first step was to collect data and generate social networks with the largest number of users whose analysis would be beneficial to the research.

Based on the criterion of the number of social media users and the mode of operation, two social networks have been selected, namely Facebook and Twitter. Processing of websites, the speed and quality of responses, the promotion of airline services as well as posts to the marketing activities of selected companies have been analysed at the pages of these social networks. Six randomly selected air carriers have been selected for the analysis: Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, Emirates Airlines, Ryanair, KLM and EasyJet.

#### Facebook

The number of users per social media is an important factor for the airline marketing department to set up a web account. Each airline has the goal of reaching as many "fans", "followers" of their site through which they can promote their services. Airlines try to get fans by posting their photos, videos to promote their services and present news in the form of posts about their aircraft. This way they invite their potential clients to feel safe and informed. Knowledge is an important factor in increasing the amount of profit from the ticket sale or the provision of additional services. The most popular among all social media (see Fig. 1) is the Facebook social network, which has approximately 1 billion 393,000 users. This social network is the biggest attraction for marketing in aeronautics [1] However, this information is not completely accurate, because a large number of users are coming up every day, and it is also not possible to determine the number of active users accurately. There are large numbers of false accounts on these media making it impossible to determine the exact number of users. A typical example of this model is Google+ which has more than 2.2 billion users registered, but it actually uses only 343 million users. The reason for such a large number of inactive users is that Google automatically creates an account on Google + when creating an account on Gmail or Google Docs [1, 11].

Each of the six airlines, Turkish Airlines, Qatar Airways, Emirates Airlines, Ryanair, KLM, EasyJet, has a social networking site on Facebook. Facebook leads Qatar Airways with a total number of 11,491,431 customers occupies the first place. Fig. 2 shows the number of fans of other companies. The company with the second largest number of fans is KLM. New fans of Airline KLM regularly increase which is also caused by a lot of sharing and promoting of the website, especially video spots, and so on. The low cost Ryanair website has the least fans. The last place in number of fans on Facebook has been occupied by Ryanair. However, its low number of fans may be caused by the late creation of an official Facebook page on 21 January 2015 [7, 6].

Posts are a major tool for increasing viewership and for increasing the number of fans, and it serves as a tool for airline ticket sales, i.e. marketing improvement. Because of time consuming, individual social media were being monitored for three months from 01/01/2016 to 31/03/2016. During these monitoring months, each airline added a variety of posts, mostly in the form of videos or pictures. The outputs from the analysis are shown in Fig. 3. In the first month of monitoring, most of the posts were added by KLM, and Emirates Airlines added the least posts. In the second month of monitoring, the most posts were added to the Turkish Airlines site and the least on the EasyJet site. Most of the posts in the social network Facebook were written by the low cost Ryanair Company, and the least were added by the EasyJet airline in the last month of monitoring [5], [8], [4].

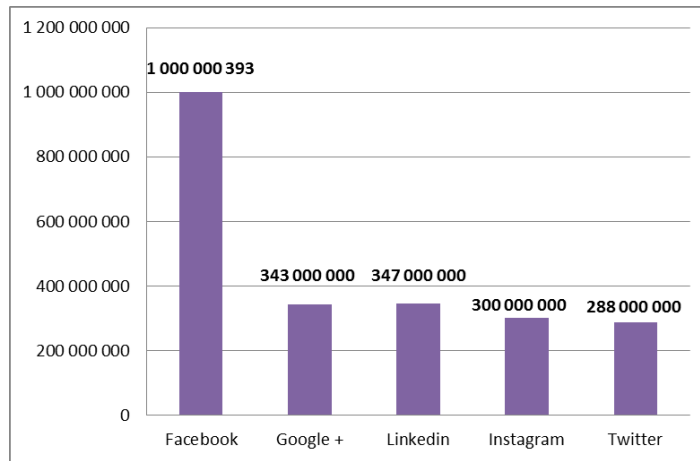


Fig. 1 The chart of social media users by February 2016

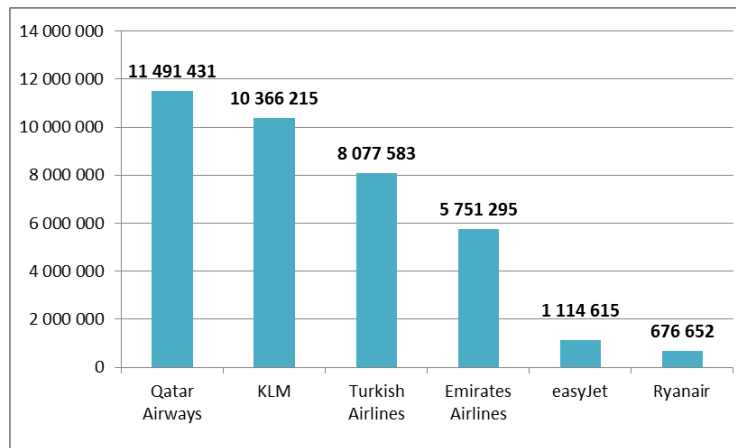


Fig. 2 The fan chart on Facebook

Ryanair created the highest number of posts for the last monitored period, up to 111. The company adds posts very often sometimes several times a day. The analysis has shown that among all airlines, Ryanair is adding more to ticket sales, lots of offers to different destinations, and is publishing a large number of benefits. It promotes different countries through images and then links to the company's website to buy a ticket to the country. The smallest number of posts for the entire monitored period was added to the EasyJet, on the page 54. Most of the posts were added at irregular intervals. This company adds similar posts as its competitor Ryanair, share airline flight tickets, fleet pictures, etc [4].

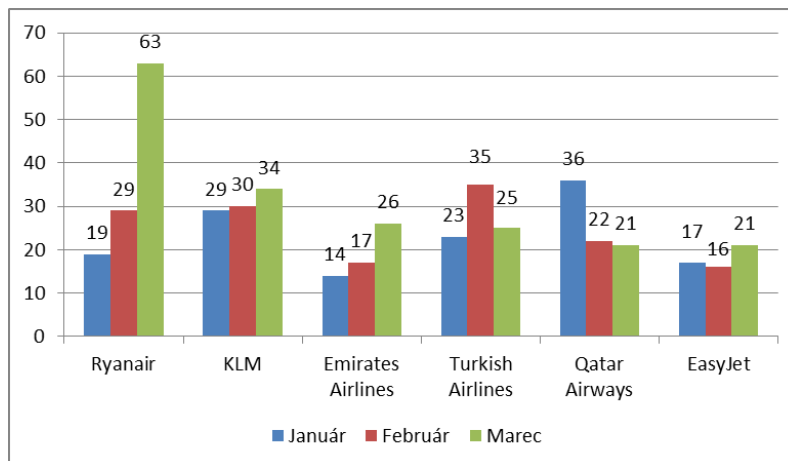


Fig. 3 The chart of posts for the period from January 01, 2016 to March 31, 2016 on Facebook

**Twitter**

Similar to Facebook, Twitter also has selected sites set up on the Twitter social network. Twitter uses the term "follower" to designate users who like pages. There are several differences in terms, but the essence of the operation is the same.

The analysis has shown that KLM has the most followers on the Twitter social network, 2,000,000, and Ryanair

has the least (see Fig. 4). However, some airlines operate only very briefly on the network, but they still have a high number of followers. The Ryanair airline had a Twitter website in 2015 which may be the reason for a lower number of followers.

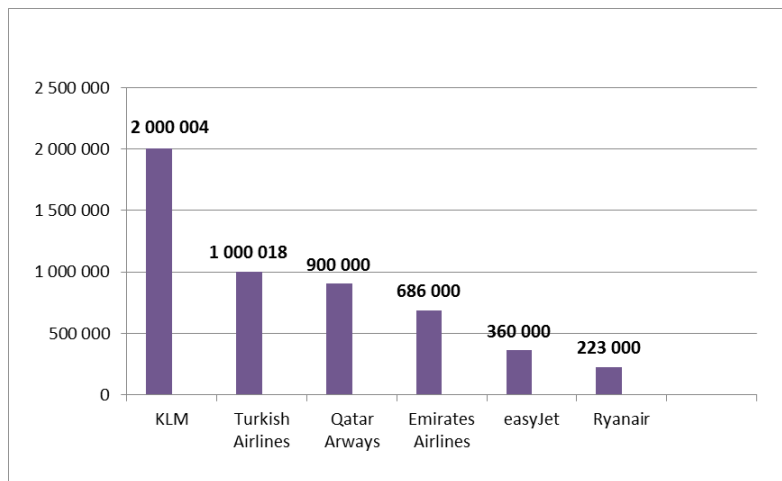


Fig. 4 The fan chart on Twitter [14]

The posts are referred to as "tweets" on this social network. All companies added tweets every day, sometimes even more in the day. Ryanair added a total of 664 tweets per day over the monitored periods, which are three months, 7 posts a day. Compared to others, they added the most posts for this period, even though they have the least number of followers. But this fact is a sign that the company is trying to get new followers, constantly adding posts and encouraging its followers to share their tweets. The least tweets were added by Emirates Airlines to 64. Fig. 5 shows graphically the amount of tweets added in the monitoring months.

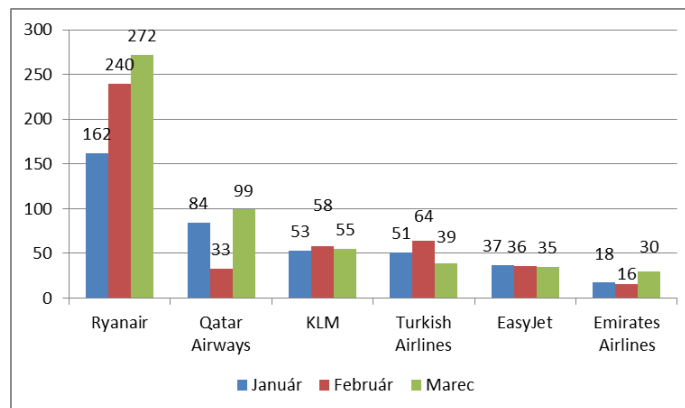


Fig. 5 Chart of posts for the period from January 01, 2016 to March 31, 2016 on Twitter [14]

#### 4. Comparison of Selected Companies

Qatar Airways, which has the largest number of Facebook fans, was founded on June 7th, 2012. On both social networks it has the same name as "Qatar Airways". On the Facebook page the post about the company are regularly published, news, interesting videos from the life of the company, as well as photographs of personnel and job offers. The company answers questions within 1 hour. The answers to questions via chats are of good quality, the answer is always quite fast and unambiguous. On Twitters, Qatar Airways has 10,591,431 fans less, which is a significant difference. They have been working on it since April 2008. They added significantly fewer posts - "tweets" over the monitoring period. The company responded to the message within 1 hour, much like on Facebook.

KLM's names are different on the monitored social networks. The name "KLM" can be found on Facebook, the name "Royal Dutch Airlines" is on Twitter. Similar to other airlines KLM adds posts more than one day to both social networks. On Facebook, the site was founded on March 1, 2012. The company responds to the news very quickly, within 1 hour. More fans have more than 8 million followers on Facebook. Well, in the Twitter it has taken the leading number of followers. The company strives to increase its image by publishing video spots of various kinds, for example a presentation of a new Embraer 175 or a Spencer robot that will lead the KLM passengers to the departure gate. On both social networks they try to sell tickets mainly through fleet promotion, on-board services, newsletters that are appealing to travellers, and more. Video spots and photos are very imaginative and interesting. The company's website called "Turkish Airlines" was based on Facebook on March 23, 2012.

It has more fans on this social network but has ranked the third place in fan-count analyses in both networks. The

company also tries to promote by advertising on its website, for example, Batman & Superman, or they even published an airplane picture of this film. The company invites you to share the Instagram photos from the experiences of Turkish Airlines. It publishes videos, pictures, service-related messages on board which are an effective marketing move and often encourages the use of Turkish Airlines.

Emirates Airlines has the name "Emirates" on the Facebook network and "Emirates Airlines" on the Twitter site. The Facebook page was established on March 21, 2012, the number of fans is bigger, similar to the previous airlines than on Twitter, where it has 686,000 followers and nearly 6 million fans on Facebook. In terms of marketing orientation and how to promote the site itself the company adds fewer posts to Facebook, 54 posts while Twitter has 64 tweets for the monitored period. Since the company is a sponsor of the football team, most of the posts concerned football. It publishes photographs of landing aircraft from different parts of the world, as well as videos, Board staff (Emirates Airlines) performs their soccer skills before the game. Responses to such posts are positive, entertaining people, that evidence is reflected in positive comments under the posts.

EasyJet has been operating on both social networks since 2008. It can be searched under the name "easyJet" on both networks. This low-cost airline on Facebook added a smaller number of posts over the monitoring period compared to other airlines. These posts are still added every day. Posts are almost identical on both networks. The company publishes video spots and a fairly large number of competitions for travellers. Passengers who join them are offered travel discounts. The aim of posts is also to promote destinations where EasyJet performs flights along with promoting a link to buying a ticket.

Ryanair is a low cost airline that has the least number of fans on Twitter and Facebook compared to other airlines surveyed. But the company is trying to crack the pages in particular by a large number of added posts, i.e. Twitter added 169 tweets on Facebook and 111 posts on Facebook. However, a large number of different posts may also have a negative impact on users and may be annoying to them. The company also publishes news about flights, which is a positive step. For passengers who decide to select an airline, information plays an important role. The company also promotes its application through networks where passengers can easily and quickly book a ticket.

## 5. Conclusions

Social media are a very powerful tool for the marketing of airlines. It's a very effective way to get closer to potential customers and reach them in an amusing way. The marketing of airlines, which is implemented through social media, takes the form of video spots, some posts published either in the form of photographs, competitions, news etc. This way of acquiring customers through social media is one of the most effective forms of marketing.

Effectively used social networks and a targeted marketing process aimed at addressing potential passengers through these social networks is certainly a beneficial step for the development of each airline. It is important that each airline responds quickly and effectively to all market changes, including the use of IT technologies and social networking.

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