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Joshua Stein

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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*The Relationship between Social Media Use
and Consumer Brand Engagement*

Joshua Stein – Minnesota State University, Mankato

Abstract

The use of social media by businesses as a communication tool has grown rapidly in recent years. Despite this rapid adoption, little is known about the use of social media among consumers and its effect on brand behavior. This research study aims to fill this gap by investigating the relationship between social media use and consumer brand engagement. To conduct this research, an on-line survey was administered through Survey Monkey to 60 undergraduates ranging in age from 18-24 through a snowball method. Survey questions included: extent of social media use, willingness to engage with brands, views on online vs. offline retailers, and demographic questions. Results showed that 72.1% of respondents interacted with the social media platform, “Facebook,” on a daily basis. Furthermore, the primary reason for using social media was: “to keep in touch with friends”. Respondents indicated that they were more likely to engage with a brand using social media when they were extrinsically rewarded (coupon, gift card, etc.) by a company. Also, results showed that there was no significant difference in “tendency to engage with” an online vs. offline retailers. Results of this study will help businesses use social media more effectively and increase participation by consumers. Despite the wide use of social media among college students, future research should extend this demographic to older populations and include comparisons among the different generations. Future research could also include more specific real world examples, to give less active social media users a feel for the benefits and/or complications of using social media to engage with brands.

Introduction

With the dawning of a new age of technology, brand identity has never been more humanized and raw. The power of social media has created a portal for direct brand-customer interaction; some companies have thrived at this, while others have failed. New technologies have seemingly leveled the playing field in many areas of marketing. No longer can a company plaster billboards and TV ads, and expect to rule the marketplace. Now things are different, to rule a marketplace you can't just present a good image, you have to embody it. This consists of several different aspects, mainly presenting a social identity to your brand that appeals to your current customer base. For instance, take "Pepsi," a multi-billion dollar brand, with an almost perfected product (at least one that people don't really want to change), has to adapt to the emergence of social networks in a way that doesn't alter their current brand image, but helps it grow. In the book "Socialnomics" they reference how "Pepsi," in 2009, passed up a traditional Super Bowl advertisement in favor of committing those millions of dollars into social media. The popular automaker, "Ford," that same year adjusted their entire marketing budget so that "digital and social media" accounted for 25%. This general trend has trickled down to virtually all of the Fortune 500 businesses, and is further affecting the way every businesses interacts with their customers.

Facebook has been an industry changing catalyst on the information-sharing front. Currently it has over 800 million users (Facebook, 2011), with half of them logging in daily. The site has matured rapidly since its creation in 2004. Approximately 80% of users are outside of the U.S. and the site is available in more than 70 different languages. On average, more than 250 million photos are uploaded per day (2011). Facebook has

more than 900 million objects that people interact with (pages, groups, events, and community pages), with the average user being connected to 80 community pages, groups and events (2011). The average user visits the site 40 times per month, spending on average 15 hours and 33 minutes on Facebook per month. Each user creates 90 pieces of content each month as well (2011). Twitter has over 465 million accounts (IOIX, 2012) with over 175 million tweets a day. Over 1 million new accounts created everyday and 11 accounts every second.

So with this rapid and exponential growth in Facebook and other Social Media sites, brands have tried to establish the best ways to go about engaging their consumers. It's no longer a game of "if" you want to be on social networks, but really "on what level?" are you engaged with your customers on these platforms. It can bode great rewards to a company by being active on social networks, however it can have a negative affect with an absent image or poor use of these platforms. Most businesses find it a bit difficult to break the barrier of "what should we put on these platforms" and "what marketing strategies do we implement here," my research aims to answer those questions. This study will also find the different motivating factors, from a consumer standpoint, on why they would engage with your given brand on a variety of different social platforms.

Literature Review

Radical changes have emerged in the last few years, with businesses pushing social media efforts to a forefront of their marketing plans. A study conducted by "ENGAGEMENTdb" showed that there was a positive correlation between companies that are highly active on social platforms and an increase in revenue. They label these

companies as “Social Media Mavens,” and they find that these companies on average grew revenues by 18 percent over the last 12 months, while the least engaged companies saw revenues sink 6 percent on average over the same time period. They define “Mavens” as “brands that have made social media as a core part of their go-to-marketing strategies and are very active in many channels; usually driven by dedicated teams assisted by company-wide awareness and participation.” Another interesting report by “Razorfish Fluent,” referenced how the tendency for consumers to engage are very much driven by the type of industry. Reports show that users are much less likely to engage in the industries of “finance” and “banking,” thus making it difficult for companies in these industries to thrive in social media use and engagement. A study done by Adam N. Joinson, goes over the motivational factors from a user standpoint as to why they would interact on a social network (specifically Facebook in this study). The study consisted of three main ideals with why people were motivated to interact on Facebook, they consisted of; ‘Looking at’, ‘Looking up’ or ‘Keeping up with’ People. They originally had open interviews, in which they recorded 137 user generated words or phrases to describe how they would use Facebook. They then coded these phrases into 46 items that were completed by a group of 241 Facebook users in a follow up survey. Factors identified in the survey ranged from “social investigation,” to “status updating,” to even “gratifications.” In this second portion of the survey people identified the highest with the following phrases in relation to their motivational factors for using Facebook, “Finding people you haven’t seen for a while,” “Applications within Facebook,” and “Connecting with people you otherwise would have lost contact with.”

Methodology

With the goal of gaining new insights into what factors influence people to engage with brands on social media platforms, we conducted a study with a sample of college students through Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). This website provides a streamlined data collecting platform which can be used to collect data on a variety of differently formatted questions. The survey is posted on the site, and respondents (with a provided link) are able to submit answers for the specific survey. Participants in this specific study were motivated by the opportunity to win a \$20 amazon gift card, a total of 5 cards were given out to the 60 participants. The survey was set to have a maximum of 100 participants, after which it would have been unavailable. Respondents were all current students from Minnesota State University – Mankato, and ranged in age between 18-23, and were currently residing in Southern Minnesota.

Measures

Social Media Use

These first 8 questions assessed what social media platforms they engage with (e.g. “what on-line social networks do you belong to”), active engagement in said platform (e.g. How many hours a day do you spend actively engaged in social networks), and what are their main reasons for using the platform (e.g. I use social networks as my primary way to keep in touch with friends). Questions were assessed on a “check all that apply” basis, as well as a likert-scale that ranged from 1-5, “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” respectively.

Brand Engagement

The rest of the survey dealt with different scenarios of brand engagement, like if social media identities (e.g. I would be more willing to engage with a brand if they have a social media identity), platform-specific engagement (e.g. I believe Facebook is the best way to engage with brands), and extrinsic rewards (e.g. I would be more willing to like/follow a brand's online identity if I received something in return). All of these questions were submitted with a 1-5, "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" scale.

Results

The results of this study yielded some interesting findings. The strongest and most significant correlation came with a question regarding a consumer's likelihood to engage with a brand if they received something extrinsic/tangible in return. The mean of the likert scale on this question was 3.96 (out of 5), with 63.7% answering "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." There were additional significant findings as well, another question dealt with a consumer's likelihood to engage with a brand if they highlighted their comments directly (be it through a "ReTweet" or a direct email). This question has a likert scale mean of 3.53, with 50% answering, "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." Another question dealt with the consumer being more willing to engage with a brand through social media if they were mainly a physical store retailer (ex. Target, Best Buy, etc.). This question had a likert scale mean of 3.65, with 50% answering, "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." A final significant question dealt with a consumer being more likely to engage

with a brand if they offered direct support through the given social media platform. The likert scale mean on this question was 3.53, with 51.9% answering, “Agree” or “Strongly Agree.”

There were additional results concerning social media use and what platforms the participants use. Facebook was, by far, the most used Social Media platform with a whopping 96.7% of the participants being on it. This became the assumed platform that participants had “in the back of their minds” while answering other social media usage questions. Another question asked “how much time you spend actively engaged in Social Media,” this would include any type of active engagement in the platform. Active engagement would be classified as; instant messaging, browsing timeline on Facebook or Twitter, and posting content on the given platform. The most significant data point from this question was the “2-4 hour” range, which accounted for 41% of the responses. This was closely followed by the “31 min.- 1 hour” range, which accounted for another 34%. As stated before, “Facebook,” was the main Social Media platform used by the participants. A follow-up question gaged how often they go on it in a month, 72.1% replied that they go on “at least once a day.”

Conclusion

The initial goal of this research project was to find the connection(s) between Social Media Use in consumers and how likely they are to engage with any given brand on these social media platforms. It became quickly apparent that human beings, in this day and age, want something tangible in return for an interaction with an entity like a brand. This was a great finding as it further confirmed that a variety of different

businesses could find success in promotional tools such as; coupon codes and loyalty cards. This aligns especially well with the food industry where these strategies can be easily implemented. We also find an interesting correlation between views of online retailers (ex. Amazon, Ebay) vs. offline retailers (ex. Bestbuy, Target). Specifically there was no different tendency between the two to engage with one over another. One would assume that consumers would be more willing to engage with online retailers through their given social platforms, but the data showed this was not the case. There was another interesting finding showing that users are more likely to engage with a brand if the brand reaches out to them directly in the form a “retweet” or direct email. This would essentially highlight a user’s comment, making them feel as if they’re opinion has value to the brand. This seems important on a variety of levels regarding the exchange and relationship formed between a brand and consumer. The more a brand does this, the more it establishes emotional bonds with its consumers. A final interesting finding was regarding the idea of customer service through a given social platform. This is potentially an untapped arena for many businesses that could benefit from it, especially given the speed and accuracy of these platforms. Many companies are starting to use Twitter’s “search function,” to find users sending out updates that paint the company in a bad light. The company itself can respond to these complaints and (hopefully) fix them accordingly. Twitter specifically serves as a platform with a lot of potential for back and forth feedback with consumers. If this was used in the correct manner it could be extremely valuable. However our main finding of consumers wanting an extrinsic reward in exchange for their time and money is the main result of this study worth highlighting.

This “offering of rewards” partnered with a high level of brand activity on these platforms is a great algorithm for success in this new world of social media business.

We had some significant limitations in our study, the main one being the same audience we selected. All of the participants were active college students, in a young demographic (18-25). The opening up of participants to include all demographics could yield some interesting results. It’s somewhat assumed that college students are more willing (generally) to use these social platforms, and to engage with these brands appropriately. Future research should include an equal amount of age demographics, along with different geographic locations as well.

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Attituds Towards Brands

Items (Scale 1-5 "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree")	Mean	% Agree or Strongly Agree
I would be more willing to like/follow a brand's online identity if I received something in return (i.e. coupon code, a loyald card etc.)	3.96	63.7
I'm more willing to engage with a brand If they highlight one of my comments (via a "Retweet" or a direct email)	3.56	50
I'm more willing to engage with a brand through social media if they have a physical location	3.65	50
If a brand offers direct support through their social networking platforms, I'm more willing to engage with their brand (e.g. Customer Support)	3.53	51.9

Author Biography

Joshua Stein just graduated this past spring and plans to pursue a career in the field of advertising. His educational interests include social media, brand engagement, and new media (online content). He hopes to utilize his research-based background partnered with his knowledge of creative solutions for traditional problems, to become a dynamic business professional.

Faculty Mentor Biography

Kristin Scott is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She received her PhD from Oklahoma State University and has been at MSU for three years. She is a consumer behavior researcher who focuses on materialism and sustainability. Recent research interests include product repair and repurposing and changing consumption values to be more sustainable.