1. Introduction

When you think at a marketing plan you see the whole process spread over a long period of time, months or even years and most for the times big budgets are involved. All this makes sense taking into consideration the big companies with lots of products that are used as examples and the economies at scale. But small companies market themselves as well, even when they do not have a wide variety of products, and most of the times in this companies the marketing planning and the implementation merge together in a very dynamic manner. These dynamic or even chaotic actions an entrepreneur develops at the very beginning of his company are not measured or properly analyzed considering the cost involved. Or at least not until recently, when there is a huge variety of online tools available to measure clients’ behaviour and integrate third party applications in specific areas of a business. This online competitive advantage forced entrepreneurs to think beyond just offering a list of products and services on a website, but to better integrate the offered service in the market and create channels of communications, with the client and also between clients. The capability to measure these activities and also having a successful history in some well known start-ups allowed marketing specialists to recognize this new marketing technique as Growth Hacking.

2. Theoretical Background

The “growth hacker” concept appeared for the first time in 2010 and was used by Sean Ellis in one of his blog posts. He referred to this term as being someone whose only purpose is to grow and each and every action of that individual is motivated by the desire to grow. Later on, Andrew Chen made this term more popular after he define the “growth hacker” as someone who is making everything possible to attract new clients for his or her product or service. Another specialist, who is known for writing for the famous IT related website TechCrunch, explained on a post available on that site that growth hacking implies using all sorts of different pieces of data in the most creative way possible.

According to J. Casanova (2013), growth hacking is the new form of viral marketing - the more engaged users are, the more likely they are to refer friends, family, professional contacts and like minded people to their particular community. For a growth hacker, viral exposure of content is crucial, because he is responsible for driving explosive, exponential growth for a company.

Growth hacking also means stop thinking marketing is something that happens after (Schawbel, 2013). In this context, companies must improve their products based on early feedback and response and
build out features and marketing efforts that retain customers and encourage them to spread and share their comments about the products they bought.

A growth hacker is a rare combination: someone with the right marketing and technical skills who can come up with clever marketing hacks and also track their results (Griffel and Wadowski, 2014).

Taking into consideration tools that are available like Google Trends, where we can measure the volume of search phrase over the internet, we can see when the term growth hacking appeared for the first time and the evolution it had. Even though it was first used in 2010, the most important improvement was two years later, when it witnessed a considerable increase in popularity. As we can see in the Figure no. 1, this concept is becoming more and more popular, unfortunately, not everyone knows many details about what it actually means.

![Figure no. 1 – The evolution of the term “Growth Hacking”](image)

We conclude with the idea that this marketing technique is maturing very fast and it becomes more popular than other marketing terms used today.

To put it as simple as possible, the purpose is to make the most important measurable marketing values increase constantly. Very important and somehow very unique is the fact that a successful growth should involve getting from 0 to millions (or even more) in a couple of years or in as less years as possible for startup businesses.

The new generation of global brands like Facebook, Dropbox and Twitter haven't spent huge budgets on traditional marketing, such as press releases, TV commercials or billboards – they found more profitable to rely on a new strategy - growth hacking - to reach many people despite without spending fortunes on marketing (Holiday, 2013). Growth hacking enables the process of acquiring customers by generating online traffic, as it is the first step in the process of converting the billions of Internet users into paying customers (Fishbein, 2014).

Even though most of us when we hear the term “hacker” we think about someone who is well known for dealing with programs or applications related to the IT domain, we should see this term also like someone who is a visionary, who does not stick to the traditional rules of marketing in order to solve some given problems. At the same time, creativity and being original is mandatory. So, in other words, a growth hacker is someone who, despite the fact of being a very organised and technical specialist, is also a very creative person.

As you can easily understand that is more of an off the record type of definition. Nevertheless, there is also a more official definition for this term. From this technical point of view, "growth hacking" is something that we can call an advertising or marketing technique, in which both creativity and analytical thinking is required. It must be taken into consideration different social aspects in order to sell and to promote a certain type of services or products. Somehow it is an integrating part of the online market domain, especially if we take into consideration the fact that Growth Hackers are very well prepared in providing search engine optimization services, content for advertising campaigns and website analytics.
Their main concern is to offer original alternatives to old school advertising techniques like using newspapers or television commercials. Instead they turn to online social media channels or viral marketing.

3. What Makes Growth Hacking Different From Traditional Marketing

Even though a growth hacker is quite similar with a marketing specialist, there are some very important differences regarding the way that each one takes care of the problems. The most helpful way to understand that will be to compare the small companies with those worldwide known companies.

Figure no. 2 – Growth hacker- a mix between a developer and a marketer
Source: http://www.quora.com/Growth-Hacking/What-is-Growth-Hacking

First issue – Clients
When you have a small company, you probably do not know who your clients are and as a matter of fact you do not know if you actually have a database of clients capable of sustaining your business. On the other hand, when it is about a really big company, these aspects are well known. This is why an entrepreneur should look for solutions in order to engage the clients in activities that allow them to share as much information about them as possible in a database and also refer new clients as well.

Second issue – Expectations
If a big corporation has a 8-15% yearly growth, it is considered successful, a startup should consider to do that monthly or even more in order to catch up. Big targets are hard to achieve and there is the need of a continuous effort and engagement with the client in order to sustain this growth.

Third Issue – Brand
A newly formed company is a "no name". That is why it is very important, first of all, to know how to prove that it is a reliable and professional company. As for huge companies, this is no longer a problem. Everybody has heard of them.

4. Techniques used in Growth hacking

Clients’ Recommendations – A company must be sure that it is capable of offering quality products or services. In this way, the clients will recommend you to other potential customers.

Paying For Advertising – The service or the product can be promoted via SEM service, social media ads, mobile ads, TV, radio ads and any other sorts of ads that you can think of. Also, a very useful strategy would be forming a business partnership with another company which will advertise your product in exchange of a certain cost.

Part Time Jobs – Getting as many potential clients as possible informed about your services is very important. That is why, hiring some part time workers can do the trick. They could send emails to your potential clients and they could also create online pages that would match the online searches for your products or services. Also, having a call center team can be quite useful.

Relevant Content – Use any sort of content from viral videos or news to interactive infographics to attract as many online visitors as possible. Many of them could turn into clients.

Advertising Via E-mail – Everybody has an e-mail address nowadays. The companies are aware that e-mail marketing technique represents an important way to attract new customers.

Growth hacking is considered as being "data driven marketing" (Doherty, 2012), as it’s coming up with new ways to engage the audience, to provide them incentives in order to share relevant content about a brand, as well as to find ways to keep them engaged on the site longer and clicking ads, links to forum posts or Buy Now buttons.

SEO is very important – Also known as Search Engine Optimization, if it is professionally implemented, the improvements will be seen in no time. The thing is that there is a very important
difference between the SEO theory that can be found all over the Internet and the actual service. That is why in this case experienced professionals are needed.

Analytics – If the pieces of data that are available are carefully analyzed, this will definitely lead to a better knowledge of what growth hacking techniques to be further used.

The Growth Hacking Framework designed by Donckers (2013) reveals different inbound and outbound marketing techniques related to growth hacking (Table 1).

Table 1 - Relevant growth hacking techniques through Inbound vs. Outbound Marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketing type</th>
<th>Growth hacking technique</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inbound Marketing</td>
<td>SEO</td>
<td>Generate Traffic</td>
<td>Accurate and unique titles, meta-tags, load times, responsive design etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Blog</td>
<td>Thought leadership and Brand Exposure</td>
<td>Customer Studies, Market Studies, Company Insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Webinar</td>
<td>Generate Traffic</td>
<td>Learning-focused and Marketing-focused Webinars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>Brand Exposure</td>
<td>Newsletters, Referral and Reactivation mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>Generate Traffic and Brand Exposure</td>
<td>Sharing relevant content via social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outbound Marketing</td>
<td>Search Engine Marketing</td>
<td>Generate Traffic</td>
<td>Google Adwords, Bing Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Display Ads</td>
<td>Generate Traffic</td>
<td>Quantcast Ads, Adroll, Premium Publishers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affiliate Programs</td>
<td>Generate Traffic</td>
<td>Content-based, Coupon-based, &amp; Price Comparison Affiliate Websites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://www.donckers.co/startup-marketing-a-guide-to-growth-hacking

5. Growth hacking techniques applied by an “Internet pure player”: Thecon

Some startup companies find it hard to implement traditional marketing techniques considering the limited budget and time they have at their disposal, so they are bootstrapping all the technical resources available. Some young companies such as Thecon would not even exist without using Growth hacking techniques. One of the techniques used by Thecon, in its early days, was guest blogging on specific niche websites with articles and technical tutorials that linked back to the thecon.ro website and other owned domains. This led to numerous relations created with bloggers that have been used in promoting other client’s websites as well.

Initiatives to engage in social media groups increased the referral traffic of the websites and also helped developers better understand the technical issues they were facing on specific projects. Integrating each of the activity Thecon has into social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Linkedin helps the two most important activities that the company needs constant efforts with: human resources and awareness. This keeps a constant flow of fresh posts and allows customers and prospects to understand that the company is on a constant shift to new technologies available.

With the help of social media, the company has also organized a series of events such as OpenHub and Startup Marketing, that allowed students and possible clients, interested in web development and online marketing, to better understand what efforts makes the company in this area. At the last 2 events have attended more than 80 persons that allowed employees to socialize and also get involved in the local IT community, participating to other events and contests as well, winning the third position in a local marketing challenge.

Thecon had a couple of in house competitions as well where the participants were debutant employees and interns from the local university. Putting a solid framework in place for this events was not easy, considering the conditions and the participants have been different every time, but putting more stress on the prizes and the end result we managed to do three competitions so far. Another challenge the company is attending is Google Online Marketing Challenge, this is the first international contest the Thecon’s team is participating to with the help of the Galati University where the prizes are more then $30000 and we are also getting a $250 in Adwords coupons that the firm can use.
One interesting phenomenon that is happening now is creating an interesting relationship with other startups, for example we are using third party software that allows our company to get discounts (being one of the first users) and provide feedback to the owners of the software as well for better integration. This reduces the learning curve, costs and also allows the company to be one of the first users of the technology. Being able to better integrate third party solutions in the work we do is one of the most important asset Thecon has.

The company always looked for free ways to promote its services and itself, since its creation was on a constant struggle to deliver quality software and increase the size of its team. Growth hacking was an important asset in its development and continues to be, but as the number of employees increases, standard marketing practices are required for a more stable development.

Growth Hacking is a new concept and it might take time to mature, it is difficult to create a standalone framework and also to integrate it in a standard marketing plan. But what we know so far is that these practices are measurable, create user awareness and most important are working.

6. Conclusions and future research agenda

This paper itself is an attempt to use growth hacking as a promotion tool so we will let decide the readers if it’s a good content marketing practice or not.

If at the beginning of the project nobody was sure of what the term "growth hacking" even means, at the end of it I am sure that you’ve got the point. Growth hacking is an ambition of developing your business, in such way that it becomes one of the most powerful in the whole world, with fewer financial resources involved. Growth hacking is about the power to promote different, yourself and your business as well, in this changing market place. Due to these rapidly changes, that the market is suffering, each and every entrepreneur should consider to do things better than his competitors.

Growth hacking is definitely a way of thinking and approaching the market with courage of doing something that was not done by everyone before. Every entrepreneur wants to succeed but has every entrepreneur the opportunity and knowledge of doing so? The information needed stands in front of you, you just have to go growth hack something.

Regarding our future research initiatives, we are interested in conducting a quantitative survey, based on the identification of the growth hacking techniques used by Romanian start-ups, as well as the benefits perceived after their implementation. Moreover, the development of a collaborative intelligence research network at the international level, aiming at finding practitioners and academics interested in content marketing and growth hacking approach, will be a priority in our future agenda.

References