Brand Communication Challenges in Getting Young Customer Engagement

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Abstract

It is important for the Brands of products and services that address young people to get to know very well this consumer segment, although they are extremely open minded, bold, friendly and great fans of brands. Nevertheless they are not so easy to deal with or to be convinced by one brand or another, but once they prove to be loyal they are highly valuable. In order to win their loyalty, companies must take into account a certain number of aspects.

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Keywords: young customer, brand communication, community

1. Introduction

Although some differences between generations have always existed, modern generations are often associated with rapid cultural changes in particular in terms of musical tastes, fashion, culture, and political orientations.

Every generation has its own trends and cultural impact. They can be differentiated by their own language, which makes the communication between them very difficult. Thus, the new generations are trying to define themselves with something different from the previous ones by adopting their own language, various jargons and slang.

On the other hand, the development of technology is another factor that caused further gaps between generations; for example, communication skills could represent for the mature generations the means to write and speak but for younger generations may represent skills in using e-mail and instant messaging.

Young people are more increasingly defined by the use of personal communication devices, such as smart phones, instant messaging, e-mail, social networking, and the result of all these was the creation of a very inventive,

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private and abbreviated written language. Depending on how modern, original or trendy is the gadget they use or own they may belong to a particular social category or they may be included or not in a particular social group – this aspect has become very important.

2. Typologies of young consumers of brands

The time spent watching TV or listening to the radio was replaced on the teenagers’ agenda by the time spent at the computer, chatting with a group of friends on social networks and going out with friends.

The relevance, consistency and authenticity of the message of original brands may become a true “addiction” among the youth, which in turn they send messages quickly and easily; on the other hand, they charged violations of any kind. Although the general trend is for the public to become more active and involved in choosing the brand, consumer reactions to messages of course may vary according to cultural, social or economic factors.

A study by GfK Romania at the end of year 2009, in order to render a portrait of today's youth, focusing on teenagers and young people aged between 15 and 20 showed that young people today compared to those in 2005, are more detached, self-centered and less willing to assume their social responsibilities; they are more radical and intolerant and more dependent on virtual communication.

Also, young people aged of 15-20 years are very sensitive to how they are perceived by people around them, especially by those within the groups to which they belong, wanting to impose themselves and stand out.

Also, we should not forget the eternal conflict between generations. Young people want to be taken seriously by adults, to be heard and valued, even admired and appreciated for their ideas and actions. Generations today are self-confident and always question all the rules of society due to their eagerness to live new experiences, to test everything on their own.

For young people today, "image" is the one that matters. Thus, they set a high value on their looks, their welfare largely depends on appearance; for them, not only the clothing is important, but also the whole look, including haircuts and other accessories. Clothes are extremely important for both girls and boys; they choose them carefully and spend a large amount of money they get on clothes with no regret.

Technology makes easier their lifestyle and it is a status indicator. The more "technologized" they are, the more they have access to activities, information; they can do things that make them visible. Moreover, depending on how modern, authentic or trendy is the gadget used or owned by the young people, they may belong to a particular social group, or they may be included or not in a certain group – this aspect is very important for teenagers.

Regarding the habits of Internet use, 62% out of Internet users are curious people who enjoy documenting themselves, so they are searching different information on Google; 58% of respondents use Internet for checking e-mails, whereas 55% of respondents use it for reading news.

Listening to music is as important as reading. Thus, 49% said that listening or downloading music is one of the three most usual activities on the internet, compared to 42% who read news on the internet. (GfK Romania)

3. Young consumers and brands

However, despite the impulse of consumers’ small attachments to the brand, brands need to constantly and creatively socialize by means of bold actions and smart thinking to instill passionate online consumers in an environment that is quite new. The brand must be able to communicate through social media which is about to be invented where the consumer is always ready to get involved. As fast as the social media works, just as quickly brands have to adapt themselves. The famous Professor David Aaker stated that "the brand is the most valuable real estate asset in the world, a corner of the customer's mind. The brand is a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer." David Aaker defines brand as" a distinctive name or symbol used to identify products belonging to a producer and to differentiate them from the competition. Besides brands, there are consumer goods which are devoid of personality, without life." (2006)

According to Hawkins and others (2001), each consumer will purchase that brand that best suits his personality. Referring to the brand personality, Aaker (1997) defines it as "a set of human characteristics associated with it", and Larson (2002) says that brand personality is the first reaction that people have when they hear, taste, see or feel a product belonging to a particular brand.
Marketers need to focus on strong strategies that emphasize the relevant characteristics of their brand personality, thus providing amazing new understandings that lead to strategic changes of positioning and communication (Naresh, Sheena G., 2012).

Brand Capital brings a higher profit margin, enabling premium pricing and sale promotions; it ensures business growth through brand extensions, it provides privileged position on the shelf and enjoys various marketing programs. Cost/efficiency-oriented companies are constantly preoccupied to improve procurement, product design, production, promotions and logistics. For many businesses, however, the brand name and what it represents is the most important asset, the basic competitive advantage.

In recent years, much about brands, brand extensions, global branding and brand value has been written. The specialized literature is extremely extensive and detailed testing and showing specific effects, but neglecting empirical findings that may contribute to a better understanding of how consumers perceive brands and, in particular, young consumers. However, research on brands can benefit from a broad perspective that integrates empirical findings into a comprehensive framework on the psychology of brands.

The consumer psychology of brands is centered mainly on the unique characteristics of brands. A brand can develop connections with other brands. Brands can be anthropomorphized and many of them are regarded as cultural symbols. Finally, consumers can organize communities around brands where they may experience the characteristics of brands and react to them. Consumers have different levels of psychological involvement with the brands due to different needs, motivations and goals. The levels of engagement can be represented by 3 levels. The deepest level is focused on the object, the attachment driven by functionality; at this level the user requests information related to the brand in order to obtain the benefits of its utility. The second level is the self-commitment; the brand is seen as relevant to the consumer. The third level is the social engagement with the brand, which is seen as a socio-cultural interpersonal perspective, which gives the feeling of belonging to a community. Thus, starting from the bottom to the top, the brand proves to be very important to the consumer.

There are five different processes that can be distinguished in relation to the brand (Schmitt B, 2011): identification (category, associations and comparison of brands), experience (sensorial, affective), integration (information about the brand into a global concept, personality and relationship with the brand), signaling (identity signal, cultural symbol) and connection with the brand (attitude towards to the brand, personal attachment to the brand and brand connection within the community).

Young people do not belong to a community only out of altruism, but they want to get something in return for their involvement. To them the only thing that matters is the emotional benefits they can get in the community: the connection they have with others within the group, the appreciation for what they do. The younger generation is interested in networking and in a context that gives them the freedom and the space to express themselves and when these needs are met, then community becomes relevant.

Teens will be more attracted by playful brands which offer them a competitive context in which outstanding themselves. Instead, young adults want to be challenged and they also want to have their status recognized.

For the modern consumer products and outstanding services have become more accessible as a result of increasing level of the discretionary income (Kastanakis and Balabanis, 2012). Thus, the younger generation is more open to new concepts of products and outstanding services as meaning of a lifestyle they desire. (Phau and Cheong, 2009; O'Cass and Siahtiri, 2013).

4. Brand communication with youngers

It is a very well known fact that young people spend more time connected to the internet and use extensively social networks. What it is also known about the new generation is that they are very stubborn compared to the previous ones and they do not accept rules as easily. The rules change when it comes to communication with young people.

Young people spend most of their time online, on social networks and playing online games (Benjamin, 2010; Jung & Kang, 2010). Therefore, advertisers should use these tools especially when they want to disseminate promotional messages and to reach a certain audience (Klein, 2009). Scientific research carried out shows the increasing level of online games use. (Benjamin, 2010), so special attention must be paid to integrating interactive persuasive messages which are believed to have a strong effect (cognitive, affective and conative) on the "gamer's"
(player) answer to the brand (Lee and others, 2009). Persuasive messages in online games, known as "in-game advertising" or "brand placement in games" imply the integration of branded products or logos during the online game; this is similar to product placement during movies.

In their communication, brands must consider a number of key issues (recommendations made by the Romanian Youth Focus 2012):

a. Companies must tell young people relevant things about the brand they represent and how it can be useful, and not the way the young people imagine the brand is.
b. Brands must be authentic in communication and to try to recreate a world that they do not understand.
c. Brands must be original, this is a desirable characteristic during the phase of collaborative and viral marketing, in which the consumer dictates media; and those who can most easily spread the message are young people.
d. Brands must assume the role of entertainment provider, generating topics of conversation, something that young people expect from them, but not trying old methods but to come up with something new.
e. However, brands have to be consistent, this feature is very important for public as they easily can be critical on deviations. So, it is really harmful for the brands to be daring online and in other media to remain to traditional communication.
f. Brands need to let young people to carry the conversation, to join them and not try to change them. Moreover, they must be part of a story relevant to young people, in which to integrate themselves very well, but the brand to be secondary.
g. A brand cannot build a community, but can only be integrated in a coherent way in an existing community supporting it and lending its values.
h. To make an effective community marketing, brands need to identify niches that they can use to determine who the opinion leaders are and to associate their image with them in a relevant way for the community to which they belong.
i. Brands should offer young people the means to make a difference in the world.

5. Conclusions

The big problem that brands have in the communication with the young generation comes from superficial interpretation of the findings from the focus groups regarding the behavior of young people. Most times, brands attempt to have a more interesting look but they overlook to differentiate themselves. Authenticity lies in doing things and not just telling them and companies should communicate with young people, they should do something more in order to draw attention to their audience through interaction, involvement and implementing brand values in real life.

Research and personal observations have shown that the new generations perceive commercial communication in a totally different way. Even if it is about major brands it does not mean that they represent an authority for the young people and they will not agree to buy a product just because a company/institution requests them this. Given this situation, we need more communication with the young public. Therefore, brands should be more than friends of the young and less the authority imposing rules.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/133255, Project ID 133255 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

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