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# Handling Positive Evaluation in Customer Encounters on Twitter

ABSTRAKT

**Strategie odpowiedzi na akty pozytywnego wartościowania w interakcji z klientem na Twitterze**

Przedmiotem analizy są wybrane strategie stosowane przez firmy w odpowiedzi na akty pozytywnego wartościowania produktów wyrażane przez konsumentów w interakcji indywidualnej na wybranych profilach marek na Twitterze. Twitter stanowi jeden z najpopularniejszych kanałów wykorzystywanych w komunikacji korporacyjnej zarówno przez firmy, jak i przez konsumentów. W oparciu o wcześniejsze badania strategii reagowania na akt komplementowania badanie pokazuje, jak firmy reagują na pozytywną ocenę ich produktów. Analiza wskazuje, iż firmy stosują różnorodne strategie odpowiedzi, np. przyjęcie komplementu, akt komplementowania konsumenta, podziękowanie, wyrażanie pozytywnych emocji. Strategie te mogą być interpretowane jako aktywności podejmowane w celu promocji produktów, tworzenia społeczności związanej z daną marką, a także wzmacniania pozytywnych relacji z konsumentem.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Twitter, komunikacja korporacyjna, pozytywne wartościowanie, odpowiedzi na komplement.

## Introduction

The aim of the following study is to examine selected strategies of responding to a positive evaluation of products in individual interaction with a client on selected English corporate profiles on Twitter. Drawing on the strategies of compliment handling, the study shows how these companies react to a positive evaluation of their products. These strategies may be interpreted as activities undertaken by the brands with the aim of promoting products, construing brand affiliation, as well as strengthening social rapport and interactional closeness with the consumers.

## Twitter and Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Twitter and other social networking sites enable consumers to engage in the electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) communication, i.e. „any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet"[1]. Engaging in e-WOM, consumers share opinions and reactions concerning services and products. The motives that encourage consumers to be involved in e-WOM comprise social-psychological, identity and utilitarian motives[2]. More specifically, the intentions behind e-WOM encompass concern for other customers, social benefits – such as the perspective of social interaction, economic incentives, advice seeking – as well as an opportunity to enhance self-esteem, to show expertise, uniqueness, and to share emotions[3]. Engaging in a positive e-WOM may help the consumer to share expertise, and thus, gain social and self-approval, while engaging in a negative e-WOM allows him/her to express hostility and vengeance[4].

Word-of-mouth communication has been observed to have an important influence on consumers' purchase decisions and attitudes towards a given brand, thus, impacting the company's reputation and sales results[5]. Yet, in contrast to traditional WOM communication, e-WOM is said to have a more significant influence[6] and is considered as more powerful in generating interest in products and services than traditional marketing communications. Cheung et al.[7] suggest that two major factors influence consumers' assessment of the credibility of online WOM, i.e. informational and normative – with the former comprising argument strength, source credibility, and confirmation with prior beliefs, and the latter involving recommendation consistency and aggregate rating.

Twitter is one of the social media channels allowing the spread of customer opinions. The research underlines a critical and powerful role which Twitter plays

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[1] T. Hennig-Thurau et al., *Electronic word-of-mouth via customer-opinion platforms: What motivates customers to articulate themselves on the internet?*, „Journal of interactive marketing", 2004, issue 18(1), p. 39.

[2] Ibidem, p. 47-48.

[3] T. Hennig-Thurau et al., *Electronic word-of-mouth*... op. cit., p. 38-52; K. Swani, B. Brown, G. Milne, *Should tweets differ for B2B and B2C? An analysis of Fortune 500 companies' Twitter communications*, „Industrial Marketing Management", 2014, No. 43, p. 873-881.

[4] B. J. Jansen, M. Zhang, K. Sobel, *Twitter power: Tweets as electronic word-of-mouth*, „Journal of the American society for information science and technology", 2009, No. 60(11), p. 2169-2188.

[5] M. Lee, S. Youn, *Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): How eWOM platforms influence consumer product judgment*, „International journal of advertising", 2009, issue 28, p. 473-499; C. Shu-Chuan, Y. Kim, Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites, „International Journal of Advertising", 2011, issue 30(1), p. 47-75.

[6] M. Zhang, B. Jansen, A. Chowdhury, *Business engagement on Twitter: A path analysis*, „Electronic markets", 2011, issue 21, p. 161-175.

[7] M. Cheung et al., *Credibility of electronic word-of-mouth: Informational and normative determinants of on-line consumer recommendations*, „International Journal of Electronic Commerce", 2009, No. 13(4), p. 9-38.

in e-WOM communication. The microblog has been observed to encourage the process of brand engagement[8]. It allows consumers to share information and interact with other consumers and companies freely[9]. An analysis of consumers' Twitter practices shows that the factors which influence consumers' e-WOM activities comprise peer communication, modelling, observing others' attitudes and behaviours[10].

## Compliment and Compliment Response

Compliments constitute evaluative speech acts that „explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some „good" (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer"[8]. They are viewed as manifestations of solidarity through the expression and acknowledgement of admiration[9]. Compliment and compliment response represent an example of an adjacency pair or „action chain event"[10]. The components are linked by both temporal and relevance conditions[11]. Most studies on compliment responses rely on taxonomies developed by Holmes[12] and Herbert[13]. In Herbert's classification, compliment responses may comprise comment acceptance, comment history, return, praise upgrade, reassignment. Holmes' taxonomy includes such responses as compliment acceptance, rejection, evasion, or no acknowledgement.

## Materials and Methods

The material for the following analysis comprises selected tweets expressing positive evaluations exchanged by consumers and company representatives on selected English company profiles. The tweets were collected in the period between November 2015 and March 2016 from the following profiles: O2, EE, Adidas, Barclays, Lloyds, Yodel, East Midland Trains, National Express, Samsung, Sainsbury's, Virgin Media. The collection of responses comprises 70 tweets.

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[8]  J. Holmes, *Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English*, „Anthropological linguistics", 1986, issue 28, p. 485.
[9]  R. K. Herbert, *The ethnography of English compliments and compliment responses: A Contrastive sketch*, [in:] Contrastive pragmatics, W. Oleksy (ed.), Amsterdam 1989, p. 3-35.
[10] A. Pomerantz, *Compliment responses: Notes on the co-operation of multiple constraints*, [in:] *Studies in the organization of conversational interaction*, J. Schenkein (ed.), New York 1987, p. 109-110.
[11] R. K. Herbert, *The ethnography of English compliments*... op. cit.
[12] J. Holmes, *Compliments and compliment responses*... op. cit.
[13] R. K. Herbert, *The ethnography of English compliments*... op. cit.

## Responding to a Positive Evaluation on Twitter

The collection of messages expressing positive evaluations published by consumers indicates that social media constitute a favourable environment for a positive e-WOM and that customers are willing to share not only negative but also positive evaluations.

Positive e-WOM messages expressed by consumers comprise:

− positive evaluation of a product:

> @SamsungUK camera looks amazing for a phone!, I love the edge. And you brought back water resistant and expandable memory yippee!!!

− positive evaluation of the company's services, campaigns, customer care:

> @BarclaysUK Help Thank you for the wonderful ladies at your #Rhyl branch for helping me sort out my app. Always helpful.

− narratives of positive experience with a product:

> @adidasUK Sunday 10k, recovery shake time. Love running in my @adidasUK vest. #run like the wind blows

The categorisation presented above shows that the companies in question employ a number of strategies of responding to a positive evaluation expressed by their consumers. The strategies are not mutually exclusive and tend to be used in various configurations.

**Table 1. Responses to positive evaluation**

| Type of act | Frequency |
| --- | --- |
| Compliment acceptance: product | 29 |
| Compliment acceptance: company | 21 |
| Complimenting the consumer | 18 |
| Acts of commitment to a consumer | 9 |
| Appreciation: expression of positive feelings | 23 |
| Appreciation: thanks | 36 |
| Accompanying acts: questions, requests | 21 |
| Emoticons and emojis | 31 |

− compliment acceptance: confirming the positive value of a product:

In response to the consumer's positive evaluation of a product launched by a given company, the speakers accept the compliment, confirm the positive value

of the product in question and resort to explicit praise[14]:

(1) @adidasUK Loving my new #stansmiths@adidasUK
adidas UK @adidasUK
@userA true classic. Today belongs to you Sheena.👏

(2) @SamsungUK Fantastic @SamsungUK #VR experience in Westfield. I've watched #VR videos before but that rollercoaster is a truly 21st centurystuff!
Samsung UK @SamsungUK
@user The world of #VR is pretty awesome, glad to hear you had a great experience with it.

These responses to the users' comments exemplify the strategy of upgrading praise[15], strengthening and exaggeration of the positive evaluation. This is achieved by means of strongly evaluative vocabulary („true classic", „pretty awesome").

  – compliment acceptance: confirming the quality of a company:

Responses to a positive evaluation comprise acts of explicit self-praise, in which the speakers positively evaluate the company's services[16]. The speakers, analogically to the acts mentioned above, upgrade the praise, confirm the attractiveness of the company's values, its innovativeness and popularity, customer-orientation and top-quality, sharing with the consumer confidence in the good value of the services offered:

(3) @SamsungUK I'm sticking with @SamsungUK for life now. Taken at night and edited on my S8 using Samsung standard apps. Already have the S9 upgrade included in my contract.
Samsung UK@SamsungUK
@user We both know it's only an upgrade when it's a Samsung. Happy to have you on board for LIFE!

(4) @SamsungUK Samsung, your music choices are fantastic.
Samsung UK @SamsungUK
@user Our music taste you mean, so WE'RE fantastic.

The messages have a highly expressive tone and comprise strong evaluations, emphasising the positive judgment given by the customers, in this way exemplifying intensification of the compliment. The illocutionary force of the acts is underlined by lexical means, emotive lexical items with positive connotations, exclamations, as well as – on the orthographic level – by means of capitalisation. The form of the acts may be dictated by their textual character. Due to the lack of further cues, the speakers enhance the strength of the message and the verbal evaluation. In the acts of self-praise, the companies explicitly confirm their „top"

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[14] Cf. A. Tereszkiewicz, *Komunikacja z klientem na Twitterze – analiza wybranych aktów mowy w interakcji handlowej online,* „Studia medioznawcze", 2017, issue 1(68), p. 82.

[15] R. K. Herbert, *The ethnography of English compliments*... op. cit.

[16] Cf. A. Tereszkiewicz, *Komunikacja z klientem na Twitterze*… op. cit., p. 83.

quality, lending credence to themselves and evaluating the consumer's positive opinion as obvious and common.

  – complimenting the customer:

Other responses to the customers' comments which underline product engagement involve positive evaluation of the customer[17]. In the analysed material, positive evaluation refers to the customer's choice of a product, activities or appearance, predominantly associated with the company or its products:

  (5) @adidasUK
  Ready for the airport run with the @SockCouncil and @adidasUK #spezial
  adidas UK @adidasUK
  @user The most stylish trip to the airport, ever.

  (6) @SamsungUK#galaxynote8 did this cute pic of me at the South Pole!
  Samsung UK @SamsungUK
  @user Great shot, Wendy! Are you able to follow us back so we can DM you with some news...

  (7) @SamsungUK I was busy thinking bout... my cute new lens!
  Samsung UK @SamsungUK
  @user Amazing lip-syncing Agnes. #ShareTheStage

The responses often have the form of motivational slogans, commenting on the user's performance or achievements:

  (8) @adidasUK And wearing them today I just equalled my fastest ever 10k time. Set in 2013!
  adidas UK @adidasUK
  @user You're on fire in #UltraBOOST Uncaged, Ben. Keep up that good work. Looking forward to reading your review. 🔥👊

  (9) @adidasUK boys are back at pre season... footwear thanks
  adidas UK @adidasUK
  @user Training hard today. Prepared to win tomorrow.

Compliments and motivational messages express appreciation of the consumers and reinforce their positive view. The acts indicate that the companies take notice of the consumers and their use of the company's products. Complimenting, signalling approval and expressing a positive evaluation of the addressee are important markers of the relationship between the company and the clients. Such acts may successfully increase rapport with customers, create a positive image of the company and consolidate good relationships[18]. However, the use of positive evaluation acts online is slightly different. In the analysed

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[17] Cf. A. Tereszkiewicz, *Komunikacja z klientem na Twitterze…* op. cit., p. 77.
[18] J. Coupland (ed.), *Small talk. London*, 2000, p. 89; cf. A. Tereszkiewicz, *Komunikacja z klientem na Twitterze…* op. cit., p. 77.

interactions, these assessments comprise post-not pre-transaction evaluations. Their primary aim, therefore, may be to reaffirm the consumer's right decision, to maintain a sociable relation with the consumer, with the prospect of future transactions. The acts have a clearly persuasive and impressive function and, though addressed to a specific individual, they have a public character, and thus, may appeal to other viewers of the message.

– Acts of commitment to a specific customer:

Responses to a positive evaluation also involve acts of commitment to a specific customer. The acts emphasise a personal approach to the customer and underline dedication towards the specific addressee:

(10) @adidasUK thanks for having me in the Brick Lane studio this morning 💪💪
Such a banging class #HereToCreate
adidas UK @adidasUK
@user Great to have you down Katie. The way to start the day! 💪

– Appreciation: expression of positive feelings:

Positive evaluation concerns not only specific products but also the company's services or customer care procedures. In these cases, similar to the above-mentioned evaluation of products, company representatives respond to customers' evaluation by means of expressive messages in which they share the customer's positive feelings:

(11) @EMTrains The man who drove this train needs a pay rise-sharp, honest, funny and had carriages clapping him!
East Midlands Trains @EMTrains
@user Hi Jay. That's great stuff! We've let Sebastian and his manager know. Thanks for getting in touch.

(12) @BarclaysUKHelp I actually did appreciate it. @Barclays sends a text with „reply 1 if valid, 2 if fraud". I replied 2 and went back to sleep!
Barclays UK Help @BarclaysUKHelp
@user Hi Sarah, I'm glad we were able to spot this for you and make it easier! ^NI

(13) @BarclaysUKHelp Thank you for the wonderful ladies at your #Rhyl branch for helping me sort out my app. Always helpful.
Barclays UK Help @BarclaysUKHelp
@user Hi Francis, it's great to hear that our staff were able to help you sort out your app :) ^AM

Such acts underline the company's customer-orientation. The speakers do not explicitly praise the company but express positive feelings concerning the successful customer care and the company's being able to meet the customers' needs and offer satisfying service. The acts have an important image-boosting function. Since the customer's initial message is not visible to the reader unless

s/he clicks on the exchange, the company repeats the statement with the compliment to make it public, so that other users can see it and learn about the positive customer care provided by the company. The company may, thus, enhance its image as a customer-oriented brand, attentive and successful in solving customer issues, express its concern for the customer and assure readiness to help the customer in the future.

  − appreciation: expressing thanks:

The responses to users' positive evaluation and compliments also comprise appreciation in the form of thanks:

> (14)  @BarclaysUKHelp Excellent customer service from Nina at @BarclaysUK in Bury St Edmunds today. Asset to the company
> Barclays UK Help @BarclaysUKHelp
> @user Hi Hayley, thank you for taking the time to share this with us :) ^CA

> (15)  @EMTrains hi. Just wanted to say a big thank you for the passenger assistance given today for my disabled mother from GY To BDM.
>  East Midlands Trains @EMTrains
> @user Hi James, your very welcome. Thank you for taking the time to get in touch.

The thanks represent positive politeness acts, enhancing customer engagement and interactional closeness. By thanking, the companies show that positive feedback is appreciated. The act takes the form of the more formal *thank you* and the less formal *thanks*, extended to include the object of thanks, predominantly comprising thanking the customer for the effort of contacting the company to share the news.

  − accompanying acts:

As can be seen from the examples, individual tweets may constitute expressions of a positive evaluation and may be accompanied by additional acts, which predominantly perform the function of increasing the illocutionary force of the initial act and/or enhancing the rapport with customers.

One of the most frequently performed acts accompanying the expressive acts by means of which customers share their feelings and positive evaluations are the questions addressed to users which encourage them to share further details concerning the products they use and further positive experiences of the products. Such acts are designed to maintain interaction, to encourage the reader to enter into a conversation with the company with further praise of the product, to continue spreading positive e-WOM, and, as a result, to raise and/or strengthen the positive associations about the company in the user's and other readers' minds, to enhance the satisfaction derived from the choice or use of the company's product, and to create a more personal experience:

(16)  @SamsungUK Guys I'm so so excited to get the S7 Edge, Even more excited it comes in white !!! Very beautiful indeed
Samsung UK @SamsungUK
@user We can sense your excitement, which is understandable. The #GalaxyS7Edge is awesome. What excites you the most about it?

(17)  @virginmedia Excited to get @virginmedia tomorrow
Virgin Media @virginmedia
@userEee exciting!!! What package have you gone for Nicole? HF

(18)  @SamsungUK Getting ready for America got a new phone today all ready for next week. #8days#samsungS7
Samsung UK @SamsungUK
@user We can't think of a better travel companion! Whereabouts in the States are you heading too?
@SamsungUK Great Barrington, MA :) going to work in a summer camp
Samsung UK @SamsungUK
@user Ooo, lots of photo taking opportunities. You're going to love using the new dual pixel camera & we would love to see them.

The examples show how promotional and rapport-building content can be strategically combined. The focus is not solely on the transactional aspects of the interaction but on strengthening the relationship with the consumer as well.

External modification of such acts by means of emoticons is also frequent. The emoticons expressing positive and affective meaning as well as emojis indicating strength, respect and enthusiasm are placed at the end of an evaluation or message. Emoticons strengthen the positive evaluation and help to clarify the intended meaning[19].

## Conclusions

Positive evaluations of products and compliments addressed to customers are also frequent in face-to-face communication, in which they often help to finalise a transaction. Previous research indicates the use of such evaluations with prospective customers and points to their considerable impact on sales. Such exchanges help to create an affiliative relation with customers[20] and may, thus, influence their decisions on potential purchases. In the analysed material, however, as indicated above, expressions of a positive evaluation appear as post-transaction acts confirming the good choice that the customer has made or supporting the customer in his/her decision or undertaking. The above-mentioned responses to a positive e-WOM may be interpreted as a co-constructed

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[19] M. Placencia, A. Lower, *Your kids are stinking cute. Complimenting behaviour on Facebook among family and friends*, „Intercultural pragmatics", 2013, No. 10(4), p. 635.
[20] C. Clark, P. Drew, T. Pinch, *Managing prospect affiliation and rapport in real-life sales encounters*, „Discourse studies", 2003, No. 5, p. 24.

promotion – promotion of the company constructed together with the consumers. The speakers use positive comments expressed by the consumers in order to promote their services. In their responses, the companies reinforce their positive evaluation and promote the product further. More importantly, evaluative and expressive acts make positive evaluation public, and thus, promote the positive image of a given company. In this way, positive evaluation acts can indirectly persuade other users to purchase the evaluated product.

These acts represent relationally-oriented strategies of positive politeness, associated with expressing and sharing emotions, and showing „interest, approval and sympathy with hearer"[21]. In this context, such expressions have an important contact- and rapport-building function[22] and help to establish and increase solidarity with customers[23]. By interacting with customers about the use of given products, the mentioned companies have a chance to trigger or strengthen the relationship with their customer, to try to persuade the customer to share more experiences with the company, and thus, to tie the individual to the brand. The acts have a clear function of creating a positive atmosphere and triggering positive energy associated with the company and its products. The strategies mentioned above exemplify the process of building a community around a given brand and show clearly how companies take an effort to engage consumers. They also construct their identity as spontaneous, emotional, enjoying cooperation with customers, sharing their excitement and being pleased with the customers' evaluations. The interaction exemplifies one of the primary purposes of social media, that is „ambient affiliation"[24], i.e. the use of social media to share emotions, reactions, evaluations, likes and dislikes. It reflects the focus on affinity seeking and the wish to indicate that one is a part of a community of users with similar experiences. A company may successfully use this potential offered by the discussed medium to get closer to its customers, to engage with customers at a personal level. Yet, bearing in mind the generally low degree of familiarity between customers and providers, the exchanges also constitute evidence of the conversationalisation of public discourse, the spread of informality and pseudo-intimacy[25]. The context of social media interaction shapes the form of tweets. Such expressiveness, rather unlikely in other channels of customer encounters, is

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[21] P. Brown, S. Levinson, *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*, Cambridge 1987, p. 102.

[22] M. Placencia, A. Lower, *Your kids are stinking cute...* op. cit., p. 642; M. Carretero, C. Maız-Arevalo, M. A. Martınez, *„Hope this helps!" An Analysis of expressive speech acts in online task-oriented interaction by university students*, [in:] *Yearbook of corpus linguistics and pragmatics 2014: New empirical and theoretical paradigms,* J. Romero-Trillo (ed.), Cham 2014, p. 261-289.

[23] M. Placencia, A. Lower, *Your kids are stinking cute*... op. cit., p. 622.

[24] M. Zappavigna, *Discourse of Twitter and social media. How we use language to create affiliation on the web*, London 2012.

[25] N. Fairclough, *Critical discourse analysis*. Boston, 1995; cf. A. Tereszkiewicz, *Komunikacja z klientem na Twitterze*… op. cit., p. 83-84.

clearly dictated by the medium, whose defining features comprise spontaneity and emotionality.

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Summary

The following study investigates selected strategies of responding to a positive evaluation of products in individual interaction with a client on selected English corporate profiles on Twitter. Twitter represents one of the most popular channels used in corporate communication, used by both companies and consumers. Drawing on the strategies of compliment handling, the study shows how companies react to positive evaluations of their products. The analysis shows that companies resort to a number of strategies in forming their responses, such as compliment acceptance, complimenting the consumer, thanking, expressing positive feelings. The strategies may be interpreted as activities undertaken by these brands with the aim of promoting their products, construing brand affiliation, as well as strengthening social rapport and interactional closeness with the consumers.

Keywords: Twitter, corporate communication, positive evaluation, compliment response