

SOCIAL NETWORKS AS COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES FOR SMEs IN THE CHONTALPA ZONE OF THE STATE OF TABASCO, MEXICO


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Abstract: The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has become essential for both individuals and companies because of the numerous benefits they provide. Companies in all sectors have incorporated ICTs into their strategies to improve their competitiveness and expand their presence in new markets, mainly using social networks and websites, which facilitate effective interaction with customers. This study focused on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Chontalpa, Tabasco, using a mixed approach. A questionnaire was administered to managers to assess the use of social networks and websites in their companies, supplemented by checklists to analyse content management. The results showed that Facebook and Twitter were the social networks most used by these companies.

Keywords: competitive strategies, small and medium-sized companies, social networks

JEL Classification: O31, L14

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have transformed the way we work and manage resources. ICTs are a key element in making work more productive: streamlining communications, supporting teamwork, managing inventories, performing financial analysis, and promoting products in the marketplace. When used effectively, information and communication technologies (ICTs) enable businesses to increase production, accelerate processes, and enhance quality, ultimately strengthening their competitiveness in the market. Among these technologies, social networks and websites stand out as particularly impactful.

Despite the perception of social networks as a relatively recent phenomenon, their origins can be traced back over a decade. The recent proliferation of social networks on the web, driven by their immense popularity in recent years, has led to their widespread adoption. After all these years, social interaction networks have become one of the most widespread elements of the Internet, offering their users a common place to develop constant communication. Nevertheless, the history of websites is changing rapidly, as it goes hand in hand with the history of the Internet. These sites are even radically transforming the way we live our lives. Websites are used by public and private institutions, organisations and individuals to communicate with the whole world. Websites are used by public and private institutions, organisations and individuals to communicate with a global audience. For companies, this communication is primarily about offering their goods and services via the Internet and, in general, making their marketing functions more efficient.

SMEs in Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, Tabasco, lack competitiveness due to inadequate use and management of ICTs. Casalet and González (2019) state that the use of ICTs makes it possible to see the current and future performance of the company based on the presence or absence of channels through which information can be disseminated across all operational areas. In other words, it is expressed in terms of the capacity of SMEs to use information and build networks that contribute to the company's competitiveness.

ICTs are increasingly used to support and automate all business activities. Thanks to ICTs, organizations have been able to obtain important benefits, such as improving their operations, reaching a larger number of customers, optimizing their resources, opening up new markets, gaining a deeper understanding of customers' needs in order to provide them with a better-quality service, and communicating more fluently, not only with their employees but also with their customers and suppliers. In short, ICTs enable them to achieve significant efficiency gains.

In particular, social networks and websites have become tools in the business environment that are used to have better interactions with customers or users and provide a better quality of service. It should be noted that sales are not the main objective in social networks, but to provide a service with quality content and response.

According to Cobo and Pardo (2020), social networks are defined as “all those tools designed for the creation of spaces that promote or facilitate the formation of communities and instances of social exchange”. Facebook is one of the most widely

used social networks and should be utilised by companies to integrate into the current market. Despite the theoretical advantages of social networks and websites, there is a scarcity of empirical evidence regarding their utilisation in SMEs in the aforementioned municipalities of Tabasco. Consequently, there is a need for further research in this area.

The research was conducted to devise proposals on how to optimize social networks and websites of SMEs in Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, Tabasco, with the aim of enhancing the competitiveness of these companies in the market.

Theoretical framework

It is vital to identify several key concepts that underpin the research in order to develop this study. These concepts are as follows:

1. **Company:** A company is defined as an economic and productive unit that organizes and combines different resources (human, financial, technological, etc.) with the objective of generating goods or services and obtaining profits. Firms operate as key players in market economies, driving growth and competitiveness (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018; Chiavenato, 2020).
2. **SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises):** Small and medium-sized enterprises play a crucial role in the economy, as they are generators of employment and meet the needs of local markets. According to recent data, SMEs account for more than 90% of all enterprises in many countries, contributing significantly to the Gross Domestic Product (OECD, 2021). Characteristics such as empirical management, less technically qualified personnel, and limitations for innovation are common in this type of companies (González, 2017).
3. **ICT (Information and Communication Technology):** ICT encompasses the technological tools and resources that facilitate the management, processing, and transmission of information, optimizing efficiency in different sectors, including business. ICTs are fundamental to the evolution of computing and telecommunications, enabling unprecedented global connectivity (Cabero, 2018; Belloch, 2017). Currently, ICTs are determinant for business success, as they allow companies to automate processes and improve their competitiveness (Mayta & León, 2020).
4. **Social Networks:** Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networks as online platforms that allow individuals to create personal profiles and connect with other users. These platforms not only foster personal relationships but have also become powerful tools for companies to create and manage their social and business identity (Brown & Barnes, 2018). Social networks play an essential role in marketing strategies and customer interaction.
5. **Website:** a website is a set of interconnected pages that make online information accessible to users. Mora (2002) define websites as a key tool for the visibility and promotion of companies in the digital environment.
 - a) **Static Web Pages:** these pages display information in a stable manner and do not require frequent updates. Generally built in HTML, they are an

economical option for companies that only need to present basic information such as their products, services, or corporate data. Although their interactivity is limited, they are useful for those organizations with simple needs and reduced budgets.

- b) **Dynamic Web Pages:** these are more complex sites that use programming languages such as PHP and manage databases. These sites allow constant updates through administration panels and offer advanced features such as surveys, forums, and online ordering systems. They are ideal for companies that need to update content frequently and manage customer interactions in real-time.

Recent literature on ICT and social networks highlights their transformative role in business strategies. Fonseca (2013) argues that ICTs have revolutionized the business world by removing traditional trade barriers and facilitating the instantaneous transmission of data globally. Uribe (2020) and Valdez et al. (2019) point out that social networks not only enable communication between people around the world but have also become an essential component for companies' marketing strategies. Social networks improve interaction with customers, promote customer loyalty, and significantly reduce marketing operating costs, which enhances the growth and competitiveness of companies.

The advent of social networks and/or websites has contributed to changes in consumption habits, communication, and even the way of doing business; this is something that SMEs know very well, or at least they should be aware of as their survival depends on their ability to adapt to these changes. Thus, knowing the potential of 21st-century social media allows them to make smart decisions that could drive companies forward.

The tools available in the virtual space include, in addition to social networks, websites, or web pages. Both concepts are used by organizations to intensify communication and information channels between them and their different audiences. However, not in all instances reflect optimal or adequate utilisation. Says Celaya (2020) notes that “Surprisingly, most companies manage the process of redesigning their corporate website as a simple administrative procedure, when it should be considered one of the most important strategic decisions of the company”.

Mexican industry, particularly SMEs across the country, has been significantly impacted by the effects of the global economic crisis since 2008. Therefore, there are two important factors that companies must take into account in order to achieve success: competitiveness and productivity. To be competitive, a company must be able to offer products and services that are superior to those of its competitors and have a clear competitive advantage that is perceived by customers. The strategic management of the elements that make up the company (resources, human resources, structure and organisational culture, among others) is a success factor in achieving competitiveness, although the current market situation is not favourable for SMEs in the state of Tabasco.

Tabasco's SMEs fail mainly due to low market demand and excessive competition, among other reasons, which leads to a decrease in profits and thus a shorter life cycle. The SME sector in Tabasco is characterised by a lack of both diffusion and

knowledge among the state's own inhabitants. It may even be posited that some of these businesses lack the capacity to sustain themselves, be productive and competitive in the absence of external support (Eliseo & Montejó, 2020). One of the problems faced by SMEs in Cunduacánby, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, Tabasco, is that their inadequate use and management of ICT prevents them from growing in the current market or from being competitive. This is due to the fact that ICT use enables the evaluation of an organization's past, present, and future performance based on the existence or lack of channels that disseminate information to all relevant parties. Stated differently, it manifests itself in the ability of SMEs to use data and make connections that increase the organisation's competitive advantage (Casalet & González, 2019).

All business processes are increasingly supported and automated by ICT. Organisations have been able to reap significant benefits from ICTs, including improved operations, extended customer reach, resource optimization, market expansion, better understanding of customer needs for higher quality service, and improved communication internally and externally with suppliers and customers. In short, ICTs enable them to achieve significant productivity gains.

Websites and social media platforms in particular are now utilized as tools in the corporate world to improve customer and user interactions and service quality. It should be mentioned that the primary goal of social networks is to offer a service with high-quality material and reactions, not sales.

Social networks, according to Cobo and Pardo (2020), are “all those tools designed to create spaces that promote or facilitate the formation of communities and instances of social exchange”, with Facebook being one of the most popular platforms that businesses should use to compete in the market.

There is a need for this research because, although these benefits are theoretically recognised, no studies have shown how social networks and websites are being used experimentally in SMEs in the aforementioned municipalities of Tabasco.

The current study was carried out with the purpose of developing suggestions on how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, Tabasco, might improve their utilization of social networks and websites in order to attain a higher level of competitiveness in the market.

Fonseca (2013) notes that ICTs are driving major changes in many industrial sectors high-speed data transmission networks, data warehouses, the Internet, and other new technologies are breaking down traditional barriers to doing business and transforming the way businesses operate.

Uribe (2019) points out that digital social networks are a global and growing phenomenon, allowing communication between people in a way unthinkable a few years ago. He also states that they are being used by companies as a marketing tool for the ease and economy that represents aspects such as communication, management of business information, and customer relationships.

Valdez et al. (2020) conducted a study on social networks, which shows that the analyzed economic entities show important areas of opportunity; it demonstrates the conclusive result as the degree of use and benefits granted by social networks and/or electronic media.

In the study conducted by García & Hernández (2020), it was concluded that 60% of SMEs in the city of Comalcalco, Tabasco, use the Internet in one way or another to carry out online marketing activities, using Facebook as the most effective option, since it increases their sales, improves the image of the company, increases the number of customers and reduces advertising costs.

Real et al. (2014) conducted a study to know the use and impact of social networks in the marketing strategies of SMEs. Among the results obtained, they found that SMEs do not take advantage of social networks and the use of the Internet in general to improve their processes.

These studies show the great importance of the use of social networks and websites in SMEs, which are tools that should be adopted to make themselves known in the market, increase their sales of products or services, and have better competitiveness.

The company is an economic unit of production and decision-making that through the organization and coordination of a series of factors (capital, labor, and technology) seeks to obtain profits through its participation in the market (Andersen, 1999).

Rodríguez (2019) defines the company as an essential element of any economic system. It is also where the production processes are carried out, coordinating the disposition of resources and factors to produce a product or service, in order to obtain a profit from its transaction in the market, with the risk inherent in this business activity.

In a very general way, all SMEs almost always share the same characteristics, so it could be said that these are the general characteristics of SMEs:

- The capital is provided by one or two persons who establish a partnership and are usually family members.
- The owners themselves manage the company; their administration is empirical.
- They obtain some tax advantages from the state, which sometimes considers them as minor taxpayers depending on their sales and profits.
- Their size is small or medium in relation to other companies operating in the industry.
- Poorly qualified or unprofessional personnel.
- Lack of strategic vision and ability to plan for the long term.
- Lack of information about the environment and the market.
- Lack of technological innovation, which may be due to a lack of resources or the necessary innovative spirit.
- Lack of training policies, since it is considered an expense and not an investment, not being able to see the long-term advantages it can generate.
- They tend to carry out their processes in the same way, with the idea that when a method does not work well, it is maintained.
- If it does not work well, it is maintained without analysing whether there are better ones.
- Lack of liquidity.

Research methodology

The approach used in this research was of mixed type as it included both qualitative and quantitative aspects, which were used for the collection and analysis of data, in the same way that they were measured using numerical data and analyzed using statistical methods.

The study universe was determined to be composed of SMEs located in the municipalities of Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, in the state of Tabasco. Based on the information provided by the National Statistical Directory of Economic Units of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), a total of 262 SMEs were identified in the region.

The instruments selected for data collection were a structured questionnaire and several checklists. The questionnaire was applied to the managers of the selected companies. According to Hernández, Fernández and Baptista (2014), the questionnaire is one of the most common tools for data collection due to its ability to measure various variables through standardized questions. In this case, a closed-ended questionnaire was chosen to facilitate the tabulation of results, and a Likert scale was used, which presents items in the form of statements to measure the attitudes or perceptions of respondents. In addition, several checklists were used to evaluate the use of social networks and websites by companies.

Once the population to be studied was defined, the collection instruments were applied. The questionnaire was addressed to the managers of the SMEs located in the municipalities, while the checklists were used to evaluate the presence and activity of the companies on social networks and websites. To identify the enterprises using these digital tools, the “Google” search engine was used, with the criterion that the last update of the social networks or websites should not be older than 365 days. Using this criterion, 51 SMEs were found that used social networks, 29 that had a website and 23 that used both tools simultaneously.

In the end, the study universe consisted of these 23 SMEs that use both social networks and websites in their business strategy. However, when the questionnaire was administered, it was found that one of the companies was not operational and also refused to participate in the study due to internal policies. As a result, 18 SMEs were successfully interviewed.

The general objective of the research was to conduct a detailed evaluation to identify the most relevant aspects in the use of social networks and/or websites by SMEs in Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez and Nacajuca, Tabasco, to propose strategies to increase their competitiveness.

The specific objectives of the research included:

1. To define the appropriate instruments for the collection of information.
2. To collect data on the use of social networks and/or websites by SMEs in the municipalities.
3. Perform a statistical analysis of the data obtained to propose improvements in the digital strategies of these companies.

Results

The following section presents the analysis and interpretation of the six questions that constituted the questionnaire, as applied to the managers of the companies evaluated.

Regarding the degree of knowledge, 71.43% of the respondents stated that they had a solid knowledge of these technologies, while 11.11% indicated that they had a good level of familiarity. However, 10.32% admitted not knowing them or having limited knowledge. Facebook and Instagram were identified as the social networks most familiar to managers, while LinkedIn turned out to be the least familiar.

Regarding the use of social networks, managers of companies such as Milano, Ceramat, Almacenes Veana, Vertiche, and Restaurante Cazuelitas indicated that they intensively use these platforms to position their businesses. In contrast, Santandreu and Boxito indicated that they only use them moderately. LinkedIn, Google, and YouTube were the most often mentioned platforms (6 responses each), while Milano and Restaurante Cazuelitas were the companies that use social networks the least, with only 4 each.

Regarding the use of social networks and/or websites for business positioning, 49.21% of managers stated that they make intensive use of these tools, while 11.11% indicated that they do not use them for this purpose. Facebook and Twitter were identified as the most used platforms, while LinkedIn and Google+ turned out to be the least used. Facebook, Twitter, and proprietary websites are the main tools used to engage customers, with LinkedIn being the least effective and least used.

In general terms, the results reveal that the managers of the evaluated companies have a good knowledge of social networks, with Facebook standing out, followed by Twitter and Instagram. However, LinkedIn and Google+ are the least known, with only 50% of managers being familiar with them. In addition, 89% of respondents stated that their growth strategies and objectives are aligned with the use of social networks and/or websites. Most of them do not perceive any disadvantages in the use of these tools in their operations. In regard to websites, although they are generally well designed in terms of usability, issues pertaining to accessibility were identified, which represents a significant area for potential enhancement. In conclusion, Facebook is the social network most used by companies, followed by Twitter. On the other hand, LinkedIn is practically unknown among companies.

Conclusions

Companies that integrate Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in their operations have the possibility of accessing new markets and developing more competitive and effective strategies. A study conducted in SMEs in the municipalities of Cunduacán, Comalcalco, Jalpa de Méndez, and Nacajuca, in Tabasco, evaluated the use of social networks and websites as part of their business strategies. The results revealed that these tools are mainly used to expand markets, strengthen brand positioning, and increase productivity.

The websites evaluated demonstrated good usability, which facilitates the user experience when navigating them. However, some deficiencies were identified in terms of accessibility, suggesting the need for improvements to ensure that all users can interact optimally with the platform, regardless of their technological or personal conditions.

In terms of the use of social networks, Facebook emerged as the platform most widely known and used by enterprises, due to its widespread popularity and ability to reach a larger number of potential customers. In contrast, LinkedIn was found to be virtually unknown and under-used by SMEs in the region, which represents a missed opportunity given the potential of this network to build professional relationships, recruit talent and position themselves in specific market niches.

In summary, the study shows that while SMEs are using ICT to improve their competitiveness, there are still key areas, such as web accessibility and the use of professional networks such as LinkedIn, that need more attention to maximise the benefits of these tools in their business strategies.

Based on the above, some recommendations are suggested for SMEs that use social networks and/or websites:

1. Continuous use of social networks: maintain a strong presence on social networks to expand the reach of the SME and promote its website.
2. Platform diversification: include less commonly used social networks such as Google+, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn to improve their digital presence.
3. Content improvement: optimize social media content and ensure constant updates to the websites.
4. User surveys: conduct surveys to better understand the expectations and needs of users when visiting their social networks or websites.

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SIECI SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWE JAKO STRATEGIE KONKURENCYJNE DLA MŚP W REGIONIE CHONTALPA W STANIE TABASCO, MEKSYK

Streszczenie: Wykorzystanie technologii informacyjno-komunikacyjnych (ICT) stało się niezbędne zarówno dla osób fizycznych, jak i firm, ze względu na liczne korzyści, jakie zapewniają. Firmy ze wszystkich sektorów włączyły ICT do swoich strategii, aby poprawić swoją konkurencyjność i rozszerzyć obecność na nowych rynkach, głównie korzystając z sieci społecznościowych i stron internetowych, które ułatwiają skuteczną interakcję z klientami. Niniejsze badanie skupiło się na małych i średnich przedsiębiorstwach (MŚP) w Chontalpa, Tabasco, przy użyciu podejścia mieszanego. Kwestionariusz został wystosowany do menedżerów w celu oceny wykorzystania sieci społecznościowych i stron internetowych w ich firmach, uzupełniony o listy kontrolne w celu analizy zarządzania treścią. Wyniki wskazały, że Facebook i Twitter to sieci społecznościowe najczęściej używane przez te firmy.

Słowa kluczowe: strategie konkurencyjne, małe i średnie przedsiębiorstwa, sieci społecznościowe

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