BRAND MANAGEMENT USING SOCIAL MEDIA

by

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Abstract

The phenomenon of social media is having a massive impact on the ways brands are perceived, and the way consumers interact with them. Consumers now desire brands that are engaging, relevant, and authentic. In turn, companies are increasingly looking to social media channels to increase their brand's visibility and influence. This paper addresses the impact social media has on branding. Companies need to have a clear social media strategy included in their overall communications strategy before undertaking a social media campaign. Once a carefully considered strategy is in play, the rewards in terms of customer loyalty and engagement are potentially great.

Dedication

To my family for their support and encouragement throughout this program. Thank you.

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1: Introduction

1.1 The Move from Traditional to New Media

Technology and new media play a major part in society. People are spending a significant proportion of their lives online as illustrated by the rapid growth of blogs, communities such as MySpace, Bebo, and Facebook, user-generated websites such as Wikipedia, and the video-sharing site YouTube (Nutley, 2008). Web 2.0 is the second generation of Web-based services and communities that emphasize online collaboration, networking, and user-created content. Among the many activities taking place on these new technology platforms, is the trend of consumers sharing their opinions about products, services, and the behaviour of companies.

Web 2.0 offers limitless opportunities for companies to engage their customers in meaningful dialogues and learn "exactly what they've wanted to know all along: precisely what their consumers think about their products and brand," (Credit Union, 2007, p. 24). Social media is the catchall phrase for these Web 2.0 platforms. Social media presents brand managers with a new and exciting opportunity to interact with potential and existing customers.

The gap between traditional and social marketing is getting wider by the day. Traditional media gets brands noticed, but it is what consumers are saying about the product in chat rooms, on blogs, on review sites, and in social networks that will

determine whether they buy it (Nutley, 2008). The traditional world of marketing involves creating messages for brands and then buying media to place them in front of consumers. This is becoming increasingly difficult and expensive as audiences fragment and technologies develop which allow audiences to ignore traditional forms of advertising altogether. The new world of social media is one where audience resistance to interruptive advertising means media cannot be bought, only earned (Nutley, 2008).

1.2   The Social Media Phenomenon

The phenomenon of social media is having a massive impact on the ways brands are perceived, and the way consumers interact with them. Research has shown that consumers are sharing opinions in unprecedented numbers regardless of the topic, product, or brand they were commenting on (Smith, 2008). While films, music, and technology are the most popular topics to comment on, around 40 percent of people have aired views on areas such as financial products and utilities (Smith, 2008).

There has also been a shift in the way people rate brands:

> This may vary by traditional aspects such as affordability, quality, functionality, and design aesthetic. But in a world where such differences are increasingly easy to replicate, where consumers are spoilt with choice in almost every category, there is an increasing focus on brand values and the brand's place in the community (Donaldson, 2007, p. 20).

A shift in emphasis from selling to buying is also apparent in the new marketplace. Consumers are no longer accepting of having information about products forced upon them. Instead, they actively seek out, compare, and discuss information about products and companies.

Consumer-generated media is not a fad and consumers' use of social media will continue to boom. Indeed, the number of people who create content is expected to increase significantly in the next few years: "globally, the number of user-generated content creators will reach 238 million in 2011, up from 137 million in 2007," (Mooney & Rollins, 2008, p. 84). Moreover, Forrester Research recently noted a 33 percent increase in the number of online consumers using social media in 2008 versus 2007 (Nail, 2009).

Social media has been likened to a philosophy as it encompasses the notion of brand transparency and changes the historical "master/servant" relationship between brand and consumer to one of equality (Sipper, 2009). It may be seen as an ongoing commitment to engage customers in meaningful and authentic ways. A recent study by the Cone agency showed that 85% of consumers believe that companies should be interacting with consumers through social channels (Fullman, 2009). With the advent of the World Wide Web, customers quickly learned to "find one another, and talk about products honestly, humorously and sometimes savagely. Blogs further that conversation and present a real marketing opportunity... but not for old-style, one-way messages," (Weinberger, in Armstrong, Kotler, Cunningham, Mitchell, & Buchwitz, 2007, p. 541). Social media therefore, is about having real conversations, ones that are candid and authentic. It revolves around relationships and genuine engagement that has to be followed for long periods of time. Web audience measurement from Hitwise reports that social media usage grew 668 percent from April 2005 to April 2007 (Mooney & Rollins, 2008).

One of the most common uses of social media is optimization. This involves a set of tactics that can help engage users in new ways, increase a brand's visibility across the Web, and make content easier for users to share. The goal is to create a visible presence within social media channels and to increase visibility on both traditional and social search engines (Fullman, 2009). Another common use of social media is word-of-mouth marketing. One of the most common starting points is for companies to create a branded presence within existing communities like Facebook or MySpace. Companies may also choose to create their own communities around their brands and products on their Websites. Either route requires a nearly constant and consistent investment of time on the part of at least one person (Fullman, 2009).

The following will discuss and analyze branding strategy and the different components involved in using social media to build brand equity. In Chapter two, brand equity is defined and the new developments in brand management are explored. Chapter three addresses components of social media including internet marketing, as well as blogs, microblogs and social networking sites, and how these can be leveraged by companies to promote their brands. The chapter ends with a discussion of online consumers and the millennial generation. Finally, Chapter four looks at different aspects involved in using social media including best practices, dealing with negative publicity online, enhancing trust and brand loyalty, and measuring results.

2: Branding Strategy: Building Strong Brands

2.1 Brand Equity

Some analysts see brands as the major enduring asset of a company, outlasting the company's specific products and facilities (Armstrong et al., 2007). A brand is the company's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits, services, and experiences consistently to the buyers. Thus, "brands are more than just names and symbols. Brands represent people's perceptions and feelings about a product and its performance –everything that the good or service *means* to consumers," (Armstrong et al., 2007, p. 311). They can essentially be thought of as a contract to the customer regarding how the good or service will deliver value and satisfaction. Marketers position their brand, promote it, and cultivate brand loyalty because of the practical value of owning a well-known, well-loved brand.

Brand equity is the positive, or sometimes negative, differential effect that knowing the brand name has on customer response to the product. A measure of a brand's equity is illustrated by repeat purchases and the price customers are willing to pay (Kania, 2001). A brand with strong brand equity is a very valuable asset. Brands rating among the world's most valuable include Coca-Cola, Microsoft, IBM, General Electric, Intel, Disney, McDonald's, Nokia, and Toyota (Armstrong et al., 2007). In general, brand equity and its impact on profitability is one of the primary measures of a branding strategy's success.

As word-of-mouth platforms grow and traditional marketing tools lose impact, the propensity of a customer base to recommend products and services to others will be regarded as a key measure of brand equity. Consequently, brand managers must rethink the customer journey to purchase, and allocate more resources for strengthening the peer connections and conversations along the way. Thus, before any type of marketing campaign begins, the core values and overall business goals of the company must be understood. Every piece of the media campaign must then not only attempt to help reach those goals, but also be consistent with the company's core values. All campaign elements must help encourage users to take a specific action in a deliberate way, as well as strengthen and differentiate the overall brand image.

2.1.1 The Benefits of Strong Brands

A high brand equity provides a company with many competitive advantages. A powerful brand enjoys a high level of consumer brand awareness and loyalty. Because the brand name carries high credibility, the company can more easily launch line and brand extensions. A powerful brand also offers the company some defence against fierce price competition. Great brands have a holistic, distinctive design, carefully packaged messaging, innovative products that anticipate the needs of a changing audience, and brand experiences that have lasting emotional resonance with consumers (Mooney & Rollins, 2008).

Above all, a powerful brand forms the basis for building strong and profitable customer relationships. Therefore, the fundamental asset underlying brand equity is customer equity –the value of the customer relationships that the brand creates. A

powerful brand is important, but what it really represents is a set of loyal customers. Hence, the proper focus of marketing is building customer equity, with brand management serving as a major marketing tool.

2.2   Managing Brands

The elements of brand identity, including the brand's name, logo, color, and typeface, contribute to the brand image. That image is defined in terms of the brand's positioning, personality, and reputation (Kania, 2001). Companies must carefully manage their brands. First, the brand's positioning must be continuously communicated to consumers. Major brand marketers often spend huge amounts on advertising to create brand awareness and to build preference and loyalty. For example, AT&T spends almost a billion dollars annually to promote its brands and McDonald's spends more than $600 million (Armstrong et al., 2007). Such advertising campaigns can help to create name recognition and brand knowledge and increase brand preference.

Today, customers come to know a brand through a wide range of contacts and touch points. These include advertising, but also personal experience with the brand, word of mouth, personal interaction with company people, telephone interactions, company websites, and many others. Any of these experiences can have a positive or negative impact on brand perceptions and feelings. The company must put as much care into managing these touch points as it does into producing its ads. However, the careful control over image, thorough attention to detail in execution, and a well-choreographed consumer experience at every touchpoint, all at the direction and discretion of the brand manager, is no longer the case given new media.

With the absolute consumer embrace of the Internet, a new kind of brand management emerges, one which involves collaboration with consumers while still preserving the brand's essence. Before, during, and after a purchase, consumers are engaging directly with each other through blogs, ratings and reviews, and other interactive forums. They share opinions and take control of the messages and values that brands once generated. Thus, brands are expected to provide faster and more customizable experiences, more enhanced content, and more opportunities for consumers to exchange ideas and be both seen and heard.

2.2.1   Build Pride and Hire Experts

The brand's positioning will not take hold fully unless everyone in the company lives the brand (Armstrong et al., 2007). Therefore the company needs to train its people to be customer-centered. Even better, the company should build pride in its employees regarding their products and services so that their enthusiasm will spill over to customers. Companies can carry on internal brand building to help employees understand, desire, and deliver on the brand promise. Many companies go even further by training and encouraging their distributors and dealers to serve their customers well.

All of this suggests that managing a company's brand assets can no longer be left only to brand managers. Brand managers do not have enough power or scope to do all the things necessary to build and enhance their brands. Moreover, brand managers often pursue short-term results, whereas managing brands as assets calls for longer-term strategy. Thus, some companies are now setting up brand asset management teams to manage their major brands.

With respect to combining social media with marketing initiatives, companies are increasingly looking to hire social media experts. Companies like Ford, Intel, Dell, and Pepsi have all brought in social media experts to lead their strategies (Morrissey, 2008). The hiring of dedicated teams reflect the rising importance of social media in companies. Pepsi describes its social media team in a job posting as "responsible for reaching new audiences, bloggers, Facebookers and other key influentials that live in the online world," (Morrissey, 2008, p. 9).

3: Introduction to Social Media

3.1 Internet Marketing

Internet marketing consists of company efforts to communicate about, promote, and sell products and services over the Internet. It revolves around a company's efforts to communicate with their customers via e-mail, message boards, chat rooms, and blogs. Internet marketing is a new media strategy. Successful campaigns now incorporate both new media and traditional advertising. In fact, the number one reason why a person visits any website, whether for personal or business reasons, is to find information (Armstrong et al., 2007). This is a big bonus for marketers who normally have to push information about their products and services onto consumers. In the online world, they have the opportunity to present detailed information about their firms, products, and services to a willing and receptive audience.

Because the Internet is interactive, it provides strong potential for increasing customer involvement and satisfaction, and almost immediate feedback for buyers and sellers. This medium is less interruptive, more targeted, and relies on a person's genuine need to socialize and to seek and share information. Compared to simply being passive television viewers and radio listeners, Internet users are actively engaged and more likely to take direct action when shown marketing messages.

Marketers are increasingly looking to run campaigns revolving around social media in the hopes they can spark viral buzz and create brand ambassadors by ceding

some control to users (Morrissey, 2006). The influence of people who contribute content, reviews and opinions online is no longer restricted by geography or physical contact. For a brand, this means the views of a few can have a disproportionate effect on the many. The challenge, therefore, is to get these influential people creating positive social acceptance –perhaps as brand ambassadors—for a company's brand (Clifton, 2007). Companies can build their own brand communities either on selected social media channels or by incorporating Web 2.0 functionality into their own sites.

3.2   Blogs and Micro-Blogs

The term blog is an abbreviation of web log. A blog is a website that consists of "regular date-stamped compositions written by an individual or a group of individuals and published online for the public to read," (Armstrong et al., 2007, p. 540). A blog is often a means of conversation between individuals or between groups. Blog readers post comments on entries, and bloggers respond to one another in their own blogs.

Despite the impressive growth of blogs, corporate blogs still account for only a small percentage of the current blogosphere (Berkley, 2007). Although many executives realize their importance, they are either unsure of how to make blogs work effectively for their company, or they simply lack the time and energy to keep a corporate blog updated and running. The biggest factor in determining the success of a blog is the quality of the voice, personality, and editorial content. Essentially, by using a blog to distribute information, businesses humanize their messages. Posts come across as more genuine to readers in contrast to publicity done through marketing or PR agencies (Newson, Houghton, & Patten, 2009).

Ultimately, blogs are an important marketing tool for businesses. They allow companies to develop a closer connection with customers, to generate feedback, and to provide customer support. Corporate blogs can generate dialogue with customer bases and informally gather website performance statistics. Indeed, the feedback loop is one of the core benefits of a corporate blog. If a company is willing to incorporate the information it has garnered into product innovation, future marketing campaigns, and overall strategy, then the value of a blog is realized (Singer, 2006).

Twitter is the brand name of a social networking and micro-blogging service that utilizes instant messaging, SMS (short message service), and web interfaces. Launched in 2006, Twitter is fast becoming a global phenomenon with celebrities, governments, politicians, and brands using it to distribute updates easily and quickly (Collings, 2009). It allows users to post updates on their status using just 140 characters. They can then choose to follow other users' 'tweets' as well as build their own following. While the general public is starting to embrace Twitter in greater numbers, companies are now increasingly turning to it as a way to promote their brands.

Using Twitter allows companies to address the issue of overloading people with too much information. As well, it allows firms to contact only the people who are interested. Companies may use the site to deliver customer service or as a posting board for updates such as sales promotions, new product launches, or corporate information links.

This social media channel is attractive for brands due to the customer engagement and idea generation factors. Brands may also use Twitter to spread an idea similar to an online viral campaign, or ask a question and receive answers from those who follow

them. Ultimately, the decision to use Twitter depends on content, relationships, and how important real time is to the message (Collings, 2009).

One successful example of a company using Twitter to further its branding is Ford Motor Company. Ford recently hired Scott Monty as the company's first head of social media. Monty has 15,000 followers on Twitter, a large portion of whom are opinion formers in the automotive industry. He has essentially turned his Twitter profile into a think-tank, "gaining knowledge from Ford aficionados and critics alike and feeding it into product development and customer care," (McCormick, 2009, p. 35).

3.3 Social Networking Sites

The fastest growing online phenomenon is social networking. Almost half of all web users participate on some type of social networking site (Berkley, 2007). These sites include MySpace, Facebook, Classmates.com, MSN Spaces, Yahoo! Groups, Bebo, and Xanga. These sites allow Internet users to post mini-web pages, profiles, and photos with the goal of meeting others online for dating or friendship, or just to exchange information. Sites like MySpace and Facebook in particular, have between 50 and 90 percent more visitors aged 12 to 24 than the Web as a whole, according to Nielson/Net Ratings (Morrissey, 2006). Indeed, social networks are becoming increasingly popular by varied groups of Internet users including companies, groups, organizations, and consumers. In the business context, social networking is shifting the power from producer to consumer.

MySpace allows registered users to, among other things, have a page on which they display information about themselves, interact with other MySpace users, keep a

blog, and publish 'bulletins' of their latest news. The number of users varies depending on the source, somewhere between 21 million and 75 million unique visitors, with over 100 million registered users (Newson et al., 2009). MySpace pages allow companies to display information about their brand and to communicate with a target audience. These pages also allow for other users to post comments about a brand and share their views.

Facebook registrations have experienced 200 percent growth in the past year alone and now number over 145 million accounts (Wenkart, 2009). It is presently the most successful social networking site. Facebook essentially develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information. It began as a way for students to connect with each other, and then it spread to friends, family, and colleagues. And now brands are joining in. Brands can use Facebook by advertising on the homepage, buying ads that users can comment on, and taking advantage of the opportunity to run events and invite users.

Facebook has a number of features that makes it useful to companies. There are thousands of groups on Facebook which may be social or business-based. Companies can create a group for their brand and use of a number of applications to communicate with consumers, including the Notes and Wall features. A note (a blog) may be written on a particular issue by the company representative and this can result in a whole discussion over that issue with Facebook friends, or fans (Newson et al., 2009). As well, enabling the Wall feature allows for group members to post comments, critiques, suggestions, and ideas.

The very nature of social networking sites makes them attractive to marketers because they create very loyal users and account for some of the highest retention rates among regular Internet users (Berkley, 2007). Marketing messages on these sites are

effective when combined with relevant, useful, and/or interesting content that will encourage users to take action and get involved. However, these sites are often tightly knit and highly personal, so promoting products in these realms requires planning and thought.

3.4   Online Consumers and the Millenial Generation

3.4.1   Consumers

Consumers have an overwhelming motivation for and adeptness at "being heard, making a mark, controlling their experiences, shaping products, and sharing opinions," (Mooney & Rollins, 2008, p. 8). The consumers today are very comfortable with technology and change. They are no longer looking for brands that are two-dimensional whereby the brand delivers product to the consumer and the consumer reacts (Fullman, 2009). Consumers now desire brands that are engaging, relevant, and authentic. The digital behaviours of creating, sharing, and influencing have altered consumers' expectations of brands. Consumers now expect to be involved in the creation and promotion of goods and services. Mooney and Rollins (2008) contend that this is tied to the fact that consumers create and share their own products hourly: blog content, videos, and social profiles (Mooney & Rollins, 2008). As a result, consumers want to feel engaged in the commercial world's creative processes rather than simply being the focus of their output.

The vast majority of online consumers simply want to make informed decisions and to do so, they go online to seek largely subjective perspectives from complete

strangers. The opinions of others have legitimacy if they are believed to be based on personal experience or the desire to help others through sharing, rather than on tactics of corporate persuasion (Mooney & Rollins, 2008). A marketer must therefore enable and foster dialogue about their brand and products without seeming to influence, interfere with or manipulate it.

3.4.2   Millennials

Web 2.0 is fragmenting marketing channels. Visitors to the Web no longer start at large portals like Yahoo or MSN. Instead, they go straight to niche communities and Web sites catering to their specific interests. The primary benefit of this fragmentation is that now companies are offered a shortcut to highly desirable demographic groups, including the 'millennial generation' born between 1980 and 2000 (Credit Union, 2007).

This group is the first generation to grow up surrounded by digital media—and they know how to use it. The digital millennials a.k.a. echo boomers, Gen Y, or the IM generation, are a generation soon to be larger than the baby boomers and their successors, the Generation Xers. By the year 2010, there will be more than 80 million of them in North America (Williams, 2008). The mindset of digital millennials is founded in a spirit of collectivism. This group is motivated by connecting and sharing with people who have similar interests. So brand marketers must address groups, not just individuals, by supporting and nurturing their shared enthusiasm (Mooney & Rollins, 2008).

Seventy-eight percent of 15 to 24 year olds participate in online social networks (Sipper, 2009). Over three-fourths of them believe that brands should routinely ask for their opinions (Mooney & Rollins, 2008). Indeed, the Internet is the millennial medium

of choice. If they had to choose between the Internet and television, today's teens say they would choose the Internet (Berkley, 2007). For marketers, this means that brands have to get inside the millennials' networks. Brands may get attention by being authentic, original, and entertaining, and by seeking involvement and forfeiting control.

Social networking enthusiasts from the millennial generation can have 'friends' numbering in the thousands. These virtual friends are accumulated via profiles at MySpace and Facebook and others, where they can quickly connect with others who share their interests, and gain popularity (or the perception of it) through the "network effect" of fast-growing friends lists. This group is so well connected that if a store or style does not match their high expectations, they can instantly tell thousands of their 'friends.' Indeed, before the age of social media, if someone had a poor customer experience he or she would tell ten people. But now, with the rise of blogs, MySpace, and Facebook, that she might be able to tell 10,000 people. Hence, there is a total change in the dynamic and importance of the customer experience.

For millennials, reliance and trust in non-traditional sources, that is, everyday people, their friends, and the network they have created around them, has a much greater influence on their behaviours than traditional advertising (Zeller, 2006). Indeed, peer opinion is the most powerful recommender for the wired generation. A Nielsen survey from 2008 shows that 78 percent of consumers trust the opinions of peers over all other information sources and advertising (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008). This growth of trust in a peer network is tied to waning trust in traditional cultural authorities and institutions, including brands and the mass media.

4: Using Social Media to build Brand Equity

4.1 Social Media Best Practices

Prior to engaging on social networking sites, firms must make a number of considerations. The company's brand should be defined to ensure that character profile accurately and consistently reflects that brand. Company representatives must be ready to address any feedback or posts, particularly if they are negative. It is essential to monitor the posts and communicate with those sending messages in a timely way, and in a manner that enhances and reinforces the desired brand image. Further, the comments received should be used as feedback to possibly aid in better refining the firm's message or product.

Respect should be shown to the community by not pushing the marketing message too hard or intruding on unrelated conversations. In order to be successful on social network sites, companies need to offer some type of content or information that is useful, interesting, or entertaining to the audience. This may also help in collecting more 'friends.' Establishing connections leads to a broader network, and therefore a more valuable 'space' online.

Keeping up to date about what is being said about the brand, whether the comments are good or bad, is a necessary component of social media involvement. Monitoring activities include arranging for automatic web searches on mentions of the brand (these searches can pick up on content on websites, blogs, and other publicly

available parts of the web), or engaging service providers to report and/or analyze all comments about the brand online within a certain period (Newson et al., 2009).

Moreover, if companies are receiving comments, they should commit to responding to them within a reasonable period of time. Responses demonstrate that the blog or social network profile is participatory, and this helps build up a community of readers and consumers who contribute to it. Moderating comments on blogs or social networking sites is also part of good brand management. While censoring comments is ill-advised, also problematic is allowing people to say gratuitously negative things about the company. Reviewing and approving comments should be done at least once per day (Newson et al., 2009).

In digital marketing, impersonating a consumer or adopting a fake persona to discuss or comment on one's brand in an online discussion group or on a blog is called flogging for "fake blogging." This should be avoided for fear of being seen as deceptive. Brands should opt instead for world-of-mouth support that is spread transparently by its most authentic enthusiasts (Mooney & Rollins, 2008).

Having interesting posts is one of the keys to making Twitter work successfully for a brand. Moreover, if a brand is keen to make a permanent and meaningful mark on Twitter, managers must be prepared to put in the time and energy required to really engage with consumers. Again, being upfront about who is manning the Twitter account, whether it is a team, marketing manager, or CEO, is also important.

Nail (2009) suggests a three-pronged strategy for companies to pursue when looking for a mutually beneficial reaction rather than a way to push a marketing agenda. First, companies will invite: companies will create communities, build feedback

mechanisms on their brand Websites, communicate the fact that they are present in social

media and welcome their audiences into a conversation. Second, companies will listen: in

addition to their own communities, companies should engage various social media

formats and channels to hear what their audiences need and want from them. And third,

companies will respond: beyond posting in these communities, companies should use the

valuable ideas and suggestions they receive to make changes in products, messages, and

processes to enhance the value audiences get from the relationship with the company

(Nail, 2009).

4.2 Dealing with Negative Publicity Online

Consumer feedback on products is going to occur, whether on a company's own

site or on some other form of social media. Positive consumer-generated media about a

company can be extremely powerful in strengthening its brand image. A tremendous

amount of exposure to consumer bases may be generated through social network sites.

However, there are some important risks that should be considered. The most obvious

risk is the lack of content control and how user comments can potentially shape brands in

a negative way. The Internet provides an open venue for anyone to post critiques about

companies, their products, services, brands, or even employees. These online

communications can be anything from a few comments to even a full-scale campaign

against a business (Newson et al., 2009). Thus, firms must be ready to deal with this

feedback, both positive and negative.

Bloggers expose brands to their biases, and consumer-posted reviews or feedback

may sometimes be inaccurate, profane and mean-spirited. But once brands publicly

commit to soliciting opinions, either through their own community forums or on-site ratings and reviews, they have to resist the temptation to censor postings. This lends to a brand's credibility and transparency, and can also be the source of valuable customer insights. Further, the opportunity to reach out even to those who do not like a company's brand can have powerful positive consequences. Reaching out conveys confidence, accessibility, respect, and authenticity to people both inside and outside of the brand community (Hanlon & Hawkins, 2008). Finally, by publicly responding to negative comments and challenging them, companies are afforded the opportunity to prove their expertise in the relevant subject area.

Opinions and facts from consumers on company websites can be managed in a number of ways. First, online Terms and Conditions could be outlined which set the ground rules for appropriate use of online resources. Second, marketers could empower the online community to police itself with reporting mechanisms for bad behaviour and ranking questions such as "was this review helpful?" Third, users may be required to log in before they post comments to reduce the likelihood of inappropriate content being posted anonymously. And finally, marketers can steer consumers in a positive way by prompting topics that may benefit the community at large. Again however, the urge to control the dialogue should be resisted (Mooney & Rollins, 2008).

Overall, customer complaints should be addressed wherever possible. The case of computer maker Dell is an example of this. In 2005, it ignored a single blogger's complaint about its poor customer service, only to see that posting set off an avalanche of negative commentary online that eventually reached traditional media outlets such as the Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. In the months that followed, Dell's

customer satisfaction rating, market share, and share price all plummeted (Credit Union, 2007).

Dell has since reworked its social media presence. It has invested years in carefully ensuring it has the requisite skills and infrastructure in place. It has picked out the most influential bloggers in its area and spent time ensuring they understood the company's products and customer service activities. It has also entered forums, where it looks for complaints and resolves them. And most famously, Dell has launched IdeaStorm, a site where users can suggest product and service innovations. Thus, the company is a prime example of how to listen to consumers and build a community through dialogue and relevant action (Blyth, 2009).

4.3 Social Media Critics

Social media critics question the value of participating in online branding efforts using blogs and social networking sites. They are quick to point out that while social media sites are 'free' in terms of setting up the account and integrating other services, they are not as easy or cheap as some may think (Marks, 2009). One of the most significant costs for businesses is their employees' time. Keeping a presence on these sites takes resources.

Further, mining public conversations is a way of tracking trends and observing common perceptions about brands, but it tends to be less effective for understanding challenges and unmet needs. Moreover, some critics are dismissive about the power that blogs and other forums might hold over brands. They contend that companies may get a

snapshot of comments, but all that is really known about those customers is that they are vocal online.

Marketers need to know how active their customers are on social technologies. A small group of vocal consumers can have a significant impact on a brand's decision to change communications strategies. For example, in the fall of 2008, Johnson & Johnson's Motrin distributed an advertisement of a mother complaining that wearing your baby "in fashion" via a sling, can cause back and neck pain. The video offended some in the social media sphere and a group of Twittering moms got the brand to pull the ad and issue an apology on its site (Klaassen, 2009). But according to a Lightspeed Research survey, almost 90 percent of women had never seen the ad. And once they saw it, 45 percent like the video, 41 percent had no feelings about it, and 15% did not like it (Klassen, 2009). So while the Internet has made it easier than ever for consumers to get their opinions heard, marketers need to be wary about whose opinions they are actually hearing.

Similarly, critics may question the importance given to blog comments and postings. While a brand may be mentioned in a number of blogs, companies should be aware of how influential that blog may be in the online realm. The blog's traffic, the number of articles, comments, and how frequently other blogs link to the blog, all help answer the question of how influential it is and whether it needs to be monitored or considered in branding initiatives (Breakenridge, 2008).

Finally, critics question the staying power of social media and whether social networking in particular is a vanishing trend. The percentage of Twitter users in a given month who return the following month has declined to below 30 percent for most the the past year, according to Nielsen Wire, and MySpace also recently suffered a decline in

monthly visitor traffic (Marks, 2009). Thus, some critics are skeptical of businesses

committing time and resources to sites which may not be around in the long run.

4.4   Using Social Media to Enhance Trust and Brand Loyalty

New media channels can provide interactive content to help build loyal and long-

term customers. A primary goal of Internet marketing is to effectively keep

communication lines open. The more firms communicate with their customers directly,

the more trust and brand loyalty they will build. One critical shift in branding is the move

from using an emotional selling proposition to a "popular loyalty proposition,"

(Donaldson, 2007, p. 19). Here, smart brands build strong communities around them. The

consumers here do not want to be sold to, but instead want to be reliably informed in

order to make a sound purchasing decision. When a community of passionate advocates

who share the brand's beliefs is built, the dialogue inspires trust, relevance, and renewed

energy around the brand. Enabling a forum where customer reviews and ratings can be

posted also builds trust and loyalty. Indeed, allowing customers to provide true feedback

about products on a company's site builds instant trust with shoppers (Berkley, 2007).

4.5   Measuring Results

The Web provides an enormous level of response and tracking. HTML,

hyperlinks, and cookies allow for the tracking of people's online usage and behaviour.

With click-through tracking, marketers can assess the performance of online marketing

programs and Web pages (Kania, 2001). The easiest way to measure the strength of a

brand online is by reviewing website traffic reports and looking at the top referrals to the

site. If a high percentage of people are finding the company website through "direct request," this can show strong name branding (Berkley, 2007). Here, tracking the number of people who actually type in the Web address (URL), rather than finding the site through other means, can help measure whether an online brand has significant awareness. Also, looking at the number of return visitors and repeat buyers over the course of an online branding effort can also be used to measure impact.

It takes time, effort, and involvement to create community. Its value is in the long-term impact on sales. In an online environment in which customers expect to have a relationship with brands, a successful campaign may run for months or even years. A variety of methods can be used to measure social media marketing results including mentions on blogs and in media, comments on the content, real-time blog advertising results, and click-throughs to the company website (Ochman, 2009). As well, precise statistics can be gathered from sites including Google Trends, Twitter search, Google Analytics, BackType, and Compete. However, some of these measurements do not provide data about attitudes or brand awareness.

5: Conclusion

Brands should exist inside the social media platforms that consumers spend time in. They should be creating content and they should be developing the applications and services that enhance a user's web experience. Benefits of adopting social media within the company branding strategy include revenue growth via access to larger, more diverse audiences, reduced mass media costs through the more effective spending of marketing and advertising dollars, innovative ideas from consumers (R&D), and relevance in the mind of consumers by showing cultural alignment with the rising expectations of demanding, participatory consumers.

By understanding the beliefs that underlie consumers' evaluations of a brand and the importance of various attributes or benefits, the marketer is better able to "develop communication strategies for establishing, maintaining, increasing, modifying, or changing brand attitudes," (Belch, Belch, & Guolla, 2005, p. 126). By actively participating in online conversations, companies are engaging with their customers and demonstrating that they care about their opinions, and this gives them a fair shot at influencing those opinions (Credit Union, 2007). Responding to negative comments online, by either engaging the creator in a discussion to try and improve the situation, or by dealing with whatever problem the consumer has been so vocally complaining about online, can help maintain and enhance a brand's reputation.

Companies need to have a clear social media strategy included in the overall communications strategy before going into any social media network. Basic social media strategy is about linking conversations or adding value to them, as opposed to forcing the brand's message on people. Before engaging in social media, companies need to take the time to find out what people are already saying about their brand in these spaces. It is from there that the brand can work out how best to add to that conversation. Brands will increasingly use social media to try and make themselves stand out. For those that succeed, the rewards in terms of loyalty and engagement have the potential to be great.

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