

COMPANY PROSUMERISM AS A FORM OF COOPERATION WITH CONSUMERS

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Purpose: The aim is to present prosumerism of companies as a form of cooperation with consumers, their expectations, perceived benefits and challenges.

Project/methodology/approach: The research tool was a survey questionnaire prepared by the author of this paper. The survey was conducted in 2022 among 1000 adults (18 years and older), by a research company, using CAWI method in a consumer panel.

Results: The survey results show that consumers engage in various prosumer activities of companies. However, they also expect companies to be proactive in including them in such activities. They are aware of the prosumerism benefits for companies, but also recognize the challenges related to it.

Research limitations/practical implications: Research was conducted among only one group of participants in prosumer activities – consumers. It is planned that future research will also include a second group – companies. This will provide insight into the prosumption activities undertaken, their barriers, as well as their benefits and opportunities. In the paper, recommendations are presented for companies to undertake prosumption activities in order to cooperate with consumers and respond to their expectations.

Social implications: The importance of prosumption activities for companies, as well as for consumers, is highlighted, which can influence consumers to become more involved in companies' activities, thus benefiting them more.

Originality/value: The paper analyzes the company's own research findings on the benefits, expectations and problems associated with prosumption practices of companies. Practical recommendations provide valuable guidance for companies planning and implementing prosumer activities aimed at cooperation with consumers.

Keywords: prosumerism, prosumption, consumer, cooperation, company.

Paper category: research paper.

1. Introduction

The development of new technologies and new media creates enormous opportunities for companies to interact with consumers as well as to establish and shape relationships with them. Consumers, especially young ones, want to be active participants in the market, not just passive

recipients, and expect companies to involve them in their activities on various levels, from expressing their opinions up to the modification of products according to their expectations and participation in the design of products/services. Consumers become prosumers or active consumers – combining the roles of producer and consumer. As Toffler points out, a prosumer is a producer who consumes products created by himself, but the market development has caused many changes in the relationship between producer and consumer (Toffler, 2006, pp. 306-307), and changes in various spheres of social and economic life mean that the modern consumer is no longer so self-sufficient and needs the market and producers' help. Therefore, companies should undertake presumptive activities aimed at cooperation with consumers, by creating appropriate tools and platforms to engage them. The aim of this paper is to present consumer activity in the context of cooperation with companies, as well as consumers' expectations in this regard and their conditions. It has been assumed that consumers are prosumers – most of them undertake various prosumer activities, recognizing both the benefits and challenges for companies arising from such cooperation. The research conducted so far has focused primarily on prosumer activity, while there is a lack of research on the prosumerism of companies and its perception by consumers. The paper presents the results of our own research on prosumerism as a form of cooperation between companies and consumers, as well as their expectations as well as perceived problems and challenges for companies.

2. Significance of prosumerism and prosumption

Prosumerism is part of the new business model (Tapscott, Williams, 2008, pp. 41-55), which is characterized by openness, partnership, cooperation, and sharing. This model is referred to as the sharing economy, as the parties involved in it share their resources. Consumers share their experiences, opinions and co-design solutions, and companies share their resources to encourage customers to collaborate. The new economy model is based on the principle of “engage and create together” (Tapscott, Williams, 2008, p. 56) and is shaped not only by the actions of companies, but also by activity, consumer involvement and the development of new technologies (Siuda, 2012, p. 33). It requires more intangible, conceptual, innovative work to respond to consumer demands and needs (Krzysztofek, 2014, p. 30). Therefore, prosumerism represents the actions and practices of companies that aim to involve consumers in the company's activities, in the creation of products, which involves revealing the ways of creating solutions and giving consumers control over the product (Siuda, 2012, p. 33).

Prosumerism is combined with prosumption i.e. the activity of consumers who want to be involved in the activities undertaken by companies on various levels: from expressing opinions to co-creating the market offer. Prosumption involves the co-participation of buyers with bidders in the process of marketing creation, resulting in the preparation of product offerings

and/or other marketing values that better meet buyers' expectations, which in turn allows for building long-term marketing partnerships (Baruk, 2017, p. 23). T. Szymusiak distinguishes three types of prosumption due to the cooperation level between the participating parties:

- individual prosumption – no cooperation, full independence and self-reliance of the prosumer,
- intra-prosumption – collective, occurs in a group of prosumers participating in the process of product development,
- inter-prosumption – collaboration between the prosumer and the producer through social networks to develop new solutions (Szymusiak, 2013, p. 263).

Taking into account the involvement level in the collaboration process, F. Nowacki distinguishes 6 types of prosumers: (1) active user – provides a small contribution through social networks in which he participates, (2) engaged user – creates ideas that the company offers exclusively to the co-creating prosumer, (3) innovative user – creates innovations for other prosumers or the company, which he uses exclusively for his own needs, (4) company partner – co-creates innovations with the company, further offered to all buyers, (5) co-creator of the market – building a market where everyone cooperates with each other, (6) market creator – independently creating the industry with the participation of other prosumers (Nowacki, 2016, p. 138). Cooperation between companies and consumers takes the form of social cooperation, when companies use not only their own human resources, but also dispersed social resources. Therefore, it is important to maintain and improve this cooperation in order to keep these resources with the company and use them (Comor, 2010). Consumer-company cooperation can be twofold:

- civic prosumption – the customer expresses prosumption activity by giving his opinion on the market offer, feedback, sharing his experience,
- participatory prosumption – the customer is actively involved in the process of developing a product, service or other form of cooperation with the company, and their result is a joint product, service or advertising, created on the basis of the consumer's design/idea/initiative (Tian, Shen, Chen, 2017).

Such activities are mutually beneficial – prosumers, on the one hand, share their knowledge, ideas, experience, and develop their skills, gain knowledge and experience (Lemanowicz, 2020, p. 83.) Material aspects can also be important here – the prosumer can obtain tangible benefits in the form of free products/services or financial gratification, and companies, shaping a better offer thanks to cooperation, can be more competitive.

3. Positive and negative aspects of prosumerism

Prosumption changes the relationship between business and customers (Jenkins, 2007, Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 1; Terblanche, 2014, p. 1; Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010) the relationship becomes more symmetrical through consumer participation, thus intensifying information exchange (Jenkins, 2007, p. 94). The prosumption model leads to the fact that passive, unconscious consumers, who remained in isolation from each other, now become conscious, active and “connected”, i.e. forming communities, consumers (Prahalad, Ramaswamy, 2004b, p. 1; Terblanche, 2014, p. 1). Creation of consumer communities increases their awareness, position and role in relations with producers. However, prosumption can also exacerbate the asymmetry of these relationships, as involving consumers in the company’s activities can involve their manipulation and exploitation (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010). On the one hand, changing relationships is a top-down process, driven by business, which directs consumer behavior. On the other hand, it is also a bottom-up process shaped by consumers themselves, engaging voluntarily with companies (Jenkins, 2007, pp. 21-23). Therefore, in the prosumer model, exploitation is less visible, and it is more difficult for companies to control prosumers than it was previously for consumers, due to the greater potential for resistance on their part (Ritzer, Jurgenson, 2010).

As such, prosumption intended to change the business-customer relationship may further deepen it. Business can create the appearance of cooperation with consumers, during which it controls them all the time. Consumers are convinced that they are the ones who give opinions, criticize, make choices (Bauman, 2000, p. 100), while the company is all the time monitoring their activity, learning about their preferences and consumption behavior (Fuchs, 2011, pp. 11-12). It can be stated that customers have been locked in a cage-trap that allows companies to exercise control over them (Barber, 2009, pp. 53-54). Companies know what their customers think, what their experiences are, what they do with their products, they know their expectations, as customers themselves provide this information to them (Ritzer, 2009, p. 29), often deriving joy, pleasure from this cooperation. At the same time, companies provide consumers with the tools to collaborate, share their opinions, give consumers work for which they do not pay (Fuchs, 2011, pp. 10-12).

Therefore, in order to solve the problems of prosumerism, companies need to prepare strategies for prosumption activities, plan them and implement consistently, making them not single actions, but actions that engage customers and create a community of prosumers around the company, such that they become an important asset of the company. The prosumption activities of companies must not be secondary, aimed at creating appearances, involving consumers in less important activities, because they want to take meaningful actions that allow their creativity, ideas to be taken into account (Xie, Bagozzi, Troye, 2008, p. 110).

4. Research methodology

The paper presents the results of our own research, the aim of which was to obtain the respondents' opinions on prosumerism of companies, the forms of cooperation of the respondents with companies and their expectations in this regard. The following research questions were adopted: are consumers active consumers, prosumers? what forms of consumer activity do they most often undertake and what are their expectations regarding cooperation with companies? It was assumed that consumers are active consumers, and their activity takes the form of citizenship rather than participation, and it is mainly determined by gender, education, age and material situation. The survey was conducted in 2022 by a research company, using the CAWI method in a consumer panel with a sample of 1000 adults (18 years and older). The participants were 510 women and 490 men. Forty-four percent each were people with secondary and higher education (including a bachelor's degree), with the remainder having vocational education (11%) and primary education (2%). The largest percentage of respondents were individuals in the 30-39 age group (30%), about 1/4 of the respondents were each aged 18-29 and 40-49, the remainder (about 1/5), were those aged 50 and over.

5. Presentation of research results

Respondents are active consumers who engage with companies in various ways. The vast majority of them (79.5%) seek information about products/services on the Internet, while almost half share their opinions, experiences about products, services with other users (49.1%). At the same time, women are more likely to share their opinions than men ($p = 0.013$). In turn, 35% of respondents took part in testing products/services, and 28.5% in contests organized by companies. Women are also more likely to engage in such activities than men ($p = 0.001$ and $p = 0.020$, respectively). Significantly fewer respondents (15%) participated in meetings, events organized by companies, in the process of developing a product/service that was initiated by the company or in the preparation of a promotional campaign, advertising (10%). Respondents are even less active in modifying the products/services of companies to meet their own needs (9%) or preparing their own projects/proposals (7%). There is a significant relationship between the respondents' age and their consumer activity, the lower the age, the more often the respondents engage both in various activities organized by companies, as well as take their own initiatives and share their opinions and experience with others. The consumer activity of respondents is also determined by education. The higher the education, the more often the respondents participate in testing products of services ($p = 0.004$), in contests ($p = 0.003$) and events organized by companies ($p = 0.001$), and the more often they seek information about market offerings ($p = 0.000$).

Table 1.
Respondents' age and prosumer activity

| Consumer activities | Total | | 18-29 years old | | 30-39 years | | 40-49 years | | 50 years and over | | p |
|---|-------|------|-----------------|------|-------------|------|-------------|------|-------------------|------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | |
| participation in product/service testing | 353 | 35,3 | 93 | 36,8 | 114 | 37,7 | 81 | 33,9 | 65 | 31,6 | 0,475 |
| participation in competitions organized by companies | 285 | 28,5 | 84 | 33,2 | 111 | 36,8 | 63 | 26,4 | 27 | 13,1 | 0,000 |
| participation in the development a product/service, initiated by the company | 97 | 9,7 | 26 | 10,3 | 43 | 14,2 | 21 | 8,8 | 7 | 3,4 | 0,001 |
| participation in the preparation of a promotional campaign, initiated by the company | 100 | 10,0 | 33 | 13,0 | 36 | 11,9 | 24 | 10,0 | 7 | 3,4 | 0,003 |
| participation in events organized by companies | 155 | 15,5 | 45 | 17,8 | 53 | 17,5 | 35 | 14,6 | 22 | 10,7 | 0,124 |
| sharing opinions, experiences about products, services with other users | 491 | 49,1 | 134 | 53,0 | 165 | 54,6 | 121 | 50,6 | 71 | 34,5 | 0,000 |
| searching for information about products/services (company websites, social networks, price comparison sites) | 795 | 79,5 | 198 | 78,3 | 256 | 84,8 | 198 | 82,8 | 143 | 69,4 | 0,000 |
| preparation of a project or modification of a product/service or promotional campaign and presentation to the company | 72 | 7,2 | 22 | 8,7 | 30 | 9,9 | 15 | 6,3 | 5 | 2,4 | 0,009 |
| modification of products produced by companies for their own needs | 89 | 8,9 | 29 | 11,5 | 27 | 8,9 | 16 | 6,7 | 17 | 8,3 | 0,309 |

Source: own research.

Knowledge and opinions about products/services with other users are often shared by almost half of respondents (48%), sometimes by 34% of respondents, while rarely by 18% of respondents. This is the most common form of consumer activity. The younger the respondents, the more often they share their experience and opinions ($p = 0.005$), and also the better their financial situation, the more active the respondents are in this regard ($p = 0.000$). The consumer activity of the respondents is not limited to cooperation with companies, but is primarily aimed at other consumers, which is reflected in seeking their opinions about the market offer. The vast majority of respondents seek information about products and services as they take them into account when making purchasing decisions (88%). The opinions of other users are more important for women (91%) than for men (84%) and for those with higher education and better financial situation.

Respondents are active consumers, most often their activity is civic and reflected mainly in seeking information on market offerings and sharing their opinions. To a much lesser extent, their participatory activity involving engagement in the creation of the market offer is visible. Civic activity is easier than participatory, requiring less effort and involvement. Access to information about opportunities for consumers to get involved is also not insignificant,

challenging companies to disseminate more such information. Especially as the survey shows that there are high expectations of respondents related to prosumerism. Only about 1/10 are not interested in any form of consumer activism.

The majority of respondents would like to participate in product testing (65.5%), and almost half of respondents declare a desire to participate in contests organized by companies. Women are more willing to express this type of activity than men. In turn, almost 44% of respondents would take part in the process of developing a product/service or promotional campaign. More than 30% of respondents would like to participate in meetings, events organized by companies and modify products by adapting them to their own needs. On the other hand, more than 20% of respondents would like to prepare their own design of a product and service or promotional campaign. Particularly important is the large percentage of those who would like to undertake various forms of prosumer activity, including participation. These expectations of consumers are higher than their actual activity, and this raises challenges for companies, which should create solutions to establish cooperation with consumers to address their expectations and needs. Consumers are more willing to collaborate on solutions created by companies than to create their own solutions. The higher the education level, the more often the respondents declare their willingness to engage with companies in various forms. More consumer activity is declared by younger people, as well as those with better financial situation. The respondents' gender determines the declared prosumer activity of the respondents in two areas, i.e. participation in product testing and participation in competitions – women are more likely to express their willingness for participation than men.

Table 2.

Respondents' age and expectations related to consumer activity

| Expected consumer activity | TOTAL | | 18-29 years old | | 30-39 years | | 40-49 years | | 50 years and over | | p |
|--|-------|------|-----------------|------|-------------|------|-------------|------|-------------------|------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | n | % | |
| participation in product/service testing | 655 | 65,5 | 162 | 64,0 | 206 | 68,2 | 151 | 63,2 | 136 | 66,0 | 0,611 |
| participation in competitions organized by companies | 487 | 48,7 | 122 | 48,2 | 176 | 58,3 | 109 | 45,6 | 80 | 38,8 | 0,000 |
| participation in the development of a product/service/promotional campaign | 437 | 43,7 | 123 | 48,6 | 149 | 49,3 | 104 | 43,5 | 61 | 29,6 | 0,000 |
| participation in events organized by companies | 309 | 30,9 | 90 | 35,6 | 108 | 35,8 | 68 | 28,5 | 43 | 20,9 | 0,001 |
| modification of products produced by companies for their own needs | 318 | 31,8 | 83 | 32,8 | 119 | 39,4 | 73 | 30,5 | 43 | 20,9 | 0,000 |
| preparation of own product/service design or its modification or participation in a promotional campaign | 231 | 23,1 | 72 | 28,5 | 94 | 31,1 | 49 | 20,5 | 16 | 7,8 | 0,000 |

Source: own research.

The need for companies to become more involved in cooperation with consumers is indicated by as many as 70% of respondents, only about 4% have a different opinion, and ¼ have no opinion on this issue. The lower the age, the more often the respondents believe ($p = 0.017$) that companies should encourage consumers to become involved in their activities, such an opinion is also shared more often by those with better financial situation ($p = 0.001$). Encouraging consumers to cooperate is important for companies, because according to respondents, companies need to cooperate with consumers and treat them as partners in order to stand in the market. Companies' openness to consumers is beneficial for businesses due to the possibility of creating new solutions, innovations (59%), access to information through which they can improve their offerings (50%), the possibility of shaping a positive corporate image (54%), as well as establishing and maintaining closer relationships with consumers (48%). The higher the education level, the more often the respondents indicate benefits for companies from cooperation with consumers in the image, relational and innovative dimensions, and the need for companies to value consumer involvement.

Table 3.

Gender and company benefits from cooperation with consumers

| Company benefits from cooperation with consumers | TOTAL | | Male | | Female | | p |
|---|-------|------|------|------|--------|------|-------|
| | n | % | n | % | n | % | |
| access to information that can improve their offerings | 504 | 50,4 | 231 | 47,1 | 273 | 53,5 | 0,043 |
| opportunity to build a positive image | 542 | 54,2 | 256 | 52,2 | 286 | 56,1 | 0,224 |
| opportunity to establish and maintain closer relationships with consumers | 480 | 48,0 | 233 | 47,6 | 247 | 48,4 | 0,781 |
| opportunity to create new solutions, innovations | 588 | 58,8 | 270 | 55,1 | 318 | 62,4 | 0,020 |

Source: own research.

However, in order for this cooperation to be mutually beneficial, companies should appreciate consumer involvement more through, among others, financial or in-kind rewards (47.5%) and take into account consumer suggestions for changes in the market offer (44%). In addition, they should provide free tools, materials, with the possibility for consumers to use them creatively and present their solutions to the company (35%) and create special networking platforms to facilitate consumers to create their own solutions, share their experiences/opinions (30%). Meetings between the company and its engaged consumers are also quite important (29%).

Table 4.

Gender and opinion on actions to be taken by companies

| Companies should: | Total | | Male | | Female | | p |
|---|-------|------|------|------|--------|------|-------|
| | N | % | n | % | n | % | |
| recognize consumer involvement through, among others, financial/in-kind rewards | 475 | 47,5 | 229 | 46,7 | 246 | 48,2 | 0,635 |
| take into account consumer suggestions for product/offer changes | 441 | 44,1 | 213 | 43,5 | 228 | 44,7 | 0,694 |
| hold meetings with its engaged consumers | 286 | 28,6 | 128 | 26,1 | 158 | 31,0 | 0,089 |

Cont. table 4.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|-----|------|-----|------|-----|------|-------|
| create networking platforms (portals, forums) to help consumers create their own solutions, share their experiences/opinions | 302 | 30,2 | 143 | 29,2 | 159 | 31,2 | 0,493 |
| provide tools, materials free of charge, with the possibility for consumers to use them creatively and present solutions to the company | 346 | 34,6 | 159 | 32,4 | 187 | 36,7 | 0,161 |

Source: own research.

Prosumerism also comes with challenges for companies, such as the need for constant innovation, creating new solutions to meet consumer expectations, and the cost of such collaboration, as companies must offer the right tools for collaboration or the risk of losing control over processes, consumer disloyalty and the difficulty of keeping consumers engaged. This is, of course, a difficult task, but with the consumer market currently in place and the need to constantly solicit consumers, companies must implement the prosumption model, especially given that consumers are interested in such cooperation with companies.

6. Discussion

Prosumerism, a phenomenon of increasing importance in the operations of companies, presents both opportunities to achieve tangible benefits and challenges from working with consumers. Consumers are prosumers and want to cooperate with companies. An analysis of the correlation between socio-demographic variables and the involvement of respondents in particular prosumption activities shows a strong correlation between gender, age or education. Respondents engage not only with companies but also with other consumers, seeking opinions about products and services or sharing them, which is an expression of civic activism (Tian, Shen, Chen, 2017). To a lesser extent, they engage in participatory activities (Tian, Shen, Chen, 2017) by engaging in activities, i.e. designing a promotional campaign, participating in the development of market offerings, or designing their own solutions. Undertaking this type of activity involves more effort and contribution, which is why it is important to create solutions aimed at increasing it. Particularly considering that the respondents declare their willingness to engage in this type of activity. However, a barrier is the lack of information, consumer knowledge about the activities organized by companies and the possibilities to join them. Accordingly, companies should disseminate more information about the prosumption activities undertaken using various communication channels, while encouraging consumers to participate in them.

In the activities undertaken, companies should involve consumers by providing specific tools rather than offering them to create their own projects, as consumers are more likely to collaborate on solutions created by companies rather than design their own solutions. Through cooperation with consumers, companies gain feedback on market offerings, consumer ideas to

improve market offerings, including better customization of the product to their needs and expectations, greater consumer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, companies should engage more in cooperation with consumers. It is also important to appreciate the involvement, activity of consumers, through financial and in-kind rewards, taking into account their proposals in the prepared market offer or providing free tools to create their own solutions. Companies planning prosumption activities should also draw attention to the problems and challenges associated with them, which arise from, among others: the need for constant innovation, the creation of new solutions, or the need to bear the costs of providing appropriate tools for cooperation, the difficulty of maintaining consumer involvement and their disloyalty.

7. Conclusions

The research conducted provided insight into consumers' activity in terms of cooperation with companies, their expectations, perceived challenges of company prosumerism. Admittedly, this consumer activity tends to take on civic forms (giving opinions/evaluating products), but according to the survey, consumers expect more participatory forms of cooperation. In spite of the fact that these are only declarations by consumers, not supported by actual cooperation, they can provide valuable guidance for a company in planning its activities. Getting to know consumers' opinions about the prosumerism of companies provides valuable guidance for them regarding planned activities in this area. Analysis of the survey results allows for the formulation of practical recommendations for companies, in terms of prosumer activities taking into account the expectations and needs of consumers.

A limitation of the research is the narrowing of the study sample to only one group of prosumerism participants – consumers, so the planned future research will include companies, which will provide insight into their prosumption activities, their perceived benefits, barriers and challenges. This research will expand the current knowledge on prosumerism of companies, as there is a lack of studies in this area. Most conducted research focuses on prosumer activity, and therefore it is reasonable to undertake prosumerism research from the perspective of companies. This would allow a better understanding of the various aspects of companies' prosumerism, gain insight into the internal factors determining companies' ability and propensity for such activities, and provide indications for effective prosumer activities

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