Online brand communities: a literature review

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Abstract

Competition in the global market is driving companies to find innovative approaches to business. The Internet explosion resulted in the transition from physical business places (companies, shops, etc.) to a virtual ones, creating new sources of competitiveness for those companies that are able to take advantage of this opportunity. Among them, one of the most promising is the online brand communities, born from the combination of conventional (physical) brand communities and Web 2.0 technologies. Indeed, a company exploitation of the online brand communities can hugely increase knowledge about customer needs, preferences and desires (actual and potential). This paper presents a literature review on online brand communities focusing on their distinctive characteristics. We highlight the managerial implications related to the exploitation of online brand communities, identifying which set of key factors companies should leverage on in order to improve their business.

1. Introduction

The transition from a material economy to an information economy, knowledge-based and interactive communication, together with the enormous development of communication technologies, in particular the rise of the Internet, has led to the growing of concept of online brand communities (OBCs) (Fernandez, 2010), which today can be a great opportunity for business improvement of the firms. OBCs, in fact, are an effective means of influencing the customer’s purchasing behavior (Adjei, Noble, & Noble, 2010) and boost the ability of a firm to know the thoughts of their customers through the monitoring of the information exchanged (Kozinets, 2007; Cothrel & Williams, 2000). “Recognizing that brand communities can become important marketing instruments and understanding who joins a community for what reasons may have potentially powerful managerial implications” (Ouwersloot & Odekerken-Schröder, 2008). The growing development and success of such consumer communities show that “this form of online organization is creating a large impact in the business community” (Ganley & Lampe, 2009).

2. What is an online brand community?

a. The Origins: from the idea of community to the concept of brand community

Historically the idea of community was thought geographically bounded, based on familiar and emotional values, typically in a rural context. Early sociologists accused the rational, mechanical, depersonalizing urban society of the...
nineteenth century to have destroyed communities. Soon, however, what remained of communities acquired, thanks to the great development of the mass media and new telecommunications technologies, an important new ability to share an identity transcending geographical boundaries including people far away from each other. This contributed to the birth of modern marketing in the consumer culture that placed first communal consumptions of brands and then the brand itself at the center of the common identity of some communities. The ability to communicate became cheaper and more accessible so members were able to establish the collective practical and emotional relationship between them outlining the brand community as a dispersed network of social relations marked by affinity and emotional bonds situated within consumption context (Bender, 1978; Muniz & O’Guinn 2001).

b. Definition and characteristics

An OBC is a brand community that take place in a virtual setting in which the members’ interaction is primarily Internet-mediated (Füller, Jawecki, & M’uhlbachner, 2007). Hence first of all an OBC is a brand community that is defined as “specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). The brand communities are specialized due to their focus on branded goods or services. These consumer communities differ from traditional communities due to to their commercial nature and members’ common interest, admiration, sympathy and even love for a brand (Albert, Merunka, & Valette-Florence, 2008). The fundamental peculiarity of the OBC resides in the ability of its members to interact with each other. In general consumers involved in a OBC share their interest for a specific brand exchanging information and knowledge or simply expressing their passion and these social interactions influence customers’ relationship with the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002). The OBCs’ core factor is the brand itself but ultimately they exist and persist due to the relationships among their members (Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008). The social identity of the brand communities is implied by the fact that the three key commonalities (markers) of the communities are always present in brand communities: consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions and moral responsibility (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Consciousness of kind is the most important marker. It describes the fact that members feel a solid connection to the brand but more significantly they feel a stronger connection toward one other. The members perceive what Bender (1978) call “we-ness”, a shared feeling of belonging that create a differentiation and separation between users of their brand and users of other brands (Fournier, 1998; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). The membership to the brand community involves a sense of belonging to a distinctive social category (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005) although inspired by an explicitly commercial and competitive marketplace ethos (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). McAlexander et al. (2002) even extended this into four types of relationships: consumer-brand, consumer-product, consumer-company and consumer-consumer. Perpetuating consciousness of kind often implies two social processes: legitimacy and oppositional brand loyalty. The former is the one by which members who are real knowers and appreciators of the culture, history, traditions and symbols of the brand tend to marginalize those who are not; the latter, through of antagonism toward competitive brands (Di Pillo, Cricelli, Gastaldi, & Levialdi, 2010), define and delimit “what the brand is not and what the brand community members are not” (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Shared rituals and traditions: through this social process the brand community members maintain, reinforce and diffuse, within and beyond the community, the culture, the set of value, norms, behaviors, specific language, signs and symbols, myths, history and consciousness of the community itself (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinaliu 2008, Muniz & O’Guinn 2001). Moral responsibility is a sense of moral responsibility, which leads the community members to feel a commitment to other community members and to the community as a whole (Capce & Costa, 2013; Casaló et al., 2008). Muniz & O’Guinn (2001) notes that the moral responsibility manifests itself through the community members’ attitude to retain old members and integrate new ones and to support them to enjoy a meaningful brand’s consumption experience. Moreover, customer loyalty, advocacy as positive word-of-mouth and resilience to negative company news depend on the customer perception about the company socially responsible behavior (Costa and Menichini, 2013; Calabrese, Costa, Menichini, Rosati, & Sanfelice, 2013; Calabrese, Costa, Menichini, & Rosati, 2013) and OBCs can play an important role in enhancing public awareness about the company.
social commitment. Indeed, the externalities deriving from companies’ activities on the local environment and on the society (Campisi & Gastaldi, 1996; Bianco, Campisi, & Gastaldi, 1995), with respect to the regional economic growth and the local communities’ interests (Campisi & La Bella, 1988; Campisi & Nastasi, 1993), lead consumers to reconsider the sustainability of the current business approaches, making them more responsible and sensible toward environmental and social issues (Capece & Costa, 2013) and reinforcing the importance of OBC in developing an ethical control over companies. Finally, there is one last aspect that it is worth to mention about OBCs: their impact on a company Relational Capital. A company Relational Capital consists in large part in the quantity and quality of the company relationships with its customers, involving the company image (Costa, 2012; Calabrese, Costa, & Menichini, 2013). For this reason, OBCs’ dynamics can have a huge influence on the enhancement or deterioration of the company Relational Capital.

3. Towards online brand communities in the Web 2.0 context: sociological and technological aspects

OBCs have been born in a virtual setting, that is, a computer-mediated environment that made available services such as chat rooms, newsgroups and discussion forums where members interacted with each other substantially exchanging and sharing information and emotions. However, with the advent of next-generation Internet, commonly known as Web 2.0, the interaction between the members, a distinctive feature of the OBC, has had an enormous acceleration facilitating their participation. Web 2.0 describes the switch from Internet-enabled delivery of content (web 1.0) to participation-based Internet communities (Adebanjo & Michaelides, 2010). The Web 2.0 paradigm is essentially connectivity and participation (Wu & Fang, 2010). In this context, the Web 2.0 technology such as video sharing, blogging, social bookmarking, social networking, exploit and reinforce the social aspect of the OBC through the multiple virtual connections among consumers thanks to which they can build relationships and easily share content and interests in relation to brand consumption (Fournier & Avery, 2011). Buttons "share this" or "I like" present on Facebook, the one billion users social media (Facebook.com, 2013), testify to the social nature of relations. These features outline a new form of brand community: the embedded brand community, characterized by ease of applicability, access to unbelievable numbers of consumers, at high speed, at low cost (Zaglia, 2013). It is worth noting due to web 2.0 the power is shifted from marketers to consumers on the web determining high potential risk for the firms. Indeed new web technologies allow critical consumers to easily network together and create an earthquake in the brand (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

4. Key factors

OBCs have a number of characteristics related to the modality of the general interaction between their members. Corporate managers should know them to be able to achieve desirable results from the exploitation of related opportunities. We identified in the literature at least four key factors. The first is the level of participation and interaction of members in the community and among themselves, i.e. the degree of social involvement in the community (Casaló, Flavian, & Guinalíu 2010). The second is the level of quality of relationships within the community and it is expressed in terms of satisfaction, that is an overall assessment made by a consumer about sharing in the community and consequently benefits obtained (Adjei et al., 2010; Casaló et al. , 2010). The third is the level of identification, that is, the degree to which a consumer feels himself as part of the community recognizing similar to other members of the community, and unlike non-members (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Casaló et al., 2010) . The fourth is the level of quality of communication expressed in term of four dimensions of the information exchanged: timeliness, relevance, frequency and duration (Adjei et al. , 2010). The first three factors influence positively the process of community promotion and the consumer loyalty to the brand around Which the community is developed (Casaló et al., 2010). Participation, that is member to member interaction, being similar to a process of socialization, is also, with the moderating effect of human capital and brand knowledge (Costa & Evangelista, 2008), positively associated with the processes of innovation and value creation (Capece & Costa, 2009). Online community lead users and consumers become a powerful source of innovation and new ideas (Wu & Fang, 2010; Brands, Jackets, & de Gennaro, 2011). The fourth factor, communication quality, affect positively
purchase decisions through the reduction of the associated degree of uncertainty and this is positively influenced by the presence of members with high level of competence (Adjei et al., 2010).

5. Conclusions

From a marketing perspective the OBCs seem to be a seem to be a fertile ground for improving business. The key factors identified give indications on what levers managers could act. It's important to note, however, that in a context in which the evolving Internet is constantly changing and removing old paradigms, not only the brand managers but also the R&D managerS must understand the mutable online behavior if they wish to develop online communities around their brands, beneficial, sustainable but also protected from risks arising from the new scenarios of Web 2.0.

References


