

EXPANDED ABSTRACT

The web presence of cooperatives in Catalonia

In 2019, 75% of Spanish SMEs had a website (ONTSI, 2020) and the number of domain names registered worldwide in the first quarter of 2019 alone was 351.8 million (Verisign, 2019). There is no doubt that the Internet has become the electricity of the 21st century. An online presence is imperative for any business that wants to be found.

In this scenario, we cannot forget a factor that has changed the way we access the web: the mobile device. Since 2016 the leading search engine, Google, announced that it would penalize in the search results those web pages that were not optimized for mobile devices, adopting a mobile-first policy. Considering that Google has maintained a market share of close to 90% for a decade, it is essential that web pages must be adapted to mobile devices.

Finally, a third factor to take into account is the relevance of identity on the web (Juliá et al., 2004). In December 2001, the IANA (Internet Assigned Numbers Authority), reported the implementation of the .coop domain to identify those websites belonging to cooperatives. Thus, since 2002 this domain is reserved for those websites belonging to entities constituted as cooperatives.

There are currently 7,919 .coop domains registered worldwide, a very modest figure if we compare them with the 108,000 .cat domains, the nearly 1.9 million .es domains, 10 million .org domains, 13.5 million .net domains or the more than 142 million .com domains registered in 2019.

We have numerous studies carried out periodically on the use of technology and the presence of SMEs on the Internet. However, this monitoring, which allows us to obtain an X-ray of the evolution of the business environment, does not let us know the specific development of the cooperative sector. Do they follow similar patterns? Are the levels of presence on the Internet of the cooperatives similar to those of the rest of the companies?

The aim of this paper is to address these issues within the framework of cooperatives registered in Catalonia. Specifically, it is addressed in two phases through a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Firstly, and taking as a universe the 3,860 cooperatives registered in 2017 in the General Registry of Cooperatives of Catalonia, a content analysis is carried out to complete the information on the cooperatives registered with a website. In cases where a corporate website is identified, the domain extension used is determined, taking into account the classifications defined by the IANA. To conclude this first phase of the analysis, and taking into account that the Mobile Checker tool developed by the

World Wide Web Consortium, the consortium in charge of developing and guaranteeing compliance with the use of web standards, has been disabled for discontinuity since 2016, a test is carried out to adapt the website to mobile devices using Google's Search Console tool.

After this first phase of analysis, a second phase is planned based on a survey sent to all those cooperatives in which a website has been located. This survey aims to find out the reasons why these cooperatives have a presence on the Internet, to find out the level of satisfaction with the use of the network that they are making and to ask them if they think there is any difference, in relation to the presence on the Internet, because they are a cooperative. This survey was sent to 1,025 co-operatives that had a corporate operational website, obtaining a total of 136 responses.

The results of the first phase show that 27% of the total number of cooperatives registered in the General Register of Cooperatives of Catalonia have a corporate website. Bearing in mind that 89% of the sample of Catalan cooperatives have fewer than ten members, the reference figure would be the equivalent of microenterprises which, according to the FAEDPYME report (2018), have a web presence for 78.6% of them.

The next aspect analyzed was the adaptability of the website to mobile devices. After analyzing the 1,015 web pages of the cooperatives, we see that 52% of them are adapted to mobile devices according to Google's tool.

Finally, the online identity of the different cooperatives is analyzed. We found that the domain .coop is only being used by 6% of Catalan cooperatives with a website. Most of the cooperatives bet on the use of domains .com (46%), .cat (20%) and .es (14%).

Secondly, and to complement the information collected through the analysis of content, the results of the surveys conducted on cooperatives with websites are analyzed. In this regard, the questions relating to the purpose, key elements and main barriers to having a website are addressed below.

Nine out of ten cooperatives reported using their website for three main reasons: a) to show what they do, the products and services; b) to have a presence on the net; c) to be reached.

Besides, three out of four cooperatives with a website say that this channel allows them to be closer to both customers and suppliers. On a scale of 0 to 5, with five being very much in agreement and 0 being very much in disagreement, the cooperatives rank above three that having a website makes it easier for them to promote and sell products and services, to be closer to and improve B2B and B2C communication, and to improve strategy.

One of the perceptions that are repeated among the cooperatives surveyed is that there is considerable room for improvement. Furthermore, when asked if being a cooperative implies any difference in the use and presence in the network, the answer in 90% of the cases is no.

So, if there is a clear difference between the penetration of the web presence in small and medium-sized enterprises that is much higher than in cooperatives, how can cooperatives be helped to narrow this gap? When asked about this question, cooperatives highlighted the lack of resources as the main reason. Training is, in turn, a major stumbling block for more than half of the respondents, while institutional support also represents a crucial aspect of being improved.

Resources are undoubtedly a vital issue in this equation, and it is particularly complicated if we take into account the size of most Catalan cooperatives: we are talking about a sample where most of the cooperatives are made up of three members.

This work offers a first approach to the web presence of cooperatives in Catalonia. The data obtained confirm the low maturity of the web presence of the cooperatives observed by Cristóbal et. Al. (2017) in oleic cooperatives.

There is ample room for improvement. This could be addressed from different perspectives. Firstly, and in response to demand from the cooperative members themselves, through training and information, for example, on success stories.

The principal value of this work is to establish a starting point. A framework that allows the intensification of studies on the presence in the network by the cooperative sector, helping its growth and competitiveness.

KEYWORDS: Internet Web; net generation; communication; information; cooperatives.