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Smells like university spirit: Predicting the propensity for student engagement using a customer evangelism model

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Smells like university spirit: Predicting the propensity for student engagement using a customer evangelism model

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Abstract

”Engaging students outside the classroom tends to be a hit and miss affair, with exceptional, vocal or troublesome students garnering most of the attention, support and opportunity. The authors of this paper proposes a targeted approach to cultivating highly engaged students and student leadership based on their consumer behaviour rather than their academic merit or self-identification. The theoretical basis for the model employed uses Consumer Culture Theory, in particular Subcultures of Consumption and Customer Evangelism. The goal is to employ a more equitable, coordinated approach to identifying students who are inclined to be highly engaged with university life during and after their academic careers and afterwards, and encourage them to self develop into organic, authentic social networks within the university community which encourage engagement with the university and peer support.”

Smells like University Spirit: Predicting the Propensity for Student Engagement using a Customer Evangelism Model

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Abstract: Engaging students outside the classroom tends to be a hit and miss affair, with exceptional, vocal or troublesome students garnering most of the attention, support and opportunity. The authors of this paper proposes a targeted approach to cultivating highly engaged students and student leadership based on their consumer behaviour rather than their academic merit or self-identification. The theoretical basis for the model employed uses Consumer Culture Theory, in particular Subcultures of Consumption and Customer Evangelism. The goal is to employ a more equitable, coordinated approach to identifying students who are inclined to be highly engaged with university life during and after their academic careers and afterwards, and encourage them to self develop into organic, authentic social networks within the university community which encourage engagement with the university and peer support.

Introduction

Students who come to the attention of staff for engagement opportunities usually do so because they are anomalous in their academic or social performance. They may be the outspoken student, the struggling student, the exceptionally academic student or the active class participant. As units move to an off-campus environment and unit enrolments rise, it is less likely that staff will be able to identify and coach students to further develop their engagement, much less help them customise an engagement experience which may suit their needs.

This paper proposes that in addition to the mechanisms currently used to identify opportunities and incentives for students, a student can be profiled at the enrolment stage to identify if they have a propensity for engagement based on select previous behaviours. Once they are identified as “Student Evangelists” they can be enabled to set up or join university social networks leading to related engagement activities. The authors also propose that student engagement should be primarily student run, commencing in an online social-media context to build on the skills and familiar environment this provides. Finally the authors propose a draft method of enacting this plan for discussion.

Engagement at the new university

Universities, particularly new universities with high numbers of part-time and mature aged students, are struggling with student services. In particular the struggle involves evolving from a traditional staff-centred, synchronous model to a student-centred one; being inclusive of students with different technological preferences, life experience and outside demands on their time; and with customising student experiences when there is scant time to get to know individual students beyond the minority who naturally grab the lecturers' attention.

Although industry is more practiced at identifying and working with their frequent customers, they struggle with engagement also: how to identify the minority of product users who will spread the most positive word of mouth about their product. Marketing and academic research teams with information on prospective solutions to the above problems; but they are not necessarily considered in the university context.

Where engagement has been identified as university priority, a multi-pronged approach to engagement can be effective at creating and publicising engagement opportunities that can suit all kinds of students.

This paper proposes a marketing solution to issues facing universities when they seek to engage students outside the classroom. The research is based on Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnoud & Thompson, 2005), specifically as it relates to Subcultures of Consumption and Customer Evangelism. At the heart of the proposed solution is the attempt to identify students with the propensity to engage beyond the classroom early in their academic experience. These potential Customer Evangelists, or more appropriately, "Student Evangelists", can become engagement leaders, and support their peers in developing authentic, engagement-focused communities.

Universities as a Brand Culture: A Theoretical Overview

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) contends that individuals construct their identity socially and economically through activities, objects and relationships which give their life meaning (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). As they consume they also reconstruct both themselves and the world around them. When they communicate about their consumption they reshape the cultural experience again (Featherstone, 1991). Some consumers connect strongly with a product, seeking opportunities to communicate about it or meet other product users. Social networks that focus on a particular activity or product are called Subcultures of Consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Subcultures of Consumption fall into several categories: Brand Communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), Brand Cults (Belk & Tumbat, 2005) and Consumer Tribes (Shanker, Cova, & Kozinets, 2007). These groups have sprung up organically throughout history. Early motoring consumer tribes are responsible for the widespread social acceptance of the car as a more reliable choice of transport than the horse (Rao, 2002). Harley-Davidson motorcycles tapped into the desire for social networks forty years ago with Harley Owners Groups (HOGs) Brand Communities (Hill & Rifkin, 1999). Rock band the Grateful Dead were trailed on tour by "Deadheads" which made up their Brand Cult (Hill & Rifkin, 1999). Apple Computer enthusiasts set a new standard for unrequited devotion and became emblematic of the Brand

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Cult. Apple is also known as the origin of the Marketing Evangelist which eventually evolved into the Customer Evangelist (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

Ideally, Consumer Tribes and Brand Communities spring up all over university campuses. Brand Communities are groups that are centred on a particular product, a course or the university in general, like the ECU Engineers' Club or the Dead Pilot's Society. Consumer Tribes are based not on a brand but on an activity, and the social networks tend to be a bit looser and informal, like groups of students who decide to enter into a rowing competition or travel together on exchange. This paper will focus on Brand Communities, although the same methodology may result in groups of tribes as opposed to the more structure Brand Communities.

Brand Communities add information to knowledge bases, support new users, develop and test new products, develop new applications for existing product and reinforce the socio-cultural connections within the network through discussions about the product.

They do all of this for free and in their own time (Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Kawasaki, 1991; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Their passionate connection to the product is something they seek to share with others because sharing it with others gives them joy and pleasure—and perhaps even status in the community. They assimilate product culture into their identity, and in their work with others reinforce and regenerate that culture (Kawasaki, 1991).

Brand Community members actively communicate with others about their experiences, and their positive Word of Mouth (WOM) messages (Sweeney & Chew, 2002) have higher value other kinds of promotional communication due to perceived authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007).

Marketers and university staff would agree that one of the most effective ways to get students on board and active is through authentic peer to peer communication: other students. Authenticity is not the only key draw; power structure of peer to peer communication in social networks are important (Porter & McLaren, 1999; Vukonic, 1996). Within Brand Communities, they mediate the perceived control that exists between the producer and customer. In the case of students, the power significantly differs between a staff member attempting to engage them in an extra curricular activity and another student doing it.

Like all social networks, Brand Community members have differing levels of devotion to the cause. The most active and vocal members of the Community are known as Customer Evangelists (Collins, Jarvis, & Murphy, 2008; Gilmore & Pine, 1999; Kawasaki, 1991). They keep the Community alive through their devotion, passion and excitement about the brand. Customer Evangelists are convincing through their genuine enthusiasm for the activity; authenticity is their primary asset (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). They reap outcomes due to their persistence; as they are not being compensated for their work financially (or academically) they don't tire or give up if they meet resistance or obstacles (Collins et al., 2008). And they are joyous: about the brand, about the experience and about the social, community aspect of the activity which attracts other positive people too (Kawasaki, 1991).

A theoretical model of Customer Evangelism (Collins & Murphy, 2009) (figure 1) approaches the characteristics of Customer Evangelists. The model focuses on attributes of the Evangelist and the observable outcomes of the attributes.

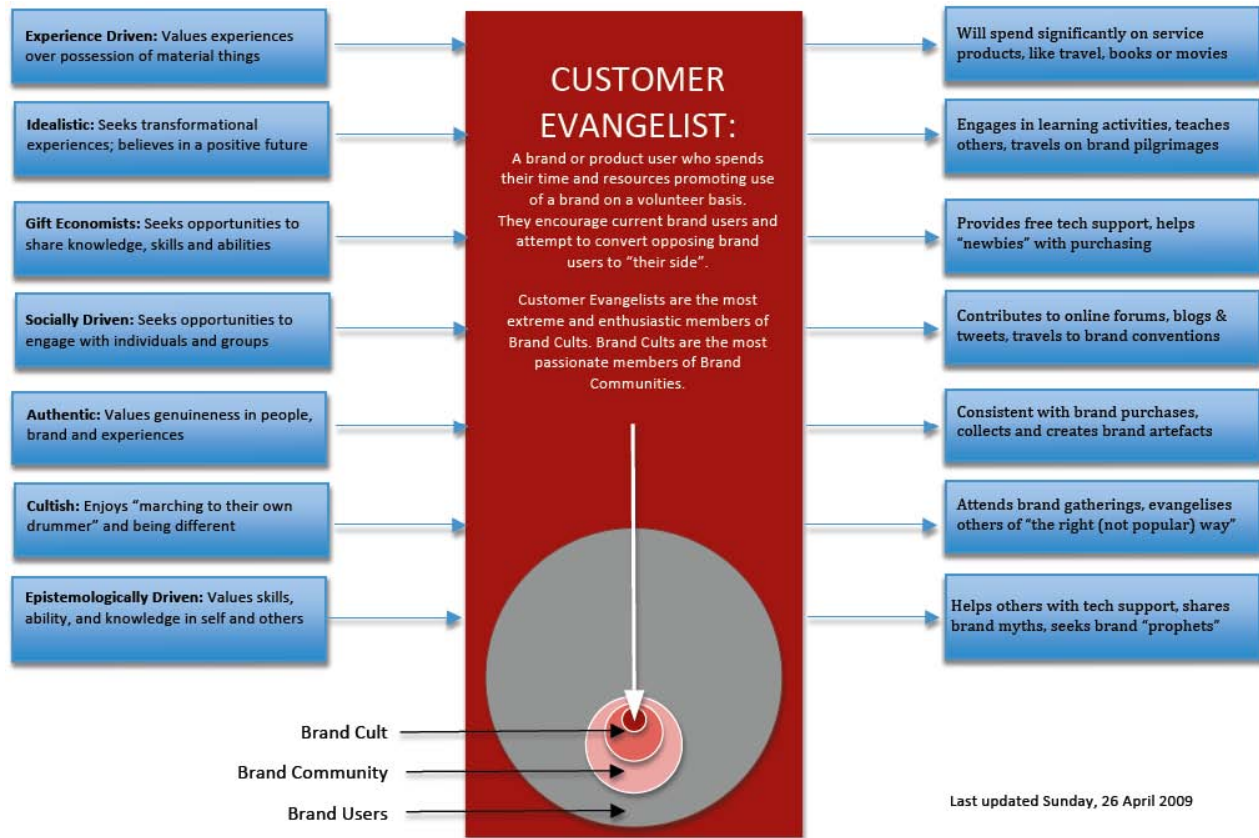


Figure 1: A theoretical model of the Customer Evangelist

The model presupposes that the inclination toward Brand Community engagement lies latent in an individual until they encounter an experience that “flips their switch”. If a product offers them a “Quintessential” experience, a spiritual connection stemming from flow in form and function (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989), the emotional and spiritual connection with the product takes hold, and a Customer Evangelist is born. The proposed formative indicators of the Customer Evangelist are described in Table 1 with explanations of how they could relate to undergraduate students at a university. The strength of each indicator varies relative to the other indicators; however ideally all will be present and a higher score than average on all indicators could indicate a propensity toward extra-curricular engagement.

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Indicator	Source	University Context
Experience Driven: Spends resources on (usually social) experiences rather than material goods	(Baumann, 2008; Belk et al., 1989; Gilmore & Pine, 1999; Kawasaki, 2009; Lusch, Vargo, & Wessels, 2008; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2000)	Likes movies, sports, travel, gaming; typically enrolls in experiential courses such as Arts, Communication, Tourism and Health; active in religious or community events
Idealistic: Engages in activities developing skills/knowledge with a benefit to self or others	(Green, 1970; Kawasaki, 1991; McConnel & Huba, 2007)	Engages in self-development activities of a psychological or spiritual nature; sport, fitness and wellness enthusiasts; typically enrolls in Sciences, Education, Social Sciences and “softer” Business programs
	Carse, 1986; Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, & Zinkan, 2006	Actively participates in class discussions, volunteers for orientation activities; Active in online social and blogging forums; Gravitates toward communication channels; Active in providing feedback through surveys
Socially Driven: Seeks group experiences, especially ones with high levels of interaction	Belk et al., 1989; James Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Sweeney, Soutar, & Mazzarol, 2008	Active social life outside of university; congregates in high traffic areas on campus (cafes, guild); engages in “group” activities on campus: sport, wellness programs
Authentic Seeks interactions which mirror perception and reality accurately; values longevity, consistency and honesty	(Arnoud & Thompson, 2005;	Seeks peer-to-peer or lecturer-to student interaction; less engaged by “official” university communications
Cultish Enjoys the elite status of being part of a subculture experience	(Belk & Tumbat, 2005; Green, 1970; McConnel & Huba, 2007; Muniz & Schau, 2007)	Identifies with subculture groups in sport, lifestyle, ethnic or cultural communities; Typically enrolls in boutique courses or niche majors within a course
Epistemologically Enjoys the process of acquiring and assimilating knowledge/skills as much as, or more than, benefits the knowledge/skills deliver	Baumann, 2008; Belk et al.,1989; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten &	Attracted to the university experience because they enjoy learning; Likely to have a strong academic record or multiple academic qualifications; Focused on assimilating knowledge, values contributions from others based on their demonstrated understanding of the material

Table 1: Relating indicators of the Customer Evangelist to a University Context

It is not enough to have people with these qualities identified. The university must create opportunities and lower barriers for these students to socially engage in a synchronous or asynchronous way. With the growth of web-based social networking applications, the appeal setting up informal, asynchronous communities within a university context is the informal, familiar social norms and context. These networks, ideally, would include staff and alumni. The central interest of each group could be dictated by the needs of the group, with the university taking the responsibility to run the more official, service-based or academic support networks.

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The two key components of Brand Communities are authenticity and the social network. It is essential to understand that the purpose of these communities for the members is to authentically celebrate the brand of activity, and to socially connect with others (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Although the university's goal may be to encourage, leverage, inform, educate or grow these communities, the goal of the communities is an existential one. They simply wish to exist in a shared real or virtual space; and therefore they must be permitted the air and freedom to breathe without barriers or constraint beyond a bedrock of conduct rules which are reasonable and expected.

Identification and Empowerment: A Process-Driven, Organic Approach

Along with a general profile of their indicators, they can be identified for engagement in particular types of communities. For example: sporting, social activism, campus development, peer support/mentoring, online applications, social activities, travel and so on. The ability to index this information would identify students who are most likely to be both engaged outside the classroom and engaged in a particular type of activity.

Once they are identified, opportunities to engage would be customised for them both in terms of general bulletins that would suit their interests via email and the opportunity to engage in university online forums from which they may gain some benefit. If a particular forum does not yet exist to suit their needs, they could start one (much like starting a page on Facebook or MySpace). It would be essential that the number of communities and the number of people involved in them are not the key performance indicator. An indicator of success would be the level of engagement of each community. For example, there may only be 20 people engaged in a Surfing oriented online university community; but they may be very active.

Alumni and staff would be encouraged to join these communities as members, not as moderators unless they chose. This "breaking down" of hierarchy is consistent with the rewards of belonging to a Brand Community (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Shanker et al., 2007; Vukonic, 1996) where everyone within the community is equal in that space. The internal hierarchy of the community would be dictated by the activity and knowledge specific to that community. So the current ECU Queer Community, which is hosted externally through a Google Group, would move to an internal system but remain moderated by the student activist who currently facilitates it opposed to a member of the equity staff. Whereas the Graduate Research School group, also run on an external server, would move internally but, as it is a university function, remain moderated by a member of university GRS staff.

Key points for identification and empowerment

The process could flow through the student journey as of Table 3.

	Interaction (Student)	Interaction (University)	Resources
Online enrolment process	Survey during the process; permission to place student on engagement alert system	Survey received; preferences actioned through online community system	Staff member to collate data and coordinate communications
Partnering during start of semester	Students subscribed to internal university social networking hub (Blackboard Community)	Staff champions partner with students in moderating information flow about the activities online	Blackboard communities created and maintained in partnership with associations, programs, unit coordinators or student evangelists
Community formation	Students can propose new forums, for a multitude of varied forms on the internal system based on student interests	Processes for staff moderation of sites through policies for users and reporting mechanisms for inappropriate posts	Server and staff resources to support multiple student-driven communities with access for alumni
Resource	Community members may apply for grant funding to hosts events or otherwise support their community	Grant funding panels adjudicate active social networks ho can access funds for events and activities	Small grant funding (for example \$500) available in competitive rounds throughout the year

Table 3: Key profiling points during the student journey

A survey can be developed based on the Customer Evangelism Model in Figure 1 and table in figure 2. Survey questions can be evaluated based on a 5 point Likert scale. When surveys are scored, the evaluation will demonstrate propensity for Student Evangelism and the strongest indicators for that student. For example, are they more strongly predisposed toward knowledge-based activities or social activities?

The survey would be completed as part of the online enrolment process and would be optional. However students would be told that by completing the survey they would be made aware of opportunities that may interest them at ECU and at sister organisations who attempt to recruit students for engagement through ECU.

Limitations of this proposal

There are limitations to this approach to engaging students. It is not comprehensive and therefore cannot be coordinated as an all in one solution to student apathy or the challenge of engaging students who have commitments outside the classroom. This proposal is envisioned as one part of an overall engagement plan. The strength of this proposal is to attempt to identify students who may otherwise slip under the radar: off-campus students, students with off-campus commitments, students with off-campus interests and students who do not naturally come to the attention of staff.

Another issue is one of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Students identified as more likely to be involved in engagement by the university may, in fact, become further engaged in activity to meet that expectation. As opposed to being a drawback, this could be a benefit of the strategy. However, what about the students who are not identified as having a high propensity for

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engagement? The university would have to tread carefully so that the profiling process does not discourage students from engaging with extracurricular activities.

Conclusion

The key advantage to the approach defined in this paper is the ability to identify and attract students with the potential to be active in university life in a methodical way, as opposed to a coincidental approach or through self-identification. With such a wide diversity of interests and kinds of activities, and with layer upon layer of opportunities for travel, sports, social, political and academic activities, finding an engagement activity is, for many students, so overwhelming a choice nothing appeals.

Moving from a staff and university centred model where the university or a guild is the centre of engagement activity to a less hierarchical, flat structure where seeds of opportunity fly around an online university community means a couple of things. First, ideas of communities can germinate organically about exactly what kind of communities and activities are required by all students; not just the students with the time and the geographical location to participate. Second, this takes the engagement agenda out of the university's hands. Although staff can create communities, particularly communities of peer support, student centred communities can be a positive start toward a less staff-focused university experience.

The engagement agenda enriches the university experience for everyone: students, staff, industry, community—even alumni who benefit from the high gloss on the university brand's name and pride of association.

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