

An Exploratory of Marketing Communication Strategy of Dietary Supplement Products on Social Media in Thailand: Preliminary findings

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Abstract.

The purpose of the study was to investigate marketing communication strategy of dietary supplement products on social media in Thailand. To study how dietary supplement product/brand use marketing communication strategies and tools to make itself outstanding in the market. The study was a qualitative research, to interview with 8 key informants who are involving in the market field; 1 product owner, 1 marketing manager, 1 online marketer and 5 product sales representatives on social media. Common results of the interview showed that every key informant concerning about 1. ‘differentiating’, to push their product outstanding in the market, being in mind of customer and being first of choice. 2. ‘reinforce/reminding’, high frequency of advertising on social media should be posted on social media into the right time, the right channel and the right person. 3. ‘informing’, by information pushing and healthbenefit claim should be more concern. 4. ‘persuading’, by using attractive cues such as picture, celebrity influencer, word-of-mouth, product reviewing by user and customer relationship management also have been used in the market. Conclusion of the study, this study is to find out marketing communication strategy on dietary supplement product on social media in Thailand by studying on the sender side (product/brand). They used marketing communication strategy to push the product into market but some of strategy (some advertising, messages, picture, health-benefit claim etc.) are not following by the regulation and leading to health-related misunderstanding and causing serious health harming. This study would be useful for the further study for preventing an illegal marketing communication on dietary supplement product on social media in Thailand.

Keywords: Marketing communication, Marketing communication strategy, Marketing communication element, Dietary supplement product and Health product advertising.

1. Introduction

The share of dietary supplement market in Thailand accounted to USD 1,682 million in 2016 (Kasikornresearch, 2017). The growth of the dietary supplement market has been driven by the country's overall social and economic climate and the changing lifestyles of the consumers (Angsukaset, 2002). They are looking for ways to stay healthy in the long run and be more cautious with their dietary, take more exercise and use nutritional supplements (Euromonitor international, 2019). Research has shown that people who are health conscious will opt for the most vitamin and mineral supplements (Wangcharoen, Amornlerdpison & Mengumphan, 2013).

What is dietary supplement? Dietary supplement is intended to supplement the diet for the prospective consumer health promotion benefits which contains nutrients or other substances as elements, in form of pill, tablet, capsule, powder, flake or other form which is not in form of conventional food (Thailand Food Act of B.E. 2522, 2013). In each country, the dietary supplement was called in the different way, in USA calls 'Dietary Supplements', in Canada calls 'Natural Health Products', in Australia calls 'Complementary Medicines', in China calls 'Health Food Products' in EU and WHO call 'Food Supplements' (Mookajornphan, 2008). In term of Thai law, the dietary supplement is regulated by Thai FDA as a 'food' that cause physiological changes. So, in every process of manufacturing are regulated strictly, such as production process, quality control, importation of ingredients, distribution, labeling, healthrelated claims and advertising must be made under the Thai FDA approval. The health-related claim of dietary supplement must be accordance with Ministry of Public Health's notification. The Thai FDA does not allow dietary supplement product to describe of health-related conditions on labeling, every message, picture, movie on broadcasting, radio, newspaper, printed ads and any channel of advertising must be considered and approved by regulator (Thai FDA) before publishing (Thailand Food Act of B.E. 2522, 2013).

In the situation of dietary supplement market Thailand, the number of online consumer purchases dietary supplement via social media channel is increasing (Dejprapasorn, 2015). Many dietary supplement products/brands are developing competitive strategies, marketing strategies (Srimanee, Sriwanat and Sanson, 2017) and marketing communication strategies for advantages (Angsukaset, 2002). Marketing communication is crucial element to build profitable customer, retailer and other stakeholder relationships (Kotler &Armstrong, 2008) and for more effective marketing communication is necessary the consistency among all communication messages by the use of highly consistent set of message themes and visuals that deliver to target audiences perception (McGrath, 2005), and the dietary supplement products/brands also use marketing communication strategy to make customer getting awareness, knowledge, belief, attitude, purchase intention and finally purchase the product (Angsukaset, 2002). An individual purchase decision depends on four psychological factors such as persuasion, awareness, learning and belief/attitude (Kotler &Armstrong, 2014) and the psychological factor for purchase decision of Thai herbal supplement is persuasion and awareness (Harnkaipong, 2011). All communication messages are information flow (marketing flow) that can be represented as

a network whose sole purpose is the satisfaction of customer needs and wants (Bowersox and Morash, 1989).

In the legal restriction and the intense competition of dietary supplement product in Thailand, competing by both international and local players. While international players have advantages in many aspects, such as innovations, know-how, research and financial resources, and the local players are looking to establish it to be outstanding in mind of customers. In this study, the purpose is to explore marketing communication strategies of local dietary supplement brand, to investigate the strategy used by focusing on only social media channel.

2. Literature review

Marketing communication is crucial element to build profitable customer, retailer and other stakeholder relationships (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008). There are five main marketing communication tools: advertising, sale promotion, personal selling, public relations and direct marketing (see table 1) and there are media in which be used to deliver messages to target audiences. The appropriate mix of these tools and the choice of media were variations reflecting particular brand (Fill & Jamieson, 2006).

Table 1: Marketing communication tools

<i>Marketing communication tools</i>		
	What this can communicate	Example
Advertising:	Identity	Clearly stated valuation
Sale promotion:	Value	Buy 2, get 1 free offer
Personal selling:	Attention and concern	Problem resolved
Public relations:	Expertise	Comment on social issue
Direct marketing:	Personalized offer	Follow-up offer

Source: Richard J. Varey, 2000 (Base on Kotler, 2000)

Fill and Jamieson (2006) demonstrated that communication plays an important role in the marketing flow that can assume four main roles/elements of marketing communication; 1) to differentiate; 2) to remind/reinforce; 3) to inform; and 4) to Persuade. They offer a simple acronym DRIP for remembering the uses of marketing communication. (see table 2)

Table 2: DRIP elements of marketing communication

DRIP elements of marketing communication	
Differentiating:	trying to exclude competing products from consumer decision-making by making your own more attractive and closer match to their needs
Reinforce/reminding:	trying to ensure that when options for consumption are being assessed, your product is included
Informing:	providing data into the consumer's mindful and appreciative thought processes to ensure that your product is considered as an attractive option in consumption
Persuading:	effort to induce desire favorable behavior from the consumer

Source: Fill and Jamieson, 2006

Marketing mix is a tool used to determine the desired responses from target market (Kotler, 2000) and can be classified into four broad group, 4Ps of marketing: product, price, place and promotion (McCarthy and Perreault, 1996). Marketing mix is the set of marketing tools that the marketing manager uses to pursue their marketing objectives in the target market (Kotler, 2000), and marketing mix is a system of communication that emphasize the interlocking nature of the various aspects of tangibles and intangibles that 'say something' to consumers/buyers, so we can think of the marketing mix elements as communicator, and the communicative effect from the consumer/buyer perspective and highlights the manager's intention (Richard J. Varey, 2000). (see table 3)

Table 3: Communicative aspects of the marketing situation that can be decided by the marketing manager

The offering	What this can communicate	The offering	What this can communicate
Product mix		Place mix	
Variety	Personality	Channels	Convenience and status
Quality	Integrity	Coverage	Availability
Design	Taste	Assortments	Choice
Features	Flexibility	Locations	Convenience and status
Brand name	Assurance	Inventory	Availability
Packaging	Protection and care	Transport	Availability
Sizes	Consideration	Promotion mix	

Services	Support	Advertising	Identity
Warranties	Peace of mind	Publicity	Expertise
Returns	Confidence	Sale promotion	Value
Price mix		Direct marketing	Personalized offer
Cost of product	Expectations of quality	Personal selling	Attention and concern
Discounts	Value for money		
Payment period	Affordability		
Credit terms	Cost		

Source: Richard J. Varey, 2000 (Base on Kotler, 2000; Dibb et al., 1999)

Kasikorn Research Center (2017) showed a desire of dietary supplement, classified by target audience as following below; older desired and millennials desired. (see table 4)

Table 4: Desire of dietary supplement classified by target audience

Older desired	Millennials desired
Type of product 1. For general health maintenance; memory enhancement/digestion	Type of product 1. For general health maintenance; brain function enhancement/eye health/gain
improvement/blood circulation/sleep aids/fatigue/eye health/bone healing/muscle function and teeth etc. For prevention and treatment; diabetes/hypertension/heart disease and 2. hyperlipidemia etc.	2. muscle/fiber/detoxification etc. For beauty purpose; weight loss/skin health/hair health etc.

Source: Kasikorn Research Center (2017)

3. Objective of the study

To investigate marketing communication strategies of dietary supplement products on social media in Thailand

4. Research Methodology

This qualitative research investigated marketing communication strategies focusing on how dietary supplement product /brand communicate its strategies to target audiences on social media. We collected data by semi-structured interview with eight key informants who are involving in the field of dietary supplement market, product owner, marketing manager, online marketer and product sales representative who are strategy maker and close to customer on

social media. Semi-structured interview enables the researchers to get rich information and insight of the product/brand's thought (Mohajan, 2018) and get understand on the strategy they used in the current intense competition.

Key informants considered by the type of the product (see table 4) were interviewed as follows.

Key informant 1 (K1): Product owner of 'weight loss product'

Key informant 2 (K2): Marketing manager of 'weight loss product'

Key informant 3 (K3): Online marketer of 'weight loss product'

Key informant 4 (K4): Product sale representative of 'detoxification product'

Key informant 5 (K5): Product sale representative of 'gain muscle product'

Key informant 6 (K6): Product sale representative of 'skin-health product'

Key informant 7 (K7): Product sale representative of 'reducing hyper lipid product'

Key informant 8 (K8): Product sale representative of 'bone healing product'

We did a semi-structured interview with 8 key informants by face-to-face interview and telephone interview. We used an interview guideline about marketing communication strategy we created. The interview guideline was determined by the scope of the literature review (DRIP elements of marketing communication, marketing communication tools and marketing mix). And the result of the study is following.

5. Results

Finding revealed that marketing mix was heavily used to communicate dietary supplement product /brand to the customers. In product mix, it was found that sizes/amount of the product was used most (7 key informants), followed by quality and brand name (6 key informants) and return of the product was the least use (1 key informant), respectively. Cost of product/price was used by most key informants (7) for price mix. In place mix, both channel and transport were used heavily. All promotion mix was used among eight key informants. Details were shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Marketing mix used by the key informants

Marketing communication tools									
Key informants	K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6	K7	K8	total
<i>Product mix</i>									
Variety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							2
Quality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	6
Design	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							2
Brand name	<input type="checkbox"/>			6					
Packaging	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							2
Sizes/amount	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	7				
Warranties	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>				3
Return	<input type="checkbox"/>								1
<i>Price mix</i>									
Cost of product/price	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	7				
Discounts and allowance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>							2
<i>Place mix</i>									
Channels	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							
Transport	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	7				
<i>Promotion mix</i>									
Advertising	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							

Sale promotion	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							
Personal selling	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							
Public relation	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							
Direct marketing	<input type="checkbox"/>	8							

According to DRIP elements of marketing communication, for K1 and K2 (product owner and marketing manager of weight loss product) concerned all of DRIP elements. For ‘differentiating’, they said “...every product has life cycle, they have to think of creating new product and push it into target needs...”. For ‘reinforce/reminding’, K1 and K2 concerned about “...being in mind of customer’ and ‘being first choice’ by using a high frequency of advertising, public relation and information push...”. For ‘informing’, K1 and K2 concerned about details and information, they said “...under the legal restriction of supplement advertising in Thailand, the information about health-benefit claim should be more concern especially about weight loss product...”.

For ‘persuading’, K1 and K2 are very concentrated, they said “...because of the legal restriction they have to create an attractive strategy such as ads design, packaging design, and celebrity influencer...”. For K3 (online marketer of weight loss product) concerned about ‘reminding’ by using high frequency of advertising, K3 said “...an advertising should be posted on social media into the right time, the right channel and the right person...”. And about ‘persuading’, K3 focused on message and picture strategy, K3 said “...a short word is more impact than long sentence and picture is more attractive than word...”. For K4 – K8 (product sale representative), they all concerned on every element of DRIP especially ‘persuading’.

K4 (detoxification/liver improvement product) said “he has to study about the product details and provoked customer’s desired by pushing information of liver dysfunction especially to heavy drinker”. K5 (gain muscle product) said “a picture of smart guy with beautiful muscle is most attractive for targets and fitness trainer is a good influencer, and challenge activity (progress of muscle building) was used to motivate target audiences”. K6 (skin-health product) said “word-of-mouth is most powerful”, “the result of the product (getting whitening skin) is attractive to new target” and “celebrity influencer is an important magnet” and “product reviewing by user is also credible”. K7 (reducing hyper lipid product) and K8 (bone healing product) both products are for elderly, they have to communicate into two group audience, one group for elderly themselves and another group for elderly caregiver. K7 and K8 said “word-of-mouth and psychological strategy are most powerful to them and customer relationship management makes them more loyalty”.

Table 6: DRIP element of marketing communication

DRIP elements of marketing communication								
Key informants	K1	K2	K3	K4	K5	K6	K7	K8
Differentiating	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>				
Reminding/reinforce	<input type="checkbox"/>							
Informing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>				
Persuading	<input type="checkbox"/>							

6. Discussion

The findings revealed that the dietary supplement product/brand concerned about marketing mix and used marketing communication strategies to push a product to the market. On product attribute, they concerned in every aspect, a quality of product and building brand name are very important task for the owner and manager. Under the legal restriction of dietary supplement product in Thailand, an intangible value has been used for communication strategy to make customer getting awareness, knowledge, belief and attitude. On pricing aspect, they also gave an attention to determine a price which represented a product value on customer seeing. On placing aspect, social media is a medium to connect and engage between product/brand and customers, the dietary supplement product is a product that needs more information to be given to the customer. Product/brand used social media channel (inbox message) for customer relationship management, to follow up a result of product usage and push continues buying. On promotion aspect, all of marketing communication tools have been used to communicate to customers. According to DRIP elements of marketing communication (Fill and Jamieson, 2006), the product owner and marketing manager concerned about ‘differentiating’, to push their product to be outstanding in the market, being in mind of customer and being first of choice. While product sales representative, they were too close with customers. They more concerned about ‘informing’ and ‘persuading’, by information pushing, attractive cues like picture, celebrity influencer, word-of-mouth, product reviewing by user and customer relationship management also have been used in the market. While online marketer concerned about ‘reinforce/reminding’, high frequency of advertising should be posted on social media into the right time, the right channel and the right person.

7. Conclusion

This study is a preliminary study, to find out marketing communication strategy on dietary supplement product on social media in Thailand by studying on the sender side (product/brand). In the intense competition and the legal restriction, product/brand used marketing communication strategy to push the product into market but some of strategy (some advertising, messages, picture, health-benefit claim etc.) are not following by the regulation and leading to health-related misunderstanding and causing serious health harming. This study would be useful for the further study for preventing an illegal marketing communication on dietary supplement product on social media in Thailand.

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