

# Online Marketing Strategies Used in the Promotion of Dietary Supplements in Romania



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**Abstract** The sale of dietary supplements in Romania has become increasingly important, competition is high and the online environment is an important channel for communication, promotion and sales. With the growth of online sales of dietary supplements, the increase in the number of users on social media platforms and mobile applications, there has been a significant increase in the number of companies that have chosen to promote their products online. Apart from that, there are other reasons for intensive online promotion: low cost, control and sorting of the target audience, analysis of the results, but also the lack of Romanian regulated legislation controlling online advertising of dietary supplements and especially on social media platforms. In this paper, we aim to identify the online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements by five leading Romanian companies according to a study conducted in 2020 by the publication “Ziarul Financiar”, conducting a content analysis of how these companies promote themselves online and what strategies they use for this purpose. The data obtained from the analysis reveals that the online marketing tactics and strategies adopted are designed to increase the market visibility of dietary supplement companies, and that companies that develop strategies such as affiliate marketing, association with a virtual community or discussion group, etc., stand to gain. This approach and the results obtained can be helpful and relevant to specialists in the field.

**Keywords** Dietary supplements · Promotion · Online marketing strategies · Romania · Content analysis

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## 1 Introduction

In general, health is said to be a priority for most people. Preventing the onset of disease by staying healthy has brought dietary supplements to the forefront. These are “concentrated sources of vitamins, minerals or other substances with a nutritional or physiological effect” [1]. According to the Romanian Association of Non-Prescription Drug Manufacturers, dietary supplements “do not prevent, do not treat but maintain health”. They are indicated for human consumption when the substances they contain are not found or not in sufficient quantity in the daily diet, having a non-traditional or psychological effect [2].

Nutrients are packaged separately or in combination and marketed in the form of capsule heads, tablets, powders, ampoules with liquid and in single, dropper or spray bottles intended for human consumption by mouth in small, measurable quantities [3]. Food supplements are becoming increasingly popular among the Romanian population. If in 2015 Romanians spent €250 million on supplements, surpassing the markets of Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland [4] in 2022, they will have spent €540 million [5] partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred in 2020, as people are more receptive to finding alternative methods of maintaining health (85% of Romanians used food supplements during the pandemic).

Among the most preferred dietary supplements are vitamin C, vitamin D and magnesium. Romanians also consume a very high proportion of supplements for immunity and liver protection. The average monthly amount spent by Romanians on these supplements is 84 Lei (approximately 17 Euro) in 2021, with most Romanians buying supplements from pharmacies and health food shops without a prescription, as they are used to prevent illness and maintain health [6].

In general, the sale of these products is made through pharmacies, supermarkets and also via the internet, which has become more widespread with the outbreak of the pandemic in early 2020, with travel restricted at that time by the authorities. Many retailers have added food supplements to their product portfolios, eMag online shop being one of them, with over 3000 products in this category on offer. The trend is now on the rise, as people are getting used to ordering all kinds of food products online [7].

With the increase in online sales of dietary supplements, the increase in users on social media platforms, mobile apps, we see a significant increase in companies choosing to promote their products online. Among the social media platforms used by organisations to promote natural health products are Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. However, traditional promotion channels such as TV, radio, display of promotional materials in pharmacies, sponsorship of events, projects, etc. are still preferred by manufacturing companies, even if the costs are higher. According to Cătălin Vicol, President of the Romanian Food Supplements Industry Association, Romanian consumers of food supplements are “medium and highly educated” people, ranging in age from “one year to advanced age”, concerned about “the relationship between food and health” [8]. Due to the increasing number of companies producing dietary supplements, competition in the Romanian market is fierce.

According to a study from 2020 [9], Fiterman Pharma, Fares, Dacia Plant, Alevia, Herbagetica, Plant Extrakt, Secom, Himalaya, Sun Wave Pharma and Rotta Natura are among the top producers. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to identify the online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements by five leading Romanian companies, selected from the study mentioned before.

## 2 Literature Review

Porter states that “the Internet can be used by any organization as part of any strategy” [10]. Online marketing or web marketing is the promotion of a brand or business on the internet, increasing website traffic, leads and conversions by using specific tools.

The integration of the internet into business has brought with it important changes in the promotional activities of organisations and the challenges it has produced have been substantial. Digital marketing has enabled companies to expand internationally, to reach other markets and audiences through the various devices that have emerged in the telecommunications sector (phones, tablets, laptops, etc.) [11, p. 81, 12].

Kimiloglu said that this integration can be an evolution of marketing, and the reasons are as clear as can be: “personalization of opportunities, reducing the distance between producers and consumers, convenience, increasing the number of communication channels and facilitating interaction, the volume of information it contains” [13]. A formal definition says that online marketing “refers to the set of activities, institutions and processes by which value is created, communicated and distributed to consumers and other stakeholders via the internet [14, p. 29].

Thanks to huge advances in technology, half of the world’s population is now connected to the internet, which has prompted organisations to advertise not only through radio and TV, but also online, with 2016 being the first year that online advertising spending in the US surpassed traditional advertising, television and radio, and 81% of those who bought goods in physical stores first researched them online before buying, according to the authors [14, p. 28] But perhaps the biggest progress achieved by digital commerce is due to the pandemic of Covid-19 [15].

According to Jones, the organisation’s website is the core of the internet marketing strategy [16, p. 24, 17]. The requirements for a successful website are responsive performance, ease of navigation, compelling content, user-friendly design and of course search engine optimisation [18, p. 299]. The goal of the marketing strategy achieved through the website is to attract users to generate traffic, keep and encourage them to return to the website, stimulate them to create interaction and complete the process by purchasing the product and analyze the data obtained, which measures how users use the website, to make improvements in its design [14, p. 70].

The tactics used to promote products online are search engine optimization (SEO), search engine advertising, online advertising, affiliate marketing, video marketing, social media, email marketing. The model operationalized through a category grid of specific online marketing activities and tools defined by Otilia Platon in 2015 [14, p. 32], is chosen in this paper to achieve the research objective, namely the

identification of online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements by Romanian brands. These strategies are the following: (1) online marketing research, (2) search engine marketing, (3) integrated marketing communication through websites and (4) online advertising, (5) public relations, (6) email marketing, (7) social media marketing, (8) permission marketing, (9) affiliate marketing, (10) viral marketing, (11) customer permission marketing [14, p. 32]. After presenting the general dimensions, the units of analysis are described, as these were defined according to a category/coding grid, while the working technique consisted of frequency analysis.

Online marketing research dimension contains the following elements: online survey platforms (e.g., Google Analytics etc.) checking for the presence of cookies on the website, data mining, visual marketing, use of online panels. Search engine marketing section is carried out on search engines, through search engine optimisation (SEO) tools, through database management systems and using the search function of websites. Integrated marketing communication through websites is achieved through websites using cookies and RSS and Atom syndication services and through online advertising using banners, pop-ups and pop-unders, skyscrapers, flash animations and cookies.

The tools used by public relations activities are websites, social media platforms such as blogs, forums and RSS and Atom syndication services. Another activity used in the online marketing strategy is e-mail marketing. This activity uses e-mail, online multimedia and database management systems. Social media marketing uses social networks, blogs and micro-blogs, podcasts, videocasts, forums, news and discussion groups, wikis, online multimedia, virtual communities, virtual worlds, social bookmarking websites and RSS and Atom syndication services.

Permission marketing uses email, online database management systems, automated response systems and again, RSS and Atom syndication services. Affiliate marketing is an activity that uses as tools: websites, email, search engines, search engine optimisation (SEO) tools, social media platforms, where we find: blogs, forums, newsgroups etc., online multimedia, RSS and Atom syndication services and cookies. Viral marketing uses email, social media platforms (social networks, forums, newsgroups, etc.), online multimedia, virtual communities, word-of-mouth. The last dimension that is part of the online marketing strategy is customer permission marketing, which uses tools such as email, online database management systems, autoresponders and RSS and Atom syndication services [14, pp. 32–33]. Thus, the paper aims to identify online marketing strategies as initially defined by Platon in 2015 [14, p. 32] and applied in the Romanian context to the promotion of dietary supplements of Romanian brands.

### 3 Methodology and Research Approach

The dietary supplement market is very competitive in Romania, so brands need to select the most effective marketing strategies and adapt to trends to attract as many customers as possible while retaining existing ones. Therefore, this paper focuses on the analysis of online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements by five leading Romanian companies, selected from the 2020 study [9]. The research question to achieve this objective is: what are the main online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements?

To answer the research question, we resorted to the model presented previously [14, p. 32], a model that allowed us to carry out a broad analysis of the strategies used in online marketing that the companies selected in the analysis are carrying out.

The research method used is content analysis. This is a powerful method of analysing how companies promote themselves online [19, 20]. According to Ole R. Holsti, content analysis is “a research technique that allows inferences to be made by systematically and objectively identifying specific features within a text” [21, p. 515]. In the following section, we present the main synthesis results obtained by applying content analysis to the analysis grid presented above.

### 4 Results

Since in this paper we set out to identify the online marketing strategies used in the promotion of dietary supplements by five leading Romanian companies, we conducted a content analysis of how the companies Alevia, Fares, Dacia Plant, Fiterman Pharma and Herbagetica promote themselves in the online environment and what strategies they use for this purpose.

The first step in this analysis is online marketing research. According to the analysis, all five companies have online search platforms, cookies, data mining (extracting data using platforms such as Google Analytics) and visual marketing. In contrast, none of the companies use online panels, i.e., they do not select individuals to participate in market research studies, (e.g., focus groups, opinion polls, etc.). The analysis shows that four companies: Alevia, Fares, Herbagetica and Dacia Plant promote themselves through search engines, i.e., they use sponsored content, the only company that does not use this strategy is Fiterman Pharma.

However, all five companies use SEO, a search engine optimization tool, database management systems, and have a website search function to make it easier to find products. Furthermore, all five companies have websites, RSS syndication services through the “Subscribe” button and cookies, through which they develop integrated marketing communication. Also, through the websites, the companies have tools for online advertising in the form of banners, but the only company that has cookies for online advertising is Herbagetica. Public relations are carried out through the websites, by Alevia, Fares and Fiterman Pharma, and via social media, by all five

dietary supplement companies, where they also have subscription services (RSS). In the next category, email marketing, all five companies send email newsletters, have online multimedia materials and database management systems.

According to research, brand promotion in social media significantly influences consumers' purchase decision, as the study was conducted on the popular social media platform, Instagram [22]. Social media marketing is carried out by each of the five firms, and blogs published on social media by the firms Alevia, Fares and Dacia Plant. Also, in this category, all five producers make podcasts and videocasts and own multimedia materials. Fares and Herbagetica are registered on forums, discussion groups and newsgroups, where they promote their products and initiate discussions about health and the applicability of dietary supplements. Herbagetica is the only manufacturer that is part of a virtual community and is on a social bookmarking site.

Permission marketing refers to sending promotional offers to customers only if they agree to receive them. The five companies send newsletter e-mails to customers after they have given their prior consent. The companies also have database management systems in place. The only company with an automatic reply system is Dacia Plant.

In the Affiliate Marketing section, which is the collaboration between an online shop and a platform or person (e.g., the website [www.2performant.com](http://www.2performant.com) or an influencer) promoting products and sending emails incorporating links to the shop, is carried out by companies Fares, Dacia Plant and Herbagetica. Also, in this category, Fares and Dacia Plant carry out affiliate marketing using search engines, use SEO search engine optimisation tools, collaborate on social media platforms, hold online multimedia material, and offer RSS syndication services via the subscribe button.

Viral marketing is a category of marketing that is not part of the five companies' promotional strategy, and the last category under analysis is customer permission marketing, in which all five companies use e-mail newsletters, RSS subscription services and database management systems.

## 5 Discussion

As a result of this research, Fares ranks first and maintains its online notoriety, services

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We can see how online marketing tactics and strategies adopted are designed to increase the market visibility of dietary supplement companies, and that companies that develop strategies such as affiliate marketing, association with a virtual community or discussion group, etc., stand to gain.

## 6 Conclusion

We have approached this topic to provide relevant information to specialists working in the field of online promotion of dietary supplements, the novelty of this paper lies in the research conducted from the perspective of the main actors, dietary supplement manufacturers, namely, how they use online marketing strategies to achieve their goals. We found out which strategies are used by Alevia, Fares, Dacia Plant, Fiterman Pharma and Herbagetica in terms of online marketing and promotion of dietary supplements.

A constant presence in several locations on the internet (e.g., the company's website, social media presence, newsletters, etc.), brings with it, besides brand history, an added notoriety. The content analysis showed that Fares uses 72% of the total online marketing strategies, Dacia Plant uses 67%, Herbagetica 61%, Alevia 54% and Fiterman Pharma 50%. The marketing strategies used to promote products online are nothing more than an adaptation of traditional marketing strategies, to which we add the opportunities created by the online environment, the most important online marketing tool being the company's own website.

In conclusion, we can say that the integration of the Internet into the business environment has brought with it important changes in the way companies promote themselves, and the level of responsibility has increased, as everything is visible on the Internet, the public has the opportunity to express, to send feedback much more quickly, to create content, and the maintenance of a positive image is closely linked to the actions carried out by public relations and marketing departments. The challenges are great, and marketing is forced to constantly evolve, so online promotion strategies should be a priority.

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