

Social Media Research: Influencing the Influencers

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1. Executive summary

One of the central concepts in marketing theory is the idea that some individuals are more influential than others, and that these influencers play a central role in driving adoption of new products and services. From a customer service perspective, when these influencers are dissatisfied, they are able to drive disproportionately large numbers of customers, and potential customers, away. This report includes two pieces of research to help organisations engage with, and manage, online influencers.

The first investigates the role of hyperinfluencers in online rate-and-review sites. Whilst existing research suggests that most individuals who post online are motivated by feelings of altruism or reciprocity this study found that the hyperinfluencers viewed reviewing products as a form of entertainment, creating 'game' elements out of the review process.

The second piece of research examined the role of influence on social media sites, specifically Facebook, and questions whether it is possible to build effective brand communities on Facebook. The effectiveness of Facebook as a tool for building relationships with customers has been questioned, with some arguing that Facebook has only a limited value for marketers as a platform for promotions and offers. The research indicates that effective brand communities can be built on Facebook, but many brands are currently adopting social media community strategies that actually destroy brand value.

For both pieces of research recommendations are provided for best practice in maximising the beneficial effect of online influencers, and minimising the potential for damaging brands online.

2. Introduction

Much of the early history of the web was concerned with ‘buzz marketing’ and the development of strategies and tactics to get customers talking about firms online. With the rise of social media, consumer review sites, brand communities and other online communication channels the challenge is no longer *whether* consumers are talking about you, it’s *what* they are saying.

This report does not consider everything that consumers write online, but instead considers two areas in which consumer influence can be greatest. Specifically, the report looks at structured or semi-structured rather than unstructured opinion. Structured opinion refers to consumers posting on specific category or product related sites. For example, consumer rate & review sites such as TripAdvisor or Amazon. These are particularly important as they are well indexed in search engines and present a large number of relevant consumer opinions in the same place. Semi-structured opinion refers to content on areas such as Facebook company pages, or ‘niche’ online brand communities such as MoneySavingExpert or Mumsnet. Whilst not as targeted as rate & review sites, these sites do tend to provide multiple opinions around a product or service in the same place and are also well indexed by search engines. What they lose in targeting, they make up for in allowing product related conversations between consumers which can serve to intensify the effect of opinion.

This report presents two pieces of research that outline different aspects of consumer influence online. The first investigates the motivations of ‘hyperinfluencers’, individuals who post a particularly large number of product centric content online. Whilst these individuals may not be as prolific in terms of volume of words as many online posters given the highly targeted product context in which they do post they impact of their online interactions can be very significant. The second considers whether it is possible to use social media, specifically Facebook, to build genuinely engaging brand communities.

3. Research Project 1: Hyperinfluencers

3.1. Research Background

The idea that the individuals may be more influenced by each other than by media has been a theme in consumer and social research for more than half a century (Roch, 2005). A key aspect of this research is the role of the influencer. The traditional role of the influencer is often viewed through a two-step process with a (relatively) small group of individuals who form and lead opinions that are then passed onto others via interpersonal relationships (Grewal et al. 2000). Understanding the role of influencers is important in a marketing context. For example, if certain types of dissatisfied customers are likely to complain more loudly, and be listened to more avidly by *potential* customers, then it is important to learn how to manage them. On the other hand if certain customers are more likely to be effective at spreading positive comment about certain products and services, then they need to be identified, and encouraged. After all, this sort of buzz marketing is a highly efficient and cost effective type of marketing activity.

Some recent research has questioned the 'influencer hypothesis', specifically the idea that some people are significantly more influential than others when it comes to discussing products and services. In particular the role of hyperinfluencers has been questioned. Hyperinfluencers are individuals with the ability to influence large numbers of others, typically defined as influencing more than 100 others (Watts & Dodds, 2007). Watts and Dodds (2007:454) go as far as to suggest that hyperinfluencers are "more a theoretical possibility than an empirical reality". They argue that what is required for ideas to spread is not powerful influencers, but rather people who are more easily influenced.

Into this somewhat confused research picture has emerged the internet, with the potential to significantly extend the costs, benefits and reach of influencers. Whilst the web might provide individuals with a large audience for their views, is this platform more similar to existing models of media influence or does it reflect, as the hype around social media marketing suggests, a means of delivering influence on a larger scale? Recent studies suggest that increasing opportunities for two-way interactions via online social networks and rate & review sites provide a means of influence with many similarities to existing face-to-face methods. At the same time whilst similar language may be used in describing these relationships, online 'friends' and 'followers' cannot be considered analogous to their real world namesakes.

The goal of this study was to see if traditional motivations for partaking in online 'communities' still stand for such hyperinfluencers who post a particularly large number of product reviews. We focus specifically on product reviews rather than all forms of online commentary, as they are likely to have the most significant individual impact on other consumers. This reflects the key role that product rate & review sites play in consumer information seeking online. Put simply, due to the mechanisms through which search engines operate, information on these rate & review sites is likely to appear relatively high up in search engine results.

Motivations for consumers partaking in online communities that have been found in previous research are highlighted in the table below. These highlight that online contributions are driven by emotional factors, many of which relate to a desire for a social connection with a community.

Table 1: Motivations for consumer participation in online communities

Motivation	What the consumer is thinking
Anticipated Reciprocity	"I want to give and get back"
Reputation	"I want to look good"
Altruism	"I want to feel good"
Sense of belonging	"I want to be part of something"
Emotional connection	"I want to make friends"

Source: Kollock, 1999

However, such research tells about overall contributions to online communities, not specifically product reviews. It also focuses on all online users rather than just those who make the greatest volume of contributions.

3.2. Research Method

This project investigated the role of hyperinfluencers on the Tripadvisor consumer rate and review site. Tripadvisor was selected as the types of services that are rated, primarily hotels, restaurants and leisure destinations provide a standardised format that aids easy comparison. It also provided publically available data that could be used to assess post frequency, enabling accurate identification of influencers. Additionally, Tripadvisor is the dominant firm for providing reviews in the leisure sector, both on its own sites and syndicated through to other travel sites. Therefore, purely in terms of visitors and traffic, it can be considered the most influential travel review site.

Whilst Tripadvisor provides a number of popular general travel forums, the focus here is on specific product reviews. The individual commitment to writing a product review is significantly greater than making a post on a forum. Indeed, there are a number of users who have posted thousands of messages on the discussion forums but have contributed only one or two product reviews. Tripadvisor defines a frequent contributor as someone who has posted greater than nine product reviews. This study adopted a much higher level of influence, selecting individuals who had made at least 60 product reviews. Overall 19 individuals fitting this category responded and were interviewed.

3.3. Findings & Recommendations

Whilst elements of previous consumer motivations were found, there was one new motivation that played a significant role in the decision to post such a large volume of review – put simply, they viewed commenting online as a form of entertainment, *as a game*. The idea of including game elements in customer facing websites as a means of encouraging engagement is becoming increasingly common (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011; Swan,

2012). Indeed, much of the allocation of 'points' for posting reviews on Tripadvisor could be classified as a game element. However, the respondents in this study had created games with their own rules, having subverted those provided by Tripadvisor. These are illustrated below with some quotes from interviews.

One aspect was the idea that individuals actively went out of their way to review new places based on the 'rules' of the game, and that sometimes this even meant deliberately looking for locations with bad customer service:

"Every time I avoid a crappy restaurant because of a bad review I think 'that's another point' I owe ... so I go find something else to review to stay ahead on points."

"The fun is in [finding] new places and adding them before anyone else."

"I write about good and bad. Sometimes I'll go to a bad restaurant just so I can have a balance of reviews."

However, the greatest source of anger, or at least disappointment, was the response of firms who were the recipients of negative reviews. Frequently, respondents received negative messages back from the business they reviewed even going as far as being threatened with legal action. More generally, respondents felt disappointment that the responses they received were overly defensive and did not reflect the content of their review.

"A restaurant threatened me with a lawyer. I told [Tripadvisor] and they were red flagged. They just didn't get it."

"In some ways you are playing against the hotel... but when they flag me it feels like they are cheating."

"...most places seem to ignore me. They forget I'm a customer."

This brings us to the question of how to best manage these online hyperinfluencers given the findings of this study. Recommendations are made based on two categories.

Play the game

Respondents felt, and expected, that their responses deserved a reply that reflected their motivation for posting a review.

- Engage with respondents, don't threaten them. After all, they have been customers and evidence suggests that (at best) legal threats are typically ineffective and can generate significant bad publicity.
- Provide status and recognition. Companies that engage with influencers most successfully provide status and recognition that helps limit the potential for harmful comments in the future. For example, one hotel chain provided contact details for their managing director direct to any influencer who mentioned a bad experience.
- Make them feel powerful. In this case power is about recognising that the reviewer had a point, and that something will be changed as a result. This comes back to the old adage of 'the customer is always right' - arguing over the finer points of customer reviews online is unlikely to benefit the brand.

Change the rules

Whilst respondents expect a response and engagement, it is still possible to control the channel and mechanisms through which this response and future posts take place.

- Change the channel. Public forums and product review sites are not the best places to manage negative feedback. If hyperinfluencers are likely to be a problem in your industry, make sure that there are opportunities for individuals to easily provide feedback in a manner which provides greater engagement, and entertainment, than they would receive from going straight to a public review site. For example, some companies run formal influencer programmes which provide prizes for people who identify particular problems with a product or service.
- Influence is customer service – not PR. Managing influence is often seen as the responsibility of the PR department. This has its origins in the days when influence was primarily about media influence. This study suggests that the new form of online influencers, particularly hyperinfluencers, would be better more effectively managed if viewed as a (difficult) customer service problem.

3.4. Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that the motivations behind online influencers are more focussed on entertainment than altruism. As a result of this, organisations seeking to influence such hyperinfluencers should build strategies to engage and entertain influencers rather than ignoring or threatening them. Furthermore, this study suggests that the common strategy of considering influencers as a PR problem does not take into account the dyadic and customer-centred response that is required to effectively manage them. Therefore, it is suggested that managing online influencers be operationally considered as a customer service challenge in future.

4. Research Project 2: Brand communities on Facebook

4.1. Research Background

“Facebook is really about communicating and telling stories...a more open world will also encourage businesses to engage with their customers directly and authentically” – Mark Zuckerberg

Previous research has highlighted the many benefits of brand communities, both for brands and consumers. For brands, benefits include increased brand loyalty, equity and advocacy; insights into consumers' needs; and a sustainable source of competitive advantage (Cova & Pace, 2006; McAlexander et al., 2002; Schau et al., 2009; Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). For consumers they include improved physical and social brand experiences and satisfying their need for networks and relationships (Fournier & Lee, 2009). As a result, many companies are seeking to develop a better understanding of how to implement successful brand community strategies. This is even more important in a marketing environment where consumers seek ways to form connections and brands look for cost effective marketing channels beyond the traditional media. Consumers have increasingly focussed their online activities around social networks, so too have marketers seeking to build brand communities. In many markets the term social network has become synonymous with Facebook. Yet, despite the promise of Facebook in terms of user engagement, significant questions have been raised over its value to brands. These problems include a significant number of fake users, insignificant response rates to advertising and limited creation of value even where consumers do engage with brands. This study explores these contradictions and investigates whether effective brand communities can be built upon Facebook, and if so, what strategies can be adopted to improve the development of such communities.

Existing research into successful online brand communities suggests that they have three characteristics (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001):

1. *Consciousness of kind* (which binds the community and distinguishes its members from outsiders),
2. *Rituals and traditions* (which disseminate the community's collective 'meanings, history and culture')
3. *A sense of moral responsibility* (a cohesive 'sense of duty' to both 'the community as a whole' and its 'individual members').

Therefore, to determine whether Facebook is actually a suitable outlet for building effective brand communities research needs to evaluate existing brand communities against these criteria.

4.2. Research Methods

To research this topic qualitative content analysis was performed on the company maintained Facebook pages of eight leader brands: BMW, Harley-Davidson, Jeep, Costa Coffee, Dunkin' Donuts, Lego, Clinique, and L'Oreal. Multiple brands and industries were selected to increase the applicability of the guidelines produced from the research findings,

as building brands on Facebook is a relevant issue for companies in any industry. Additionally, many of these companies had previously been identified as successful proponents of brand marketing strategies. Company maintained rather than consumer maintained pages were selected because the aim of the research was to determine how companies could build brand communities. Data was collected over a period of four months and thematic analysis was carried out.

4.3. Findings & Recommendations

In performing analysis we compared the information posted on brand communities with the key characteristics of successful communities identified by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). Findings suggested that each of the brands researched had at least one of the characteristics required to be identified as a brand community. *Consciousness of kind* was demonstrated through oppositional brand loyalty, with opposition towards competitor brands, or even consumers of competitor brands, acting as a cohesive force within the community. *Rituals and traditions* were reinforced through discussion of brand histories and the sharing of brand stories between consumers. Finally, *a sense of moral responsibility* was demonstrated through high levels of engagement where community members followed a 'sense of duty' to provide new or potential customers with assistance surrounding use of the brand product or services.

Overall, based on this analysis companies can create brand communities on Facebook, but to do this successfully companies should consider the following guidelines:

- Aid the development of consciousness of kind by posting questions that tap into a collective sentiment within the community or incite opposition to people outside the community. Consider posting content that appeals to more marginal members of the community to help legitimacy to develop.
- Help rituals and traditions to develop by: posting photographs and videos that foreground aspects of brand history; sharing brand history facts; or using the Facebook timeline to both draw attention to aspects of brand history and encourage consumers to contribute their own brand history knowledge to it.
- Create a sense of moral responsibility by asking consumers to share their advice and experiences that will assist others' use of the brand.
- Encourage consumers to share meaningful consumption experiences by asking questions that allude to them. Less profound questions about consumption experiences are unlikely to produce this response, but can help by generating interconsumer interaction.
- Create a 'context' for consumer interaction with other consumers and the brand by posting visual content that provides a discussion point.
- Highlight consumer submitted photographs to encourage consumers to share brand experiences and stimulate direct and indirect interconsumer interaction and to create a positive brand experience for consumers.
- Consider posting about events; responding to consumer complaints and questions; creating a brand persona; and running Facebook competitions.

- Contemplate only highlighting geographically bound promotions if there is a corresponding or alternative online promotion for consumers in different geographical locations.
- Be aware that posting event photograph albums and links to non-Facebook-based competitions, and asking consumers to 'like' statements or vote in polls, usually fails to engage consumers.

4.4. Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that effective brand communities can be built on Facebook. As online consumer attention increasingly shifts towards social networks, brands may have little choice but to engage with social media in this way. However, successfully developing a brand community requires going beyond the basic interaction features provided within the site. Additionally, findings suggest that a number of commonly used community building features fail to help build the community and can potentially damage the brand.

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