

# Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats



The SWOT (i.e. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis of social media as a tool in food risk and benefit communication is based on qualitative interviews conducted, as part of the FoodRisC project, with stakeholders and experts in food risk and benefit communication from six European countries. An overview is given below in the picture above and more detailed information can be found in the following text.

## Strengths

- ✓ Speed was identified as a first strength by stakeholders and experts. Social media is the perfect tool to speed up communication and, for all practical purposes, it speeds up awareness. It is a way to get a message out instantly and it gives the opportunity to communicate in “real-time”.
- ✓ Secondly, interaction was perceived as a strength of social media. It offers interested parties the opportunity of increased involvement in the communication process. There is the possibility to interact with the public and organizations receive instant feedback from consumers.
- ✓ The third strength, peer-to-peer awareness was mentioned which relates to the possibility to see interests of “friends” or “followers”. Consumers became valuable channels themselves to spread a message.
- ✓ A fourth strength according to stakeholders and experts was accessibility. The development of and increased access to the internet is a key driver in the emergence of new media. Social media tools are in many cases easily accessible and require low technological knowledge. And on top of that most popular tools like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are free to use.
- ✓ The technological possibilities of social media were perceived as the fifth strength. Social media tools make it easy to post lots of information and material, including photos and videos online and are a growing field in combination with mobile technologies.

## Weaknesses

- × A first weakness relates to low trust in the (information) source. Sources on social media can be anonymous and unidentifiable which lowers trust in social media as an information source. The participants mention the lack of control on accurate information, on the source and the anonymity of lots of information posted often by lay people. This often creates a gap between facts and perceptions. This low trust in source can be enhanced by the speed of social media. The rapid spread of a false message, e.g. about potential food crisis can have severe consequences. There is no room to check the value, the source or the dependability of a message.
- × The absence of a filter is seen as a second weakness of social media. Everybody (experts, companies, consumers) is able to post information online through social media and can become a source of information. There is no filter with respect to accessing social media and very few barriers to stop people from publishing what comes to mind.
- × Thirdly, continuous investment of human capital and time is needed to stay up to date in the fast evolving world of social media. Pressure on time is perceived negatively by a lot stakeholders and experts.
- × Fourthly, concerns about intellectual property rights, privacy and data protection are regularly raised as disadvantages in relation to social media.
- × Fifthly, a negative image of social media is seen as a weak spot. Social media are linked to advertisement, enjoyment, spread of extreme views, bullying, etc., and may possess a negative image among some population groups. In several cases, lack of familiarity is one the major barriers for not using social media in their organization particularly for food risk and benefit communication; there is a fear for the unknown.

## Opportunities

- 👉 A first identified opportunity is the need to reach specific audiences: More and more situations arise where a targeted, specific audience should be used. Especially in terms of reaching a younger audience, social media can provide opportunities. But the perceived limited demographic audience and the focus on young people is also seen as a limitation.
- 👉 Crisis communication is seen as a second opportunity for communication through social media. A growing number of situations arise where a large audience rapidly needs to receive information.
- 👉 Thirdly, there is a high current societal popularity of communication technologies involving the internet and mobile phones. Several experts and stakeholders saw this growing market as an opportunity to spread their message in, for instance, applications for cell phones and tablets. This is believed to result in high reach.
- 👉 Community feeling is recognised as a fourth opportunity. Consumers with common interests congregate in online communities. The experts and stakeholders were very positive about the opportunity to engage with these communities and share expertise and experiences. The possibility of having a conversation with the public gives the opportunity to identify needs and worries in relation to food.
- 👉 Finally, the experts and stakeholders recognised an opportunity to provide detailed, unbiased and easily accessible information about food based on reliable facts that can be consulted when a need is felt. Social media easily reach large audiences. Traditionally, only mass media organizations were able to reach large amounts of people with information.

## Threats

- 👉 A first threat of social media is the fact that the online world is a fast changing area. Online technologies are continuously evolving and changing with the consequence that the tools of today can be outdated tomorrow. Some participants feared to invest in a domain that might be redundant in a few years.
- 👉 Secondly, the overload of information was identified as a threat. Users are confronted with an overload of information and communication. Information gets lost in the noise. Because of all this existing noise, it's hard to get your message through according to the respondents.
- 👉 Preference for traditional media and channels was discussed as a third threat. Traditional communication channels and media like radio, television and quality newspapers are preferred in allocation of resources to spread a message about food risks and/or benefits.
- 👉 Fourthly, there is a low consumer interest in online information: Audiences choose their interests: People can't be forced to listen or attend, and they won't spread information if it's not interesting enough.
- 👉 As a fifth threat, emotional behaviour can play a role on social media. There is a tendency in society that people say/write what they want and don't think about possible consequences. The low threshold to post an opinion has as a negative effect that consumers react too fast and emotional without thinking about the consequences.