

HEDVIGA TKÁČOVÁ

ONLINE FORMS OF REACHING CUSTOMERS IN THE CONTEXT OF
MASS MEDIA AND MARKETING IN A SMALL POST-COMMUNIST
COUNTRY. THE CASE STUDY OF HERBALIFE IN SLOVAKIA.

Hedviga Tkáčová

Catholic University in Ruzomberok, Faculty of Arts and Letters, Department of
Journalism, Ruzomberok, Slovakia.

E-mail: hedwiga.tkacova@gmail.com

Abstract: According to experts, the rise of consumerism in Slovakia is associated with the end of communist totalitarianism. However, consumerism is a common phenomenon in developed countries of Western Europe as well, where the relaxation of the social happened for different reasons. Consumerism was accompanied by an increase in alternative "spiritual" trends (e.g. new religious movements) and an increase in the number of client cults such as Herbalife. The new "alternatives" have proven to be able to adapt to the current needs of humanity, and address the depths of human being. The current paper presents an analysis of the forms under which Herbalife reached old and new customers online, in the context of mass media and marketing communication. In order to identify the forms of effective advertising employed by Herbalife in reaching new or existing customers, the paper carried out content analysis of the main and official websites of the company.

Key words: advertising, mass media, public relations, Herbalife, communism.

1. Herbalife - characteristics and attractions in the context of a small post-communist country

Herbalife has been operating in Slovakia since 1992, and it is considered to represent a 'self-help movement', more specifically among the so-called 'client cults' (literature also uses the term 'commercial cults', note). From the point of view of Religious Studies, the term "cult" is a kind of compromise variant between the church and the sect, which is, however, characterized by an emphasis on radical, ideologically subdued individualism. Religionist Václavík reminds that, in contrast to other forms of social (especially religious) groups, "cults do not have the sanctity of institutions such as the churches or the radicalism of sects" (Václavík 2007, 40-41). Sociology notes that there is relatively little understanding in the cult of organized membership. On the contrary, the importance of individual freedom is emphasized, which should be of benefit in the exchange of thoughts and ideas.

Client cults, including Herbalife, assume a greater (although not full) level of active participation of their members or supporters. The emphasis of client cults can be clearly seen in appeals to personal experience, private, personal and economic goals. This is one of the reasons why experts point to the fact that client cults (possibly commercial cults) are also psychotherapeutic-educational groups that penetrate different areas of life, attracting people through distorted, semi-truthful and incomplete information that is part of recruiting new members. As a rule, there are always promises that cannot be fulfilled and projected gains that are significantly overestimated (TASR 2001).

Many trends are driven by highly unsustainable patterns of resource consumption. The advertising of Herbalife is appealing primarily because it offers people the chance to participate in a healthy lifestyle, that is associated with the company's products.

Orbanová associates the rise of consumerism in Slovakia (and not only in this country) with the end of communist totalitarianism. The author talks about developed countries in Western Europe, including Slovakia, where there was a relaxation of social conditions, which was accompanied by an increase in alternative "spiritual" trends (e.g. new religious movements) and an increase in the number of alternative groups (e.g. client movements such as Herbalife and others). In Orbanová's words, the new "alternatives" have proven to "be able to adapt to the current needs of humanity in all circumstances" (Orbanová 2010, 13-14).

Two institutions, the Slovak Values Survey in cooperation with the European Survey of Values, conducted a research about the values and changes in the value system of the Slovak population, shortly after the fall of communism. The research took place over two time periods: in 1991 and ten years later in 1999. This allowed for a better and more reliable identification of the changes in value system of the population. Research

has shown an ever-increasing number of those professing a religious faith. The same results were recorded in the 1999 census; up to 77 percent of respondents identified themselves as believers (Bunčák 2003, 16-17). However, the postmodern "rebellion" was not quite in line with the traditional values that shaped our culture many centuries before communism.

Indeed, studies in post-communist countries show a visible increase in religion in the public, private and political spheres (Need-Evans 2001; Greeley 1994; White, Mc Allister 2000, 360; Cordero 2017). We refer to the original, traditionally Christian religion as well as the new spirituality characterized by the inclination of people towards new forms of religious life, which no longer have their origin in the historical tradition of Christianity. The changes certainly require a broader description and clarification, but that is not the goal of this paper. However, it should be noted that society's inclination towards religion took place despite secularist tendencies of the European Union, which "proclaimed the idea that not the tradition of Christianity but above all secularism and freedom of thought are the idea of Europe" (Tižík 2019, 64).

It can be assumed that the rediscovery of religion is due to a number of phenomena, including feelings of life, in connection with the lingering legacy of communism, for which the social norm was the rejection of religion and absolute Truth. In Slovakia, 1989 brought, on the one hand, democracy and freedom, but on the other hand, reverberations of emotions (e.g. frustrations generated by unfulfilled hopes) accompanied by new fears; above all, these were concerns about the future after 40 years of communist totalitarianism. Kotrč describes a time, shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain, during which it was easy to arouse people's fear of death or fear of ill health. According to the author, both topics were key in Herbalife's advertising strategies at the beginning of its operations in Slovakia (Kotrč 1999).

The success of society at the time of the awakening from the totalitarian lethargy in the early 1990s was conditioned by another important fact: Kotč pointed to the fact that during those years, uncritical admiration for everything that bore the seal of "the West" prevailed in society. Multi-level marketing firms "used rhetoric such as <<top-quality cellular nutrition from the United States>>, or <<we will give you a salary comparable to the Western average>> - and they succeeded" (Kotrč 1999).

2. Customers as a Homo consumens

Every social development, including the one of departing from communism and embracing democracy, is part of a much bigger "story"; it is a story of human evolution as a process, that has consistently been a process considered a more or less direct series of assumed improvements

within a single lineage that eventually culminated in the imagination of "perfection" of Homo sapiens. This picture may be flattering to the modern human ego (Tattersall 2000). Among many new species, which had been constantly spawned, Homo sapiens, although not the sole occupants, simply the last surviving twig on a intricately branching tree.

According to psychologist E. Fromm, Homo sapiens is currently being transformed into its new form, despite considered to represent, until recently, a symbol of human evolution. Fromm uses the name "homo consumens", i.e. the consumer man, who represents today's man, and in a broader sense also the society which this man actively creates and influences. Homo consumens is characterized by an unlimited, compulsive and unsatisfied desire for everything that is material to use it to satisfy one's own needs. However, the quickly acquired satisfaction is only temporary for him, because soon the need for new goods, services, experiences etc. will exceed him again. According to Solomon, the continuous consumption of new objects becomes "consumption for consumption." At a given moment, material goods become the meaning of the life of "the consuming man" (Solomon 2006).

The way of this thinking and acting does not bring satisfaction. On the contrary, it causes a constant hunger for further consumption. However, paradoxically it is not about accumulating things. The consumer man longs for permanent change much more than for long-term ownership of his things (because he already considers them outdated, nonstandard or boring). Homo consumens, longing for permanent change, in fact desires to "achieve" what is new and just "in". For this reason, he follows trends, tests new products and, together with them, buys a feeling of happiness. Last but not least, he also fulfils the meaning of his own life, because stylish consumption gives it a feeling of self-realization and personal growth.

This is very reminiscent of the idea of a "tourist", through which sociologist Z. Bauman describes the image of a person involved in mass culture. The tourist is contemporary, hungry for adventure and experience and free in his choice. The tourist spends most of his time in an artificial environment (i.e. online environment) and does not realize that he is losing not only contact with other human beings, but also with the world and nature. His lifestyle is based on individualism, value egoism and an emphasis on the momentary feeling of happiness (which is brought to him by experiences and the fulfilment of his own needs); the happiness he gains, however, is superficial and short-lived. He is not happy, and yet he remains in this environment; losing not only contact with the world, other people and nature, but also a relationship with the world, other people and nature. In this artificial environment, the "tourist" tries superficial substitutes for the interpretation of reality, but they do not satisfy him or make him happy, on the contrary. It is always only "substitutes" that ultimately lead him to spiritual decline (Volko 2015, 50).

3. Herbalife in the context of marketing and mass media communications

At the heart of Herbalife's teaching and practice lies an emphasis on humanism (in which Herbalife has its own ethical concept, note), the essence of which is the ability to give meaning to the individual's human life (Tižík 2006). Adhering to humanistic principles, in advertising and in the media, Herbalife presents itself as a society that is primarily concerned with the good of man, the solution of his health problems, achieving success, longevity etc. Scholars in sociology and religion list Herbalife as a 'client cult' among others such as Amway International, Rotary International and Lions Clubs International. In a broader sense, Herbalife is categorized within the so-called 'Self-help movement'; the biggest among them in Slovakia are *The Church of Scientology* and other self-help movements in the context of the *New Age* (Enroth 1995; Iliaš 2004; Hrabal 1998; Macháčková, Dojčár 2002; Marrs 1990; Vojtíšek 1998).

Given the advertising conducted by Herbalife, many people became interested in the offer of services and activities that allegedly improved self-awareness, while others were interested in the material side of things, focusing on ways to make more money, manifest wealth, and improve their overall standard of living. This frame "can take many different forms for different people" (Orbanová 2010, 14). In principle, however, advertising works and reaches either new customers or new future sellers.

In the case of a personal business strategy, as well as in the case of media addressing of clients, the key business strategy is based on Multi-level marketing. These are business and marketing tricks and strategies that do not benefit from the product that is sold, but from the people who enter the system and who, with the promise of greater income, self-realization and quality of life, are willing to become members of a multilevel business structure. The marketing strategy is based on the fact that the seller (distributor, dealer) is rewarded for the sale of the product and at the same time benefits from the sale made by another seller, whom he brought into the system. In short, multilevel marketing, and thus the model of selling products through a network of retailers, can be imagined in the form of a (yet legal) pyramid.

The creation and supplying of information that arouses interest in a given topic in the media (i.e. "*Media relations*") is also the basis for Herbalife's commercial success. Mass production is complemented by marketing production, as products and their sales are Herbalife's main source of income. The aim of marketing is therefore not only to address, but above all to reach the public and public opinion, which in the field of mass media communication is called "*Public relation*". We can see that

Herbalife's main online goals are promotion, publicity and sales. The final and desired reaction, as Matúš calls it in the context of Public Relations, is the motivation of people to trust in something (product) or someone (company) (Matúš 2008). Thus, trust proves to be an essential component of success.

In the context of mass media communications or online advertising, it can be stated that Herbalife's success on the market was conditioned by one factor: the dynamic development of the internet and its dominance in the ongoing cultural changes. We also see the great success of Herbalife on the internet, where communication takes place on two levels - mass media and marketing, as well as on two levels - the company communicates with the audience (interested people, potential members, existing members), but also the audience (respectively interested people can talk to each other (for example, about their views or opinions on goods and services). In the second mentioned we speak about an active audience of users, who decode media content and use media to meet their own needs (need to be informed, need to be part of the community, need to have fun and distraction and so on) (Burton, Jiráček 2008).

Within the framework of mass media and marketing communication, everyone must behave in such a way as to make the most of their advantages and possibilities, and at the same time achieve the highest possible level of attention, goodwill (product quality, positive consent, values) as well as financial output.

4. Methodology of the survey

The main goal of the content analysis was to identify the forms of effective advertising through which Herbalife reaches new or existing customers. The research was carried out employing content analysis on the main and official websites of the researched company.

We researched texts on the following nine official Herbalife websites; three are official websites, three operate on Facebook and through Facebook, and two represent online stores.

a) Herbalife's official website abroad: <https://www.myherbalife.com> and <https://www.herbalife.com/>;

b) Official website of Herbalife in Slovakia: www.skherbalife.sk;

c) Official Herbalife Nutrition website abroad: https://support.herbalife.com/s/?language=en_US;

d) Official website of Herbalife Nutrition in Slovakia: <https://www.skherbalife.sk/>;

e) Herbalife online shop on Facebook: Health food shop in Slovakia (538 followers): <https://www.facebook.com/Herbalife-Slovakia-2259426250972395/>;

f) Facebook official website of Herbalife Nutrition in Slovakia

(6,342,039 followers; available on

<https://www.facebook.com/HerbalifeSlovakia>);

g) Herbalife Facebook group (public group, 1.7K members); available on <https://www.facebook.com/groups/151036039895125/>);

h) Website of the official Herbalife distributor in Slovakia: www.herbashop.sk;

i) Website of a randomly selected e-shop: <http://www.herbali.sk/>.

The data analysed covered the timeframe between March and June 2021, and comprised 360 texts (i.e. 40 texts on each researched website). The goal was to identify the main forms of Herbalife's advertising through which it reaches its customers on the internet.

5. Results - Forms of online advertising to reach old and new customers

Herbalife currently presents its service, including a wide range of products, not only on its official website or through Facebook, but also on other websites that focus on product sales (created by resellers) or on its e-shops.

On the researched websites we found a total of eight forms of online advertisement:

- Nutrition clubs: They represent an important opportunity to promote products on the internet (and thus to find and reach new customers and potential retailers). They represent a whole network of sites that promote healthy nutrition and the benefits of client participation in the so-called nutrition clubs. The company increased club penetration through online training; in 2006 it trained more than 16,000 new distributors worldwide. Building on this success, Herbalife identified the expansion of internet business (i.e. e-commerce) as one of its main goals (Herbalife, Consolidated Statements of Operations, online);
- Herbalife Newsletter: This is a newsletter with information on news and nutrition products. The four-page A4 sheet presents the principles of proper nutrition, product composition, as well as new products focused on nutrition, weight control and personal care "developed on the basis of the latest scientific knowledge with the support of personal, friendly service and a 30-day money back guarantee" (Herbalife Newsletter, online, 4). The newsletter is a way of regularly contacting existing members on the internet;
- Sharing sales incentives through so-called motivational emails: The role of motivational emails is to reach a potential new member on their first visit on the official website. This type of

service is free. It asks the user to enter a personal email, to which he will receive "ten inspiring tips" at regular intervals. The service promises: a) Inspirational topics about work and business; b) Suggestions on how to increase your income; and c) Tips on how to communicate better. Looking at happy and healthy people is a tempting bonus of this promotion. Motivational e-mails are a tool for reaching a new person via the internet and part of its content (one idea or even the whole paragraph) customers like to share;

- Press online news of the company: the company also presents its activities on the internet through press releases, which are placed in PDF and freely available to anyone interested. In press releases, clients learn weekly information about the company's sales, profits and progress in terms of market growth in a global context;
- Webcasting: In addition to greeting the company's leaders, there is also a presentation of the latest products and success stories of the company in a local and global context. The frequency of these online programs is relatively small. Webcasting takes place every two to three months;
- Private reseller sites: Herbalife also uses the internet and new media for a successful advertising campaign, which it provides through many of its resellers' private sites. Your own website (i.e., e-shop) and facebook page are part of a recommended "package of responsibilities" to be created by a customer who is "moving" to the position of Herbalife reseller;
- Internet advertising: Presentations, advertisements and eye-catching photographs that accompany each website of individual sellers, as well as online advertising in the environment of the entire World Wide Web, are also relatively common and well-represented elements on the internet. Herbalife's advertising is a popular part of ads tailored to the interests of visitors, i.e. so-called cookies;
- Promoting Herbalife's activities through a public relation activity: The latest shift in the company's media communication strategy is the appointment of the very first "digital technology leader". In March 2021, Herbalife Nutrition commented briefly on this step. We decided to create a position called Head of Digital Technology "because we support digital transformation" (Herbalife Nutrition 2021, online).

Based on the results of the qualitative content analysis, we can say that client cult Herbalife asks for an active participation of its members or customers. On the official websites that were part of this research, its emphasis on appeals to personal experience, private goals, personal and

economic goals are very clear. On the internet, many trends are driven by patterns of consumption and profit.

The primary current theme of the Herbalife movement is protecting health through prevention. The advertising focuses on boosting immunity products through nutrition. We can see that the topic of "health prevention" creates the content for marketing relations (sellers - buyers), and at the same time for advertising. The advertising conducted by Herbalife appeals to people primarily by offering them the chance to participate in a healthy lifestyle that is brought by Herbalife products.

6. Conclusion

Religion is an element of culture that pervades every aspect of a society. Religion is a stable element whereas the cultural dimensions are very dynamic. In the article we shortly explained a new situation in Slovakia, in the context of cultural dimensions and cultural changes in Slovakia, after the fall of communism. We pointed out that the inclination of the Slovak society towards religion took place despite secularist tendencies, but on the other hand, the popularity of alternative groups has increased. It was a time when uncritical admiration prevailed in society for everything that bore the seal of "the West", when it was easy to arouse people's fear of ill health (Kotrč 1999). Both seemingly unrelated topics were key in Herbalife's advertising strategies for its operations in Slovakia. In this specific case we can see that understanding the impact of ideology on the values system of a society and the effect of the values system on marketing must not be underestimated.

The fundamental cultural, spiritual, economic or legislative changes that took place in former communist countries, as well as current events, people's actions, changes in their behavior and attitudes, are currently forming a diverse, dynamic and extremely interesting social reality. After 1989, we see change, especially in the political sphere. These changes were brought about by the democratization of society, which was linked to the building of civil society. The fall of communist totalitarianism also clearly changed the economic conditions of the population, caused by the growth of private property, the possibility of private enterprise and, at the beginning of the new millennium, the openness of markets (European Union) and world economies (globalization). The alternative religions understood the new situation correctly, and have adapted to the current needs of humanity in all circumstances (Orbanová 2010).

In this paper, we focused on the analysis of online forms of reaching customers in the context of the client cult entitled Herbalife. We studied the contents of 360 texts on the official Herbalife websites, and we identified eight forms of reaching customers.

We found that Herbalife presents its products and activities (1) through a whole network of sites that promote healthy nutrition and the benefits of client participation in the so-called nutrition clubs; (2) through newsletters with information on news and nutrition products; (3) within sharing sales incentives from so-called motivational emails; (4) through presentation of Herbalife's activities on the internet as well as through press releases; (5) through a presentation of the latest products and successes of the company in a local and global context; (6) through advertising campaign, which run through many private sites of the resellers; (7) through internet advertising such as presentations, advertisements and eye-catching photographs; (8) through the public relation activities of the very first digital technology leader.

References:

- Bunčák, J. 2003. "Zmeny v hodnotovom systéme obyvateľov Slovenska po roku 1989." [Changes in Value System of Slovak Citizens after 1989]. In: *Kresťanská spiritualita v prostredí rastúceho materializmu* [Christian spirituality in an environment of growing materialism], edited by O. Prostredník, 9-18, Bratislava: Ekumenická rada cirkví.
- Burton, G. and J. Jiráček. 2008. *Úvod do studia médií*. Brno: Barrister & Principal.
- Cordero, G. 2017. "Three Decades of Religious Vote in Europe." *World Political Science* 13, no. 1, 77-98.
- Enroth, R. 1995. *Průvodce sektami a novými náboženstvími*. Praha: Návrat domů.
- Greeley A. 1994. "A religious revival in Russia?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33, no. 4:253-72.
- Herbalife Newsletter. 2019. Retrieved from http://herbalifetoday.com/insert_download/Aspire_CZ-cs_170.pdf
- Herbalife Nutrition. 2021. *Press Releases: Herbalife Nutrition appoints its first chief digital officer as it advances digital transformation*. Retrieved from <https://ir.herbalife.com/news-releases/news-release-details/herbalife-nutrition-appoints-its-first-chief-digital-officer-it>
- Herbalife. *Consolidated Statements of Operations*. Retrieved from <http://ir.herbalife.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=560088>
- Hrabal, F. 1998. *Lexikon náboženských hnutí, sekt a duchovních společností* [Lexicon of religious movements, sects and spiritual societies]. Bratislava: CAD PRESS.
- Iliaš, P. 2004. "V moci kultu." [In the power of cult]. *Rozmer: časopis pre kresťanskú duchovnú orientáciu*, 1, no. 1.
- Kotrč, J. 1999. *Herbalife - klamlivá vidina mamony*. Retrieved from <http://www.sekty.sk/sk/articles/show/716>

Macháčková, L. and M. Dojčár. 2002. *Duchovná scéna na Slovensku II. [Spiritual scene in Slovakia II.]*. Bratislava: Ústav pre vzťahy štátu a cirkvi.

Marrs, T. 1990. *New Age cults and religions*. Texas: Living Truth Pub.

Matúš, J. 2008. Médiá a public relations [Media and public relations]. In: *Médiá, spoločnosť, mediálna fikcia [Media, society, media fiction]*, edited by S. Magál, M. Mistrík and M. Solík. Trnava: Fakulta masmediálnej komunikácie, UCM.

Need, A. and G. Evans. 2001. "Analysing patterns of religious participation in post-communist Eastern Europe." *British Journal of Sociology* 52, no. 2, 229-248.

Orbanová, E. 2010. *Náboženský synkretizmus v hnutí new age [Religious syncretism in the new age movement]*. Trnava: Filozofická fakulta Trnavskej univerzity v Trnave.

Solomon, M. R. 2006. *Marketing: očima světových marketing manažerů [Marketing: through the eyes of global marketing managers]*. Brno: Computer Press.

TASR. 2001. *Na Slovensku pôsobí pravdepodobne až do 40 rôznych náboženských siekt a kultov [There are probably up to 40 different religious sects and cults in Slovakia]*. Retrieved from <http://www.sme.sk/c/11596/na-slovensku-posobi-pravdepodobne-az-do-40-roznych-nabozenskych-siekt-a-kultov.html>

Tattersall, I. 2000. *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tižík, M. 2006. *K sociológii novej religiozity [On the sociology of the new religiosity]*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského.

Tižík, M. 2019. "Vplyv právnej regulácie na rozvoj náboženského života v SR." [The influence of legal regulation on the development of religious life in the Slovak Republic]. *Sociology* 37, no. 1, 59-89.

Václavík, D. 2007 *Sociologie nových náboženských hnutí [Sociology of new religious movements]*. Brno, Praha: Masarykova univerzita.

Vojtíšek, Z. 1998. *Netradiční náboženství u nás [Non-traditional religion in our country]*. Praha: Dingir.

Volko, L. 2015. *Sociologické aspekty mediálnej kultúry [Sociological aspects of media culture]*. Trnava: Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave.

White, S. and I. Mc Allister. 2000. "Orthodoxy and political behaviour in Post-communist Russia." *Review of Religious Research* 41, no. 3: 359-372.