

The Interactivity of Corporate Websites: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper reports on the results of a study on a corpus of corporate websites of British and Italian Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises communicating in English, with reference to their degree of interactivity with their (prospective) customers. The comparison of the communicative and linguistic strategies enacted by the two sets of firms testifies to the fact that British SMEs appear to be more inclined than Italian ones to a dialogue with their customers. Specifically, their corporate communication focuses on the interests and opinions of their customers, so as to set up a relationship with them and increase their degree of satisfaction and loyalty. In contrast, the websites of Italian SMEs seem to be more self-centred and more focussed on the presentation of their products than on the interaction with their customers.

Keywords: corporate websites, British and Italian SMEs, communicative strategies, linguistic interactivity.

1. Aim and scope of the study

Since the late 1980s, the Internet has become the largest communication network, the most prominent manifestation of our globalised world, where time and space barriers are overcome at the click of a mouse. In the economic field, the web has also marked the transition from a society based on the production and exchange of material goods to one based on the virtual market, where

the generation of wealth, the exercise of power, and the creation of cultural codes [...] depend on the technological capacity of societies and individuals, with information technologies as the core of this capacity. (Hilbert and López 2011: 1)

Indeed, the Internet enables companies to promote their products or services at a lower cost than before and with a potentially wider

reach; as such, it expands the firms' "opportunities for branding, innovation, pricing and selling" (Hanson 2000: 4). Hence, while during the first phase of the Internet revolution, the interaction between user and company was still limited to email, fax and telephone, now the website has become the most popular tool used by business organisations to express and promote their identity and conduct communication.

This also implies that any company wanting to attract customers beyond its geographical boundaries must rely on the English version of its website to inform, promote, persuade and sell, since "the market dictates the language used and it would not be cost-efficient to adopt any other language but English" (Incelli 2007: 127-8).

By now, effective exploitation of new media technologies and the use of English as the international language of communication have become crucial to the internationalisation and dissemination of knowledge in general and to business success in particular.

Bearing this in mind, the present paper will analyse Micro, Small and Medium enterprises (henceforth SMEs) communicating in English with the public. Specifically, I will first overview the basic features of corporate websites and will focus on successful communicative strategies adopted by SMEs to improve their online business visibility and impact. Then I will compare the communicative and linguistic strategies exploited by the corporate websites of a set of British and Italian SMEs. The study is part of a wider project funded by the European Social Fund and supported by the Italian region Veneto in the north-east of Italy, which is generally acknowledged as the most resourceful cradle of Italian SMEs. While the final aim of the project is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of north-eastern Italian firms in building their online professional identity, the present paper will concentrate on the differences and similarities between the British and the Italian corporate websites in terms of their degree of interactivity with (prospective) customers.

2. Corporate websites and SMEs' communicative and linguistic strategies

The overarching needs of a company are to establish contact with users and to persuade them to purchase its products/services.

When a company establishes a corporate website, these two aims are activated in different ways and in different degrees.

Specifically, Valdani (2002: 402-3) identifies four 'moves' that may be taken by SMEs when setting up their own websites and that represent different degrees of communication between the company and its customers. Firstly, companies may provide a highly simplified website with an e-mail contact; secondly, they may activate globally accessible virtual showcases, where they offer their products/services; the third move requires the intensification and improvement of the relationships between the company and its clients by providing all the needed information, i.e. product availability, technical features, prices, delivery times and stages. Finally, the fourth move entails the development of digital platforms for e-commerce, with the company ultimately setting its corporate image at a virtual level as well.

Within this framework, companies need to build a solid relationship in order to satisfy increasing market demands and win competition. Bearing in mind that "the higher the level of interactivity, the more customised a search is and the more individual a user's behaviour or path" (Janoschka 2004: 118). Sections 2.1 and 2.2 below will overview the most typical communicative strategies and linguistic choices enacted by SMEs in their corporate websites, while sections 3.1 and 3.2 will check them against the corpus specifically built for the comparison between the two sets of firms.

2.1. Communicative strategies

The most straightforward means to trigger online communication is indexing, that is, the visualisation of a website on the most popular search engines. Successful indexing involves the optimisation of the webpage, so that the search engine results page is directly linked to the company's website; this places the company in a privileged position relative to other competitors.

In turn, logfiles help companies to know how much their websites are being used by showing, for example, the trend of visits, the type of visitors, the most visited sections, and the click-stream through the website, i.e. how a typical visit begins and ends. All this is vital especially for SMEs, as they can identify their target audience, strengthen their relationships and target their customers more closely.

Thirdly, the 'Contact us' link provides such information as the address, telephone/fax number, and e-mail, to enact a dialogue between the company and its customers that reinforces the degree of satisfaction of the latter. In turn, online events like a 'Chat' or a 'Forum' service, the webcasting of a product launch or a press conference further enhance communication and strengthen the link between a firm and its customers.

Finally, newsletters contribute to the personalisation of customer relations, as do search engines within company websites. They help users to find the exact information they need, while using questionnaires to collect detailed information on consumer preferences and habits in their databases.

2.2. Linguistic choices

Considering that "a corporate website needs to create a profile of the company which distinguishes it from its competitors" and that "the brand image, the corporate identity [...] all contribute to this profile and influence linguistic choices and the organization of discourse" (Salvi 2007: 244), corporate websites exploit different lexico-grammatical and rhetorical features, the most prominent of which are described below:

- i) Possessives *your(s)* and *our(s)* and personal pronouns *we*, *you* and *us*: used to strengthen the company's interaction with clients;
- ii) Positively connoted adjectives: used to present and describe the company's products/services and aimed at intensifying its value and reliability;
- iii) Questions and imperatives: used to ensure a sense of interpersonal communication by addressing users directly.

Linguistic choices combine with communicative marketing strategies to shape a company's image on the web, and thus by studying these, one can elicit the degree of interactivity enacted by a firm with its customers.

3. A comparative study of British and Italian corporate websites

In her contrastive study of a set of Italian and British corporate websites, Turnbull (2007: 19-28) highlights the following:

- i) British firms try to establish a friendly relationship with the

visitors of their website, in order to enter into a constructive dialogue with them;

ii) Italian firms generally do not set up a dialogue with their website visitors, but prefer to adopt an authoritative attitude and establish their position as experts.

Five years on since the publication of Turnbull's study, further developments of online (commercial) communication were calling for updated research in this field, and hence a comparative analysis of the corporate websites of a new set of British and Italian SMEs has been carried out.

The corpus examined covers the English corporate websites of ten SMEs, of which five are British-owned and have their headquarters in Britain, while five are located in the North Eastern Italian region of Veneto.

The selection process of the English version of Italian websites was thwarted by their limited presence on the web, since (English) corporate websites are still not commonplace even in the highly productive and entrepreneurial North-East of Italy, where the firms were selected. Despite this, five Italian-English websites of Italian firms from five different business sectors were identified, as follows:

- i) *Endes* (www.endes.it), organising private and public events;
- ii) *Pieffe Sport* (www.pieffesport.it), producing technical sportswear;
- iii) *Cantina San Rustico* (www.sanrustico.it), a winery;
- iv) *Maglificio Erika* (www.maglificioerika.com), a knitwear company;
- v) *Franklin & Marshall* (www.franklinandmarshall.com), a casual clothing firm.

British firms with comparative types of production were then selected from similar environments to make comparison possible:

- i) *Vjem Events* (www.vjemevents.com/), specialised in catering private and public events;
- ii) *Swimovate* (www.swimovate.com), manufacturing electronic training aids for swimming;
- iii) *Aquatina* (www.aquatina.com), dealing with collapsible pocket bottles as a green alternative to bottled water;
- iv) *Imtaz Bespoke Tailor* (www.imtaz.com), focussing on bespoke tailoring;

v) *Cyclehoop* (www.cyclehoop.com), producing innovative indoor and outdoor cycle parking solutions for local authorities.

The ten corporate websites were analysed with reference to both the communicative marketing strategies and the linguistic choices, illustrated in Section 2 above.

3.1. Communicative strategies

All the British corporate websites appear to be designed to promote and enhance communication with (prospective) customers and to establish with them a relationship based on mutual trust. Specifically, social networks like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, together with blogs, are strategically used by the British SMEs to actively engage users and reinforce their degree of satisfaction and loyalty.

Moreover, British SMEs give high prominence to their customers' comments. So, for example, *Imtaz Bespoke Tailor* exhibits the section 'Clients', where comments are shown, while *Swimovate* provides a section called 'Don't just take our word', where anybody can write their opinion about the products. This communicative strategy is aimed at fostering a feeling of confidence about the company by establishing an open dialogue with it.

In turn, the Italian firms do not share the same attitude for communication and rather seem to be more self-centred and focussed on the presentation of their products than on the interaction with their customers. True, two SMEs out of five, *Maglificio Erika* and *Franklin & Marshall*, have an account on *Facebook* and *Twitter*; while both *Pieffe Sport* and *Franklin&Marshall* have a 'Feedback' / 'Leave a comment' section. Yet, in so doing, they seem to focus more on keeping updated with the technological breakthroughs in the trendy environment of social networks than on incrementing an embedded 'philosophy of interaction'.

Indeed, *Endes* is the only company that initiates a dialogue with its prospective customers, inviting them to take a break from their busy daily life and meet up in front of a cup of tea. Moreover, such dialogue is not aimed exclusively at presenting the firm, but also at getting to know the customer's needs. Customer and firm are given equal importance in getting acquainted with each other's aims and specificities:

(1) **Stopping for a cup of tea** is hardly the kind of break you would think of fitting into a busy day's schedule. Sometimes, however, the winning idea you were searching for can come to you precisely during one of these breaks conducive to reflection. This is why, at Endes, we believe in creating opportunities for **meeting up with our customers** at a relaxed and leisurely pace, which makes a refreshing change from today's dynamic environment. That way, **you can take us on an ideal tour of your business and allow us a slightly more in-depth insight into your corporate philosophy**, and we can provide a more professional contribution to the achievement of the targets you've set yourself. (*Endes*) (emphasis added)

The other four SMEs largely present themselves on the web in terms of their professionalism, as in (2), where the focus is exclusively on the company, on their top-level output and on their wide-ranging products:

(2) [...] **the firm has grown consistently and specialised** in fine gauge and ultra-fine fully fashioned knitwear. [...] **We have specialized in** producing samples for the Women's, Men's and Children's Market with both carded and worsted yarns. Moreover, **all garment [...] is produced internally by our staff of experts** who are equipped with all types of machinery necessary to produce a collection of a classic or modern nature. (*Maglificio Erika*) (emphasis added)

Moreover, while all the ten firms exploit the 'Contact us' link and 'indexing' successfully, only the British ones make use of 'logfiles' that indicate how much their websites are being used and referred to, 'Chat' services, and newsletters, all contributing to the personalisation of customer relations.

Hence, the British firms analysed make use of both moves three and four, in Valdani's terms, and e-commerce facilities to intensify relations with customers. In contrast, the Italian ones appear to be more limited to move one (only e-mail contact), by producing little dialogue or showing little interest in communication and information-sharing with their customers.

3.2. Linguistic choices

The self-evident interactivity in the structural organisation of the British sites is confirmed by the quantitative analysis of the linguistic features, as described in section 2.2. Indeed, while the

total running words in the two sub-corpora are virtually identical, 6602 words for the Italian firms vs. 6693 for the British firms, the frequencies of occurrence of the linguistic data under scrutiny differ prominently¹.

Specifically, with reference to the possessives and personal pronouns summarised in Table 1, the most prominent feature concerns *we*, *you*, *us*, *our(s)* and *your(s)*², signalling interactivity, as opposed to *they*, *them*, *their(s)*, showing distance. In the British corporate websites the possessives/personal pronouns referring to the company (*we*, *us*, *our(s)*) exhibit the same frequency of occurrence as that of second person (*you*, *your(s)*). This indicates the 'equal weight' given by the British firms to themselves as producers/suppliers and to its customers. In contrast, in the Italian websites, the focus on the customer is three times lower than that given to the firm (32 vs. 103).

TABLE 1
Pronouns and possessives indicating interactivity

	British	Italian
I, ME, MY, MINE	15	3
YOU, YOUR(S)	138	32
SHE, HER(S)	20	0
WE, US, OUR(S)	137	103
THEY, THEIR(S)	11	27
Total	321 (4.8%)	165 (2.5%)

Interestingly, in the wordlist generated by the software for the British subcorpus, *we* (71 occurrences), *you* (69), *your* (69) and *our* (51) are among the first 12 most recurrent words, preceded only by prepositions and articles. In contrast, in the wordlist of the Italian

¹ The data have been analysed by means of the software *Wordsmith Tools* 5.0.

² First person singular personal pronouns and possessives will not be discussed here since they only refer to quotations of customers' opinions in the British firms and of a statement by a film director in an Italian firm. In turn, *she/her(s)* is used only by British SMEs to refer to themselves in third person.

SMEs, *we* and *our* (46 and 47 occurrences respectively) – still among the most recurrent words – distance *you* (20 occurrences) and *your* (12) by far.

Secondly, I discriminated between the connoted adjectives merely indicating positivity and those showing the superiority of the firm as opposed to rival SMEs. Among them, I selected a list of those terms from both categories that occur in both sub-corpora, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Positively connoted adjectives (*great, high, good, most, best*)

	British	Italian
positivity – <i>GREAT, HIGH, GOOD</i>	13	23
superiority – <i>MOST, BEST</i>	19	39
Total	32 (0.5 %)	62 (1%)

In the first place, overall, the data point to a relatively higher use of positively connoted terms by the Italian firms (1% as opposed to 0.5%), which also exhibited a more prominent use of superlative forms. Indeed, the Italian firms are particularly aware of competition with rival products and show great interest in highlighting the superiority of their products on others:

(3) The steady commitment in the research of new fibres and new solutions, the use of the **best** raw materials and of **very advanced** machines, the scrupulous care for details, the quality of a product which is technologically up to date and characterized by a trendy style, make of PIEFFE SPORT a reliable point of reference, in particular in the field of private label. [...] There is a sock for each sport and each sport has its own sock. We at PIEFFE SPORT know it **very well** because we work every day to produce articles that meet in **the best possible way** all the sportspeople's needs[...] customized with printings or trade marks even for a little supply: PIEFFE SPORT socks are **the best** the market can offer. (*Pieffe Sport*) (emphasis added)

Finally, I recorded a regular use of questions posed to their customers by British SMEs, as in (4):

(4) Are you using the correct barriers? What about your legal obligation? Do you have the correct license or permit? How robust is your emergency plan? Have you taken all the necessary steps to reduce your event's impact on the environment? (*Vjem events*)

A total of 11 questions were found in the British websites as opposed to one single case recorded in the Italian sub-corpus.

4. Conclusions

Over the last decade the Internet has grown to become an invaluable marketing channel (Silverstein 2005; Lindstrand, Johanson, Sharma 2006; Donelson 2011; van Noort, Antheunis and van Reijmersdal 2012, among others). At present, it offers great possibilities for the setting up and management of short-, medium- and long-term customer relationships; it helps gather information about customers' wants and needs; it contributes to ensuring customer satisfaction and loyalty. In short, it works as a fully-shaped e-commerce medium.

Yet, as the present study has highlighted, its potentialities are only partially exploited by SMEs throughout the world, particularly when it comes to building a relationship with (prospective) customers. My data confirm that British SMEs appear more inclined than Italian ones to dialogue with their clients; their corporate communication focuses on their customers' interests and opinions, so as to set up a relationship with them and increase their degree of satisfaction and loyalty. In contrast, the corporate websites of Italian SMEs appear devised not so much to enact a dialogue with clients, but rather to focus on the firm's superiority to its competitors and to provide an online shop-window for its products. Dialogue and interaction come at a second stage. These companies tend to take an authoritative stand, as demonstrated by a greater degree of textual formality (passive voice, more frequent use of third person pronouns/possessives) as opposed to the British ones.

Bearing in mind that the English on the websites is merely a translation of the Italian original, such differences in attitude may signal a divergence in marketing cultural approach. So, while on the one hand my study confirms Turnbull's finding published in 2006, on the other hand it may trigger further research on the

culture(s) of corporate websites; indeed, while the internet seems to dispel geographical boundaries, the webmaster and the socio-cultural background may still play a key role in the development and maintenance of the website, when it comes to electronic customer relationship management by micro, small and medium-sized companies.

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