

Spring 2014

[Sabbatical Report]

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Recommended Citation

Phillips, Joanna, "[Sabbatical Report]" (2014). *Sabbatical Reports*. Paper 18.
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To: Dr. Gordon Emslie, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs
From: Dr. Joanna Phillips-Melancon, Associate Professor, Marketing
CC: Dr. Jeffrey Katz, Dean, Gordon Ford College of Business
Dr. Richard Shannon, Chair, Department of Marketing
Date: January 22, 2014
RE: Sabbatical Activity Report: Managing Consumer Social Voice

Sabbatical Research Overview:

Research suggests that 2.4 billion conversations about brands occur daily in social media. Managers consistently cite consumers being negative as the number one fear upon entering social media, yet few organizations have policies in place to handle negative comments and there is a lack of research focusing on how to strategically handle negativity from consumers on social media. My sabbatical project addresses this paucity in the marketing literature by developing a construct called "Consumer Social Voice," defined as public complaining behavior attempting to change the operations of an organization. This construct has been derived from theoretical frameworks in the areas of both negative word-of-mouth (which in the past has traditionally been a private complaining behavior) and the Exit/Voice/Loyalty framework developed by Hirschman (1970). Social media has allowed for a convergence of these two types of customer reaction to an organization's perceived failure in a very public forum. My sabbatical has focused on the conceptualization and development of this construct, specifically on identifying and categorizing types of consumer voice, with research on motivations behind various types of social voice to follow. My actual approach resulted in a slight deviation from my proposal. I originally had planned to develop the construct using insight and interviews from managers working in social media; however, as I explored the nature of social voice, I recognized that initial studies would be more appropriately explored from the consumer's perspective. I do have plans for executive interviews as well as empirical testing of this construct for future studies (see Future Research Plans).

Research Progress:

- Due to the exploratory nature of this research, I am using a qualitative methodology called "netnography" (Kozinets 2010) to capture data. For the first phase of the qualitative analysis, I have captured consumer comments from social media sites of several diverse organizations including Coca-Cola, BMW, Burger King, Red Lobster, AT&T, and Ally Bank. This has resulted in hundreds of data points.

The Spirit Makes the Master

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- I am using an in-depth and manual analysis for this qualitative data. This method is an iterative reading strategy which involves several levels of coding (open, axial, and selective) as I read through the data multiple times (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This is a time-consuming method of analysis, but allows the researcher to become very familiar with the richness of the data.
- Eight themes have emerged from the data; these themes suggest “types” of social voice prevalent across organizations in the data set. For example, one theme is termed “The Social Activist” defined as an individual who is attempting to activate change at a level of operations external to the firm, typically the firm’s position on social, philanthropic, or religious issues. An illustrative quote for this theme would be the following from a Coca-Cola consumer: “I am now Coke free for almost a month and if you continue to support what is happening in Russia by sponsoring the Winter Olympics, I see a Coca-Cola-LESS future.”
- I am confident that no new themes are emerging from additional data collection and thus I am now entering the third and final stage of my analysis called “selective coding,” which involves organizing themes around theory, with protest-framing theory and reactance theory being explored as possible frameworks.

Future Plans for Research:

- My primary research focus for the Spring 2014 semester is to conclude data analysis and prepare the initial manuscript for the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, commonly ranked as an “A” level journal; it is cited as the 5th most prestigious journal in the Marketing field.
- For my next study, in-depth interviews with consumers will be conducted to explore both their motivations for various types of demonstrated social voice, as well as their experiences with how companies responded to them and the effect of that response on future patronage intentions. I also plan to interview marketing managers about current methods of handling social voice, and whether these methods are effective from their perspectives. This study’s timeline would involve a manuscript submission, tentatively at the *Journal of Advertising* (a top ten marketing journal) in late Fall of 2014.

Professional Benefits Arising From Sabbatical:

- I am confident that the data I have gathered has high publication potential at a quality outlet and that this is an area rich for future research studies. I believe this research will aid in establishing WKU’s Marketing Department as a destination for social media marketing expertise and education. On a more personal level, I believe this research stream will carry me into my promotion to Full Professor and beyond.
- I developed WKU’s Social Media Marketing course in the Fall of 2010, and at that time it was one of the first courses of its kind. Career opportunities in this field are growing exponentially, which has led our department to develop a Social Media Marketing Track for our majors.

Elements of social media marketing change so rapidly that there are no satisfactory and up-to-date textbooks/materials. Therefore, it is imperative that I stay current on the literature in both academic and practitioner presses. This is quite a difficult task given the dynamic nature of this area. This sabbatical allowed me much needed time to review large amounts of information being generated about social media and social media marketing.

- This project has also given me multiple ideas for my social media marketing course; for example, I will be adopting a new engagement project where students evaluate company responses to consumer complaint and interview consumers about their experiences with companies on social media sites to better understand the importance of appropriate managerial response for consumer retention.
- My social media course is heavily focused on an engagement project where student teams develop social media plans for local businesses and non-profits. This research will allow me to give students and clients insight into how to best handle negative consumer behavior on social media sites. This makes the project more valuable for my students and for my clients.
- I would also like to mention that this sabbatical has allowed me to focus on other projects in my research pipeline. Since beginning my sabbatical, I have had two journal articles (one also in the area of social media marketing) and one conference proceeding accepted, one article under review that has been granted a revise-and-resubmit, and another article targeted for a well-respected marketing journal will be ready for submission in the first weeks of the Spring semester. Without this time to devote to my research, I do not believe I would have had such high levels of productivity in the fall semester.

Conclusion:

This sabbatical has served as an invaluable opportunity for me to integrate social media into my current research stream of customer loyalty, retention, and consumer misbehavior. It has also allowed me to spend quite a lot of time reading the rapidly growing body of research in the area which will be reflected in my lectures, discussions, and projects in the classroom.

I offer my sincere thanks for this much-appreciated time to concentrate solely on the research that interests me most. I believe this sabbatical has served its purpose of recharging my own excitement for my research and allowing me to grow professionally in this new and complex area of my chosen field. If you have any additional questions for me regarding any part of this report, do not hesitate to contact me.



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