
PROMOTION ON THE INTERNET AS A FUNCTION OF AGRIBUSINESS DEVELOPMENT IN CENTRAL SERBIA

Dejan Dašić¹, Milijanka Ratković², Anđela Marčetić³, Miloš Tošić⁴

*Corresponding author E-mail: drddasic@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The advancement of information technologies during the past several decades has excelled, especially those that are applicable to all aspects of human activity. The aim of this paper is to determine the views of agricultural product producers in Central Serbia on e-business, with a focus on determining the perception of the promotional potential of the Internet itself. As social media networks, play an increasing role in e-business globally, the intention is to emphasize the importance of their use in order to promote various agricultural and food products. The survey included a final sample of 92 respondents. The basic hypothesis in this paper is that the Internet as an e-business technology has great potential for improving the position of farmers and producers, but also that it is not used in its full potential. The results confirm the aforementioned hypothesis, while the conclusions are directed towards the necessity of education in order of getting to know the benefits of e-business, as well as the advantages of promotion via social networks.

Introduction

This research was conducted in order to examine the connection between some of the leading topics in agribusiness, namely how many farmers in Central Serbia use the Internet in their everyday business, what attitude they take towards promotional

- 1 Dejan Dašić, PhD Full Professor, University „UNION – Nikola Tesla“, Faculty of Law, Security and Management; Faculty of Sport, Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381606626922, E-mail: drddasic@gmail.com, ORCID ID (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8245-1117>)
- 2 Milijanka Ratković, PhD Full Professor, University „UNION – Nikola Tesla“, Faculty of Sport, Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381606106005, E-mail: milijanka.ratkovic@fzs.edu.rs, ORCID ID(<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7946-354X>)
- 3 Anđela Marčetić, associate in Higher Education, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Agriculture, Belgrade – Zemun, Serbia, Phone: +381643770019, E-mail: andjela.marcetic@agrif.bg.ac.rs, ORCID ID (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5133-4623>)
- 4 Miloš Tošić, PhD, Senior lecturer, College of Vocational Studies “Milutin Milanković” Belgrade, Serbia, Phone: +381692713536, E-mail: to.milos@yahoo.com, ORCID ID (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9989-7115>)

activities on social networks, and which (if any) of the social networks they use for advertising and selling their goods. E-business is an area that includes all of the aforementioned segments, but also many other aspects of business in today's market, however, the focus of this research is on general attitudes within e-business, as well as on determining the perception of social networks for promotional purposes, i.e. discovering preferences in relation to their choices. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to determine the views of farmers on promotion via social networks, as well as opinions on the advantages of e-business. The research is based on the perceived advantages of e-business is limited to the general opinion about this way of organizing business activities, without entering into questions related to the perception of specific techniques of business improvement using Internet technologies and excluding farmers' attitudes on promotion on social networks. This is also a limitation of the research, that shall be explained in the second part of the conclusion.

The Internet has proven its capabilities to many individuals and organizations in the promotion of their products, but also in other business segments (Grubić, et al., 2013). Among other things, the goals of the Internet in any business are to expand the business to the goal of reaching the largest number of customers currently possible and find the best distribution channels (Dašić, Jeličić, 2016). Putting the Internet into the function of e-business implies exactly the aforementioned. Promotion, that is, presentation of the offer of the goods in a way that will attract customers (Tasić, Đokić, 2022; Prdić & Kostić, 2022) is directly related to this. The field that deals with this topic, Internet marketing and promotion, is the segment of e-business, that has social networks as a key tool. Internet marketing, as well as promotion on the Internet, which is a part of it, is a relatively new concept in the agribusiness sector and to farmers, when it comes to the use of modern digital technologies in order to create marketing strategies for promotion and selling of their goods. The goal of using the Internet in this market is to make the process of promotion, sale, distribution and purchase of agricultural products easier and more efficient. Using modern technologies, agricultural producers can quickly expand their customer base, reach a wider audience and strengthen their competitive advantage in a short period of time. Promotion via Internet plays a major role in this, as it includes the potential of social networks, and in a broader sense, relevant Internet and mobile technologies as well as other technological approaches in customer relationship management processes (Ratković et al., 2013). This paper will discuss "Internet marketing" through its key segment, which is promotion via social networks, in the context of the market of food and agricultural products in Central Serbia.

Serbia has all the natural, cultural and social preconditions for healthy food development and production, such as various biodiversity, noticeable agricultural resources, a large percentage of active agricultural origin, traditional farming methods, limited use of chemicals, etc. (Dašić et al., 2020). The reasons why this potential has not yet been used to this day may be found in the inadequate and insufficient Internet promotion of domestic agricultural products (Dašić, et al., 2022). In other words, although the

characteristics of agricultural products largely determine the choice and application of key marketing instruments, promotion is a segment that can always be realized via Internet, if the target audience is on this channel. The key goal of Internet promotion is to represent brands, create preferences and increase sales (Bojkić, et al., 2016).

Social networks have taken the central role in modern society during the last two decades. They are part of the basic communication, entertainment and various other online activities (the Covid-19 era has enhanced this even more), and as such, have become an integral part of marketing strategies for companies (Dašić, et al., 2021). Social networks provide effective ways of quickly and cheaply reaching a large number of potential customers, which makes them an attractive choice for the promotion and sale of agricultural goods. While the Covid-19 pandemic was ongoing, the possibility of ordering products via the Internet and social networks became even more attractive, which directly implies the importance of their integration into marketing strategies, and as part of the overall e-business.

Literature review

By adequate strategic planning, agriculture in Serbia can give a significant contribution to the economic development of the country. Agriculture encourages employment, takes a significant part in foreign trade, provides a food security of citizens, contributes to rural development (Leković et al., 2020) and ecological balance.

In the study performed by Kocan and associates (2017), the factors that have a great impact on (un)successful business of agricultural households in Serbia were analyzed. The authors stress that application of prevention measures is of a particular importance in order to protect the crops from negative effects of climate changes. In addition to the above-mentioned, it is required to provide small and medium agricultural households a greater availability of knowledge, technique and technology and funding.

In a context of contemporary social changes some authors (Ćirić et al., 2018) state that there is a connection between innovativeness of a farmer and their acceptance of the Internet and social media. The authors mentioned state that if the farmers are more open for new ideas and they try out new products, services and technologies, then they shall have less resistance to changes of habits and thus their usage of Internet and social media is higher. The results of the study mentioned (Ćirić et al., 2018; Pantić et al., 2022) show that farmers are mainly interested in Facebook and YouTube, and their intensified usage is expected. Instagram and Twitter are the networks that still aren't widely accepted among farmers and they are used by those farmers with the highest innovativeness level and desire to try out new things.

In a similar survey in conducted Croatia (Cerjak, Tomić, 2014; Sofronijević & Kocić, 2022) the results have shown that only 18.3% of surveyed businesses sell their own products over the Internet. According to respondents, the main reason for not using Internet sales is the lack of interest of customers for this way of shopping. The share of web sales in total sales, among 65.4% of business entities that offer the possibility

of selling products via the Internet, is only 15%. Among business entities that offer the possibility of selling products via the Internet, 69.2% of them offer the possibility of Internet banking. The research results show that the surveyed business entities are aware of the advantages and necessity of Internet business, as well as the use of e-marketing, and therefore should use this way of business more, in practice. The main limitation, according to the respondents, is the ignorance of business partners, which creates a need for education of subjects within the agricultural sector and related activities, as well as consumers, on the topic of the possibilities and advantages of e-business. One third of India's population is directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture, making it an agricultural country. Having more than 30.02% contribution in the GDP, agriculture plays a significant role in the Indian economy. In the last two decades, all industries have gone digital. Following the same way in marketing, organizations have started selling their goods on e-commerce platforms. Promotional activities have began developing on social networks, such as e-mail, website, messages etc. Realizing the convenience, effectiveness and efficiency of digitization, the Indian government has promoted the use of technology in the organizational function, although it seems somewhat inconvenient to use these types of technologies in unorganized sectors like agriculture (Shrikant, et al., 2017).

The potential of using the Internet in agribusiness is very great (Tsekouropoulos, et al, 2011), however there are still many problems regarding it. Numerous studies (White, et al., 2014; Alavion et al., 2017; Bhalchandra Balkrishna & Deshmukh, 2017) have confirmed that the adoption of e-marketing and Internet technologies in agriculture is a necessity for local farmers, because in this way information regarding agricultural products can be available to a very large number of potential buyers and without a direct role in buying and selling. In all mentioned studies, it is recommended to accelerate the adoption of Internet marketing, and that its advantage and potential for the users should be demonstrated. Finally, in order to speed up the adoption of Internet promotion, users should be educated on the subject of familiarization with ways of integrating different platforms such as video presentations and workshops.

In Serbia, it is planned to introduce the "eAgrar" system by the end of 2023. The website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management, states that the introduction of this information system will enable agricultural farms to function more simply in terms of registration, submission of requests for approval of current incentives, faster payment, etc. It is expected that farmers will get significantly closer to e-business in the part of business they have with the state system, as well as funds through which they can secure significant financial resources that they can use and apply for through this information-administrative system. It may be assumed that, by becoming familiar with the mentioned benefits, farmers will be more ready to accept other segments of e-business. According to data from 2019, the share of agricultural production in Serbia's GDP is 4 times higher than in other European Union countries, which is 6-7%. However, it is assumed that this is due to insufficient development of other production activities. In Table 1, we see data on agricultural holdings in the Pomoravlje and Šumadija districts.

Table 1. Data on agricultural farms in the Šumadija and Pomoravlje regions

Region1	Number of farms	Used agricultural land (ha)	Arable land and gardens (ha)	Orchards (ha)	Vineyards (ha)	Meadows and pastures (ha)
Šumadija region	26.941	111.974	75.165	9.971	772	23.682
Pomoravlje region	24.990	92.223	70.883	3.914	1.217	14.970
Total	51.931	204.197	146.048	13.885	1.989	38.652

Source: RZS, 2019

In one study (Ristić, Obradović, 2017), in the total number of agricultural farms in the Pomoravlje region (24,990), the share of family farms is dominant (24,887), as well as in the Šumadija region, where out of a total of 26,941 agricultural farms, 26,838 are family farms, and 26,838, whereas legal persons and entrepreneurs are only 103 each in both areas, with 300 employees each in 2012. When it comes to the level of training of farmers, agricultural experience gained through practice dominates, with most often completed secondary school that is not in the field of agriculture. Other profitable activities, apart from agriculture, are engaged in by about 12% of agricultural farms in the Šumadija region and 7% of farms in the Pomoravlje region, mostly processing agricultural products.

Method

The framework of this research is determined by the terms e-business, Internet promotion and social networks. An important segment of Internet promotion today is social networks, while the Internet promotion itself is an important part of e-business. These key terms are placed in the above-mentioned relationship solely to illustrate their importance, while the ultimate focus of the research is on determining the perception of promotion through social networks and the general attitude of agricultural producers from Central Serbia on the topic of e-business.

The purpose of this paper is to determine the attitudes of agricultural producers from Central Serbia towards e-business, as well as to determine their perception towards the use of social networks in the promotion of agricultural products, and the space for business improvement through this segment of Internet marketing. The main goal of this paper is in accordance with the aforementioned, and refers to presenting the potential of using social networks in the promotion of agricultural products. An additional goal is to present the importance of e-business as a complementary way in relation to the traditional ways of doing business for agricultural producers in Central Serbia.

Based on a sample group of 92 respondents, owners and holders of agricultural farms, we wanted to find out how familiar they are with and how much they use the benefits of Internet promotion via social networks, as well as how much and which social networks they use to promote and sell their agricultural products. Additionally, the focus of the research is on discovering the attitudes of the same respondents about e-business in

general. The research was conducted in the period from October to November of 2022, on the territory of Central Serbia. The sources of data are primary and secondary, while the level of presentation of research conclusions is based on a descriptive analysis. The survey was used to collect primary data, which was sent to 126 email addresses that were obtained with the help of the “Young Farmers of Serbia” association. The positivity of the attitude was measured through five-point Likert rating scales in which the respondents assessed how interested they were in e-promotions through social networks, as well as what attitude they had about e-business.

Bearing in mind the trends in the area of Internet promotion, then the initiative of implementing certain segments of e-business through the „eAgrar“ system on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, but also the advantages of social networks in the context of supporting the promotion and sale of agricultural products during the pandemic, along with the set goals of this research, the following hypotheses have been established:

H1: Agricultural producers in central Serbia do not sufficiently use the capacities of social networks for the purpose of promotion.

H2: Agricultural producers from central Serbia have a positive attitude towards e-business as a way of organizing their business activities.

The Sample

The survey was sent to 126 addresses and the correct form of answers was submitted by 92 respondents, of which 54 respondents were male and 38 were female, i.e. more males 58.7% compared to females 41.3%. All of the respondents are also owners of the land they work on, and when we look at the length of time the farm has been in operation, it is noticeable that a large number answered up to 10 years since its establishment, or 82.6 percent, and only 16 respondents answered that their farm has existed for more than 10 years. years, or 17.4 percent. When it comes to whether work on the farm is done independently or with the help of the family, it is approximately the same, i.e. 41 respondents or 44.6 percent answered independently, and 51 or 55.4 percent answered with the help of the family (Table 2).

Table 2. Presentation of the structure of the sample according to the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents

Sociodemographic characteristics		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	54	58.7
	Famale	38	41.3
Years of farmwork	up to 10 years	76	82.6
	over 10 years	16	17.4
Independently or with family	independently	41	44.6
	with family	51	55.4

Source: Author's research

Results and discussion

Agriculture has been the base of economic development for centuries and is still an integral part of a well-functioning economy. The role of agriculture in GDP is particularly important in developing countries, where it plays a key role in providing food and employment.

Modern agribusiness integrates the application of modern management tools and techniques, advanced technologies, sustainable solutions, and support from the government in the form of incentives and strategic support (Bešić, et al., 2022). In some researches (Lio, Liu, 2006; Maurseth, 2018, Dukić-Mijatović, 2022) the conclusion was reached, that the use of up- dated industrial inputs in agricultural output is dependent on an information and communication infrastructure. There is a statistic regarding the inline of higher economic growth with higher Internet access (Suroso, et al., 2022).

The results from Table 3 show that a large number of respondents, 73 or 77.17 percent, would accept e-business as the only way of doing business, which is confirmed by the answers to the question “does e-business contribute to better business?”. As many as 72 respondents or 78.26 percent answered “agree” or “completely agree” that e-business can contribute to better business. The respondents see the only barrier to the adoption of e-business in the safety and reliability of this way of doing business, as many as 49, while 6 respondents have no opinion on this issue. This would mean that the respondents are not familiar with the elements of e-business integration in terms of security, which implies the need for education on this topic.

Table 3. Presentation of the distribution of respondents' answers to questions in the questionnaire

Questions		Number	Percentage
Would you accept e-business as the only way to do business?	Yes	73	79.3
	No	19	20.07
e-business contributes to better business	I don't agree at all	7	7.61
	I do not agree	3	3.26
	I neither agree nor disagree	10	10.87
	I agree	40	43.48
e-business is safe and reliable	I completely agree	32	34.78
	I don't agree at all	24	26.09
	I do not agree	25	27.17
	I neither agree nor disagree	6	6.52
	I agree	18	19.57
	I completely agree	19	20.65

Source: Author's research

We applied the X^2 test to identify the association between the gender of the respondents and the answer to the question: “Would you accept e-business as the only way of doing business?” $X^2(1, N=92)=11.025, p=0.001$. The data show that men, to a greater extent than women, believe that it is possible to do business only via e-business (Table 4).

Table 4. Would you accept e-business as the only way of doing business

Gender	N	Yes	No	X ²	p
Female	38	37	1		
Male	54	36	18	11.025	.001
Total	92	73	19		

Source: Author's research

Note: N- number of respondents, x2 statistic, p-statistical significance

For the purpose of the research, five different social networks Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, LinkedIn, own website and the answer option "other" were singled out. The intention is to find out which social networks the respondents use and to what extent.

Table 5. Social network you use to promote your products

	Very rarely	Quite rarely	Neither rarely nor often	Quite often	Very often
Facebook	8.8%	9.2%	2.1%	39.13%	52.17%
Twitter	88.04%	10.87%	1.09%	/	/
Instagram	91.30%	5.43%	3.26	/	/
LinkedIn	75%	11.96%	5.95%	/	/
web portals	17%	97.78%	3.26%	6.52%	3.26%
Other	36.96%	51.09%	4.35%	5.42%	2.17%

Source: Author's research

As can be seen in the Table 5, the vast majority of respondents advertise their products on Facebook. Of these, 36 (39.13%) respondents answered "quite often", and even 52.17% answered "very often". Other social networks are used little, and it is noticeable that the use of own web pages is very small. And research in other countries (López-Becerra, et al., 2016; Fernández-Uclés, et al., 2020) confirms the above-mentioned, that the use of web portals should be greater, and in some cases it is insufficiently used.

Internet marketing in agriculture is a great way for farmers to increase their visibility. By using modern technology, farmers can create social media-based Internet promotion strategies to reach a wider audience and strengthen their competitive advantage in a short period of time. For example, in one research (Ilić-Kosanović, et al., 2019), the vast majority of respondents agree that the use of ICTs can be a useful resource for acquiring knowledge about organic production methods. The insufficient use of information technologies and tools is explained by the inadequate network infrastructure of the elderly population, or the lack of education. The conclusion is that internet technology is suitable for small farmers and helps in all activities, interaction, accessibility and fast exchange of data.

Based on the obtained results, it is particularly emphasized that Internet security is an important factor in the adoption of e-commerce. The above data are confirmed by other

researches, e.g. the Government of India attempted to connect farmers across the country through an electronic platform in 2016. It has been observed that lack of participation and awareness among farmers, information literacy, sense of security, as well as lack of advisory services still represent a bottleneck for the implementation of marketing institutions and the adoption of e-marketing in agriculture (Damodar, et al., 2022).

Conclusion

There are various techniques that the agricultural industry can use to promote their products and services through social media. One approach is through sponsored content, where ads are placed next to users' daily activities where they can be easily seen. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are commonly used for sponsored content advertising, as they have large user bases and are designed for shorter content, making them ideal for this purpose.

Similarly, social media can be used to interact directly with customers and potential customers. Through posts and comments, the industry can get instant feedback from those interested in their products and services and quickly answer any questions they may have.

Numerous studies, presented in this paper, confirm that using the website, agricultural producers can inform their customers about their current offer and introduce them to new products. In addition, they can use these websites to create loyalty programs such as discounts for regular customers or special offers for referrals. By running promotions and giveaways, they can get in touch with their customers and generate interest in their products.

Thus, respondents positively evaluate e-business in general, but perceive a certain degree of uncertainty and reliability towards this way of doing business. Also, the data show that men, to a greater extent than women, believe that it is possible to do business only via e-business. Based on other answers, but also the fact that the state imposes certain e-administration systems, as well as overall trends in the acceptance of certain actions via the Internet by the population, it can be assumed that, with the condition that farmers are better informed and educated, e-business will to be much more prevalent than before in Serbia as well. In addition, and with the aim of more successful positioning on the networks and in general in the Internet environment, it is necessary to adapt the methods of promotion to the characteristics of different target groups. Great attention should be paid to the older generations, who are less computer literate than the younger ones.

Based on the results of the research in this paper, it can be said that agricultural producers from Central Serbia recognize social networks as an important way of promotion, but still not all respondents think so, considering that not all of them have personal or business accounts within these networks. In addition, the results show that a small number of agricultural producers from central Serbia have their own website, which can be one of the places to improve future promotion and sales.

Based on the data obtained, the respondents mostly use Facebook in their business, while a very small number of them have and use their own web sites for business, it can be concluded that the hypothesis H1: *Agricultural producers in central Serbia do not sufficiently use the capacities of social networks*, has been confirmed. Also, it can be concluded that hypothesis H2: *Agricultural producers from central Serbia have a positive attitude towards e-business as a way of organizing their business activities*, has been confirmed. The data show that men, to a greater extent than women, believe that it is possible to do business only via e-business.

Limitations and recommendations

In addition to the fact that this research does not cover the segments of e-business, but only the general opinion about it, it is not possible to give guidelines on the direction of education of agricultural producers. In accordance with the mentioned limitations, it is recommended that further research deepen the mentioned topics, and that in accordance with the received answers, the researchers arrive at a more precise situation about the perception of social networks, as well as about e-business.

Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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