

LEVERAGING DIGITAL PLATFORMS FOR GLOBAL PUBLIC SECTOR MARKETING

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Abstract

In the rapidly changing landscape of international marketing and public sector management, the integration of effective marketing strategies becomes vital for public organisations to navigate the international stage successfully. The paper explores the symbiotic relationship between both domains with emphasis on the importance of utilizing digital platforms to enhance global outreach and stakeholder engagement. The use of digital platforms in international public sector marketing offers a cost-effective solution to reach a diverse international public and enable precise audience targeting. Examples of successful international marketing campaigns driven by digital platforms demonstrate their immense potential. However, challenges such as trust building, legal considerations, and measuring impact must also be addressed.

Key words: international marketing, public sector management, digital platforms, audience engagement, trust

JEL: M31, M38, H83

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of international marketing and public sector management, organisations face multiple challenges and opportunities. As globalisation continues to shape the way countries, governments, and public sector entities engage with the world, the integration of effective marketing strategies becomes essential to successfully navigate the international stage.

At the core of this evolving paradigm lies the intersection of international marketing and public sector management. Public sector organisations increasingly recognise the importance of adopting marketing principles and strategies to promote their missions, initiatives, and services to a global audience. Simultaneously, the dynamic nature of the international marketplace demands a comprehensive understanding of public sector management to ensure the effective delivery of public goods and services in diverse cultural and economic contexts.

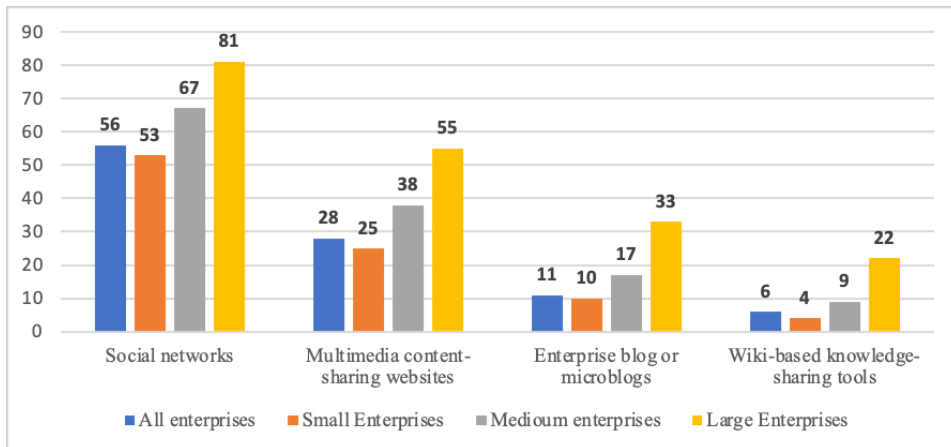
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In the present paper, the analysis is focused on how to take advantage of the power of digital platforms in public sector organisations. It explores the potential ways through which public sector entities could capitalise on marketing principles and online strategies to enhance their global outreach and foster effective engagement with stakeholders on an international scale. The distinct challenges confronted by public sector managers in this context are also examined, related with trust and credibility, legal requirements, and results measurement and evaluation.

The primary aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the basic principles and specific practises related to the use of digital platforms for international marketing initiatives undertaken by public sector organisations. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these individual marketing efforts play a significant role in the broader context of nation branding strategies. By engaging in international marketing campaigns, public sector organizations contribute to the overall perception and portrayal of their respective nations on the global stage. The successful execution of targeted marketing initiatives could positively influence how a country is perceived by international audiences, thus enhancing its standing in the international community, and fostering a favourable national image.

1. The importance of digital platforms in international public sector marketing

In the digital age, the role and impact of digital platforms in international public sector marketing are characterised by both challenges and transformative possibilities. These platforms, which include a diverse range of online channels such as social media platforms, websites, mobile applications, and digital advertising networks, have long been acknowledged for their effectiveness in the business world. No matter the size, all enterprises have, to some degree, developed their online presence and established communication channels with their clients to engage and interact effectively in the digital landscape (Fig.1). Digital platforms have become the go-to source of information for individuals worldwide - according to a study by Kepios (Kemp, 2023), the active social media users are 4.76 billion people as of January 2023. This widespread connectivity provides public sector organisations with an unprecedented opportunity to reach diverse international audiences, regardless of geographical boundaries or time zones. Transforming private sector best practices and aligning them with public sector interests could lead to enhanced collaboration and mutual benefits and have the potential to revolutionise the way public sector organizations communicate, engage, and promote their missions to a global audience.



Source: Eurostat, 2022

Figure 1: Enterprises using social media, by type of social media used and size class, EU, 2021 (% of enterprises)

Public sector organisations benefit from several advantages when leveraging digital platforms for international marketing. First, these platforms offer a cost-effective solution to reach global audiences. Compared to traditional marketing channels, such as print media or television advertising, digital platforms provide greater reach at a significantly lower cost. For example, the cost of reaching 2000 people via digital marketing approaches (search and social networking) is estimated at 125 USD, in comparison with traditional methods (broadcast, newspaper, magazines, direct mail) that may add up to 1800 USD (Owen, 2021). This cost-effectiveness is particularly important for public sector entities that often operate within tight budgets and limited resources.

Second, digital platforms allow public sector organisations to target specific audiences with precision. Through data analytics and user insights, organisations could identify and understand their target markets, tailoring their messaging and campaigns to resonate with the public. For example, VisitScotland, the national tourism organisation of Scotland, utilized a mix of activity from social media, local radio, and digital advertising to ensure wide popularisation of the campaign ‘Keep Scotland Unspoiled’. Phase 1 of the campaign achieved 4.6 million impressions on TikTok and 9.1 million impressions on Facebook and Instagram. Additionally, radio ads reached over 19 million people, and more exposure was gained through prominent news outlets, totalling 1.5 million people (VisitScotland, 2022).

Digital platforms could also enable public sector organizations to engage in two-way, real-time communication with their international stakeholders. For example, the European Space Agency used social media, participatory

engagement, and storytelling techniques to reach the hearts and minds of a global audience for the Rosetta and Philae mission. The mission received major global publicity unseen before for a space mission in recent times, with the comet-landing event generating over 804,000 tweets and 4.3 billion timeline deliveries with over 339,000 contributors and 910 million reaches between. The mission was tweeted by space agencies, astronauts, politicians, senior figures, and celebrities, and live Twitter conversations between Rosetta and Philae provided a link to the real world, allowing the public to feel close to the adventure lived out by the two spacecrafts (Marcu & Laird, 2015).

At present, there are already numerous examples of international marketing campaigns driven by digital platforms, and various public sector organisations have demonstrated their power in driving successful international marketing initiatives. One notable example is Tourism Australia's 'Best Jobs in the World' campaign, launched in 2013. Using digital platforms, Tourism Australia invited people around the world to apply for the 'best jobs' in Australia, such as a 'NSW's Chief Funster' or a 'South Australia Wildlife Caretaker'. Through social media platforms, online videos, and targeted digital advertising, the campaign generated massive global interest, receiving applications from 330,000 individuals from 196 countries (Tourism Australia, n.d.).

Another compelling example is 'The Swedish Number' campaign. To promote tourism and foster cultural exchange, the Swedish Tourist Association launched a unique initiative that allowed people from all over the world to connect with random Swedish citizens via a dedicated phone number. This campaign gained widespread media attention and attracted participants from over 190 countries with a total call duration of 367 days, resulting in positive international exposure for Sweden and increased tourism interest (Swedish Tourist Association, n.d.).

Digital platforms play a key role in international public sector marketing. They offer public sector organisations unique advantages, such as cost-effectiveness, precise audience targeting, and real-time engagement. Successful international marketing campaigns driven by digital platforms demonstrate their immense potential in reaching global audiences and achieving the desired results. Public sector organisations could learn from these examples and capitalise on the opportunities presented by digital platforms to promote their missions, attract visitors, and engage with stakeholders on a global scale.

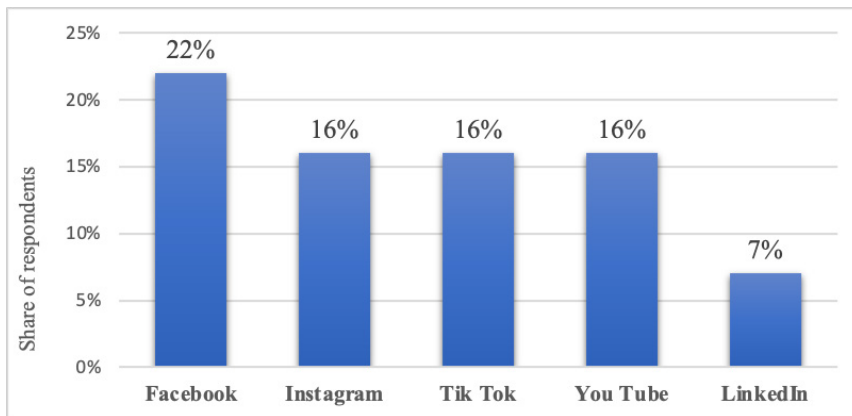
2. Strategies for effective use of digital platforms in public sector marketing

To maximise the impact of digital platforms on international public sector marketing, it is essential for organisations to develop a comprehensive digital marketing strategy that aligns with their organisational objectives. It should outline the specific goals, target audiences, messaging, and metrics for success.

It could include anything from developing a website and utilising social media to generating internet advertising and email marketing campaigns (The Public, 2022).

As in the private sector, a successful digital marketing strategy in the public sector begins with an in-depth understanding of the organisation's target audience segments. Conducting market research, analysing user demographics, and utilizing tools such as social listening could provide valuable insights into the preferences, needs, and behaviours of international audiences. Demographic analysis could reveal details such as age groups, geographical locations, income levels, and cultural inclinations of the targeted segments. Social listening, a powerful tool in this context, enables public sector managers to monitor and analyze online conversations, opinions, and trends related to their domain. This reveals not only what audiences are saying about the services but also their sentiments and expectations. For instance, if social listening indicates that a substantial portion of potential tourists is discussing sustainable travel practices, this insight could initiate the development of campaigns centered around eco-friendly initiatives. Provided with this knowledge, public sector managers could tailor their digital marketing campaigns to resonate with specific segments and deliver relevant and compelling messages.

The next step is to explore and identify effective strategies that would leverage social media platforms for targeted international promotion and engagement (Fig.2). These platforms have already proven as powerful channels for such initiatives, and for public sector organisations, it is essential to identify those that are popular among the target audience and align with the organisation's goals. They could share engaging content, such as informative videos, captivating visuals, and compelling stories, to promote their missions, initiatives, and destinations. They could also use the interactive features of social media platforms, such as live streaming, polls, and contests, to actively engage with international audiences and seek their participation. For example, Tourism New Zealand's strategic collaboration with partners such as Air New Zealand, Flight Centre, and Instagram was designed to promote the winter holiday campaign aimed at attracting Australian skiers. This marks the first time Tourism New Zealand has partnered with Instagram, using paid imagery and video content to engage a younger audience and showcase the beauty of New Zealand. The campaign aligns with the organisation's digital-first approach, which allows them to target specific groups effectively, while digital media cost benchmarks and engagement metrics are used to assess campaign success (Venuto, 2015).



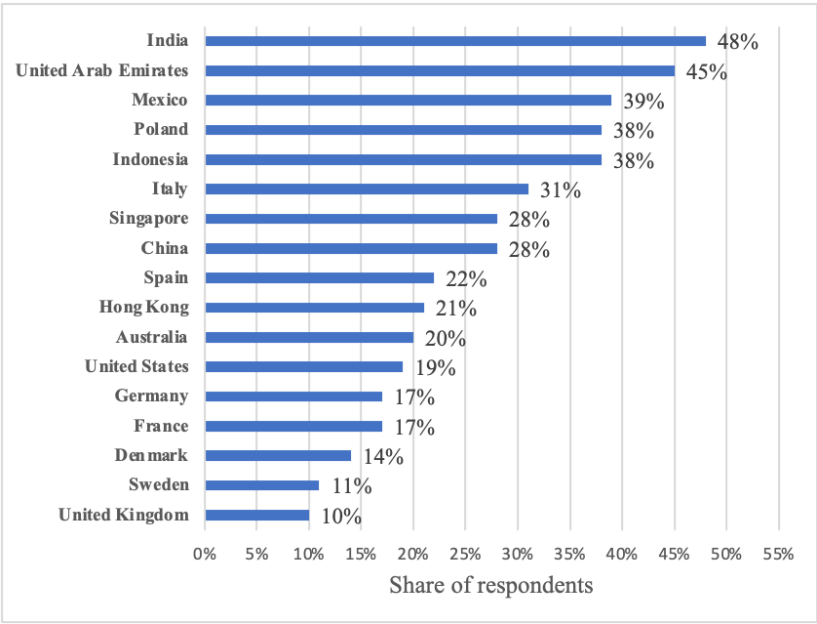
Source: Statista, 2023a

Figure 2: Social media platforms with the largest ROI according to marketers worldwide as of October 2022

Finally, the public organisations should learn how to harness the power of data analytics and user insights to optimise their marketing campaigns. Through such data-driven approach, they could gain a deeper understanding of user behaviour, preferences, and engagement patterns, enabling them to refine their strategies and deliver targeted content. A prevalent and user-friendly set of tools encompasses Google Analytics, built-in social media analytics, and website tracking mechanisms. They offer access to various quantitative and qualitative data such as information about website traffic, audience demographics, engagement rates, and conversion metrics. By analysing it, public organizations could identify trends, preferences, and areas for improvement that would allow them to refine their marketing strategies and enhance their digital campaigns. User feedback and sentiment analysis from social media platforms and online reviews could also provide qualitative insights into audience perceptions and preferences. Public sector organisations could utilize this feedback to understand their target audience's needs, concerns, and expectations, and tailor their messaging accordingly. For example, in response to the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Singapore's tourism sector, the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has initiated a range of digital initiatives to help businesses and position them for recovery. STB's efforts focus on leveraging digital transformation and enhancing workforce skills. To facilitate digital transformation, the Tourism Transformation Index has been introduced as a self-diagnostic tool for businesses to evaluate their digital readiness. Moreover, the STB has established ThreeHouse, an innovation space for collaborative idea testing. Singapore Tourism Analytics Network (STAN) offers industry stakeholders access to updated tourism statistics to make informed decision-making. Additionally, online training resources are provided, in collaboration with key digital players like Facebook, Google, and LinkedIn, to enhance workforce skills and adaptability within the tourism industry (Sagar, 2020).

3. Challenges in international digital-based public sector marketing

When engaging in digital marketing, one of the most significant challenges an organization, both public and private, faces is related to trust (Fig.3). Clients should feel that the information they access is provided by a credible source. To foster trust among international audiences, public sector organisations should alike private ones prioritise transparency and authentic communication. Transparency involves openly sharing information about the organisation, its policies, initiatives, and activities (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). By being transparent, public-sector organisations could build credibility, establish themselves as reliable sources of information, and engage international audiences in meaningful ways. Authentic communication is equally important, as it establishes a connection with audiences, generates trust, and encourages participation and participation. Public sector organisations should adopt a genuine and client-centric approach in their digital marketing efforts, conveying their values, purpose, and impact. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) effectively utilises transparency and authentic communication in its digital marketing efforts. Through its website and social media channels, WHO shares timely and accurate information about global health issues, outbreaks, and public health guidelines. The organisation’s commitment to transparency and authenticity has helped to establish it as a trusted source of information worldwide (WHO, 2017).



Source: Statista, 2023b

Figure 3: Trust in social media advertising to consumers in selected countries worldwide as of January 2021

One key option according to Duran (2021) is branding for public-sector agencies that enables them to build trust and establish a good reputation, especially in times of crisis and the digital age where misinformation is prevalent. Three key ways are proposed for public sector organizations to incorporate branding into their communication strategies: building trust, being consistent, and owning the brand's authoritative voice. Building a recognisable and trustworthy brand helps the public identify and trust the agency as a reliable source of information. Consistency in branding, including logos, colours, and tone of voice, fosters public loyalty and recognition. Public-sector agencies could further use their authoritative voice to define how they want to be perceived and align their brand with the services they provide.

Additionally, public sector organisations engaging in international digital marketing face various legal and regulatory considerations that must be navigated to ensure compliance and mitigate risks. These considerations may include data protection and privacy regulations, intellectual property rights, advertising standards, and cross-border data transfer regulations. To overcome these challenges, organisations should conduct thorough research to understand the legal and regulatory landscape of their target markets. Collaborating with legal experts specialising in international digital marketing could provide valuable guidance and ensure compliance with relevant laws and regulations. For example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) introduced by the European Union imposes strict rules on the collection, storage, and processing of personal data. Public sector organisations targeting European audiences need to ensure compliance with GDPR requirements, such as obtaining explicit consent for data collection and implementing robust data protection measures (Regulation (EU) 2016/679).

There is also the question of measuring and evaluating the impact of digital marketing efforts for public sector organisations to assess the effectiveness of their strategies and optimise their campaigns. By implementing robust measurement and evaluation processes, organisations could gain insights into audience engagement, campaign reach, conversions, and return on investment (ROI). To measure the impact of digital marketing, organizations should establish clear key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with their objectives. These KPIs may include website traffic, social media engagement, content downloads, lead generation, or conversion rates. Using web analytics tools, social media analytics, and campaign tracking, organisations can track and analyse relevant metrics to measure the success of their digital marketing initiatives. Public sector organisations should also conduct regular evaluations to understand the broader impact of their digital marketing efforts. Surveys, feedback mechanisms, and sentiment analysis could provide information on audience perceptions, satisfaction, and behaviour, allowing organizations to refine their strategies and improve audience engagement. For example, the content marketing has also gained recognition for its potential to effectively engage citizens and there are various metrics that monitor the audience engagement (Granicus, n.d.). Websites could track metrics like traffic and pageviews to assess

user engagement. Email newsletters offer valuable insights through metrics such as click rate, engagement rate, and open rate, with benchmarks aiding comparison. Infographics, shared on social media, could be measured by likes and retweets. Video content's success is determined by play rate and accessibility, considering factors like subtitles for silent watching.

Conclusion

Operating successfully in the international marketing and public sector management landscape presents numerous challenges and opportunities for organizations. As globalization continues to shape how countries and public sector entities interact with the world, effective marketing strategies become essential to navigate the international stage. The integration of marketing principles and strategies by public sector organizations is increasingly recognized as crucial to promoting their missions and services to the global audience. Leveraging the power of digital platforms in international public sector marketing is a key aspect of this evolution, offering cost-effectiveness, precise audience targeting, and real-time engagement. Successful international marketing campaigns driven by digital platforms demonstrate their immense potential in reaching global audiences and achieving desired outcomes. However, there are challenges to be overcome, such as building trust, ensuring legal compliance, and measuring the impact of digital marketing efforts. Public sector organizations must prioritize transparency, authentic communication, and consistency in branding to establish themselves as reliable sources of information and engage international audiences effectively. By adopting comprehensive digital marketing strategies, conducting market research, and leveraging data analytics, public sector organizations can enhance their global outreach and foster meaningful engagement with stakeholders on an international scale, thus contributing to a positive and impactful nation brand.

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