

SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDING FOR MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS: A MESSAGE STRATEGY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the social media branding communication of one of the world's leading brands on a popular social networking site is explored by applying an existing framework for social media message strategies. Although methods to promote a brand on a social networking site are becoming increasingly difficult due to online clutter, there is still a paucity of research and numerous perspectives on social media branding. The perspective taken in this study is that although the marketer or company still owns the brand on social media platforms, it no longer controls the brand message after it is posted but can still steer the conversation in a constructive way by using a specific message strategy to elicit valuable electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Methods to create a meaningful brand conversation have not yet been addressed adequately through academic research. The findings of this study contribute to the limited body of knowledge on social media branding in that it applies and adds to an existing framework for social media message strategies to elicit meaningful eWOM activities. Social media branding is still in its infancy and brands should be used to make the most of this opportunity to have a social media message strategy linked to the vision and mission of the company.

KEYWORDS

Social media, branding, branding communication, electronic word of mouth, social media networking, social media strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

The way in which brand communication is managed in an online environment, in particular using Web 2.0 technologies, is gaining more interest among scholars. Using social media could play a significant role in enhancing brand related communication. How often users engage (or connect) with the brand on social media (referred to as engagement), is considered an important aspect to determine branding success. At present, the literature on how branding is done in a social networking environment is varied. This is partly because a brand is a multidisciplinary concept with a wealth of definitions. The definition of a brand provided by Opoku, Abratt, Bendixen and Pitt (2007) is adopted for this study because it acknowledges a brand as a "symbol around which social actors, including firms, suppliers, supplementary organizations, the public and customers construct identities". Through various branding techniques, a unique name and brand image are created in the consumers' minds through brand communication via different media (Duncan, 2005).

Christodoulides (2008) recognises the need for a new branding paradigm in the age of co-creation and openness where both the role of stakeholders and companies who generate brand-related content are considered (see also Farquhar 2013).

In this paper, Swani, Milne and Brown's (2013) conceptualisation and measurement of social media branding to the social message strategies of one of the world's leading brands as framed on a popular social networking site, Facebook, is applied and extended. Promoting a brand on social networking sites is becoming increasingly difficult for companies because Web 2.0 technologies are more geared towards consumer engagement through relevant communication than on selling products or services. Brand messages can no longer be controlled in terms of their reach, frequency and distribution (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) and

when communicated on social networking sites, should be depicted as part of the consumer's life (Lieb, 2012). Engagement is a multidisciplinary concept and can thus mean different things in different contexts. Within the context of branding, engagement refers to how a consumer feels about a brand based on specific levels of cognitive, emotional and behavioural activities emanating from direct brand interactions. Many marketing scholars view brand engagement as encouraging brand loyalty (Hollebeek, 2011).

Social networking sites, such as Facebook, can thus give marketers an idea of how users feel about the brand they want to be associated with and create unique opportunities for more interactive consumer-brand relationships. Davis and Piven (2013) refer to this as "social media branding" which occurs when the brand is "outsourced" to the consumers and other stakeholders and is no longer owned by the marketer or company. The perspective of this study, however, is that although the marketer or company still owns the Facebook brand, it no longer controls the brand message after it is posted on the social media platform but can still steer the conversation in a constructive way through a specific message strategy. However, ways to steer this conversation have not yet been addressed adequately.

Even though social media such as Facebook are popular research topics for scholars, not enough studies have been done on branding within the context of effective message strategies on social media networks. There is thus still a paucity of research on what social media brand communication that will most likely generate electronic word of mouth (eWOM) in social media environments should consist of (Yan, 2011). eWOM, a form of viral marketing, refers to users using various online content sharing tools to instantly disseminate interesting information that they regard as notable in some way (Martin & Lueg, 2013) and thus create an immediate "buzz" (Jenkins, 2011). eWOM differs from traditional word of mouth (WOM) in that communication is frequently asynchronous when the sender and receiver are separated by both space and time (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

The array of social media sites on the Internet is endless and growing. In an online environment, communication is increasingly fragmented and controlled by the target audience rather than by the brand (Aaker, 2010). This study focuses only on Facebook, as this social network (with its 1.23 billion monthly users) remains very popular and beneficial for branding by means of brand pages (Protalinski, 2014). Davis and Piven (2013) point out that when a brand is represented on a Facebook brand page, it is also linked to other social media technologies such as Twitter (a microblogging site) and Instagram (a photosharing site). Relationships are thus formed based on collective objectives and experiences from dedicated brand fans as well as those who only randomly visit the brand page. When users engage with brand content, they usually react to it by using one-click social plugins such as Like (Facebook), plus 1 (Google +), retweet (Twitter) and other share buttons (Swani et al, 2013). Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) argue that social plugins such as Facebook's like button create new forms of connectivity between users and websites in that external websites can be linked to the Facebook platform and thus create more social connections.

In this study, Swani et al's (2013) three message strategies were applied to Google's Facebook brand page over a period of four months in terms of the use of corporate brand names, emotional content and use/non-use of direct calls to purchase (namely a "hard sell" promotional approach). These message strategies were analysed based on the number of likes and comments generated by each post.

The study contributes to social media branding in that it explored social media message strategies in a specific social media context and the results provide a snapshot idea of the type of social media messages users typically respond to. The concept of social media sharing through the one-click social plugin Like was thus also explored within the context of eWOM. This study further provides insight into social media brand communication that will likely promote eWOM activity by users.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following two research questions:

- (1) Research question 1: What types of social media message strategies were evident on Google's Facebook brand page when applied to branding?
- (2) Research question 2: In what way did Google use these message strategies to elicit eWOM?

3. COMMUNICATING THE BRAND MESSAGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Measuring communication in social media is still complicated and numerous perspectives exist (Bonso'n & Ratkai, 2013). Ghodeswar (2008), for example, explains that branding plays an important role in how a brand is perceived by its target audience based on a distinct vision and the positioning of the brand. The way in which the brand message is communicated should result from this vision and positioning, and helps to focus the communication themes, objectives and media for all brand communications. However, because of all the online clutter, it has become a challenge to be noticed and remembered, to change perceptions, to reinforce attitudes and to create meaningful customer relationships. There are still contradictory viewpoints on whether social media branding plays any significant role in fostering relationships with consumers and that social media should rather connect people and not brands (Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2013). On a social networking site where the message is no longer controlled by the brand, it is particularly important that users strengthen the brand image by endorsing and sharing brand messages; however, often conversations about the brand can become harmful to its reputation (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). If a consumer is very involved with a brand and shares and communicate a great deal about the brand, he or she can be referred to as a brand advocate. In many instances, it is because social networks such as Facebook allow consumers to associate with brands that represent their "ideal self" (Swani et al, 2013).

By adopting Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, it can be argued that consumers who like brands on Facebook do so partly to express themselves and to convey a specific image and identity to others. A social network site such as Facebook is therefore not an over-researched social media site but a powerful eWOM medium that allows consumers essentially to co-create the brand among networked friends but most brands regrettably still lack a suitable strategy and vision and do not fully embrace social features to encourage eWOM. (see Owayang, Tran & Webber 2010).

3.1 Conceptual Framework for the Analysis

The conceptual framework that guided the analysis of Google's Facebook posts for this study was anchored in Swani et al's (2013) research based on three types of social media message strategies for Facebook branding communication that could either encourage or discourage eWOM, namely communicating the company brand name, emotional content and hard selling of a product as indicated in Table 1 below. This particular conceptual framework was chosen to add to the limited body of knowledge on social media message strategies for branding communication to enhance eWOM (Swani et al, 2013).

Table 1. Type of social media message strategy

Type of social media message strategy	Meaning within the context of branding
Company brand name	Mention of the company brand name in the message
Emotional content	Brand-related content generating either negative or positive emotions, containing themes such as fear, humour, romance, sensuousness, adventure, guilt, play/contest and other emotional cues such as conveying congratulations
Hard selling approach/statements	Direct calls to purchases refer to clear statements encouraging prospective buyers to make an immediate purchase, for example these calls to action could be commands to make a purchase

Swani et al's (2013) research findings suggest that Facebook account posts are more successful if they include corporate brand names and avoid "hard sell" or openly commercial statements. Furthermore, the results suggest that including emotional sentiments in Facebook posts is a particularly effective social media strategy for service marketers.

3.2 Facebook Brand Pages

Numerous studies about Facebook brand pages have already been conducted, including the use of brands in identity construction (see Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2011). Facebook as a brand (Patterson, 2012), consumer eWOM responses (Coulter & Roggeveen, 2012), criteria for Facebook marketing (Owyang et al, 2010), consumer engagement (Swani et al, 2013), and impact on brand awareness and purchase intention (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt). Fewer studies have considered social media branding message strategies.

A Facebook brand page is a dedicated site on Facebook that was among others created to create brand awareness and to connect consumers to the brand (Dekay, 2012). The focus of this analysis was not on Facebook marketing but on a branding technique using social media communication by means of posts that were viewed and accessible on users' (brand fans') feeds. Once a brand page is liked, the brand posts (messages) automatically feed into the newsfeeds of the user's network and can be further disseminated to other networked friends or social media platforms. In a way, users then promote the message as a personal referral or endorsement by means of eWOM. Ideally, users as brand fans should become engaged with the brand and discuss their experiences, emotional attachment and loyalty towards the brand (Swani et al, 2013). In this regard, Wallace, Buil and De Chernatony (2014) argue that "liking a brand" can be perceived as a measure of brand engagement in that the number of "likes", shares or comments that a brand's page has can be indicative of the extent of such engagement.

3.3 Google Inc.

According to Interbrand's 2013 best global brands survey, the Google brand was the world's second top brand in 2013 in terms of growth and brand equity (Interbrand, 2014). Google Inc., which was established in 1995, is an American multinational corporation providing internet-related services and products. The company is renowned for continuous innovation and its ability to develop new products and business models that are part of its culture and leadership (Steiber & Alänge, 2013). Davis and Piven (2013) argue that in 2013, the Google was brand worth nearly US\$ 300 billion, which is a result of its unique business model in that brand outcomes of service provision and experience are defined by the stakeholders and users. It is also argued that because of the company's approach to innovate continuously, it has taken some time to treat social media as an area in which to develop (Google grows on people, 2013). Google's Facebook page was chosen for this study because of the good engagement rate as reflected by the page's statistics.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A worldview based on the interpretive research paradigm was adopted for this study in that the researcher tried to explore and interpret social reality dealing with qualitative data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The researcher used a thematic analysis to evaluate Google's Facebook brand page posts to obtain a snapshot idea of the types of social media communication for branding that was evident during the time of the study (as put forward by Swani et al, 2013 – see Table 1). The perspective (see Table 1) consequently guided the researcher in organising all the posts into categories. The researcher also followed qualitative data analysis guidelines by Miles and Huberman (1994) to sort the data into these categories as well as for data reduction (see Bryman, 2012). The content on Google's Facebook brand page was regarded as socio-cultural "texts" and is thus described and explored from a qualitative perspective to uncover conformity with the proposed types of social media communication for branding which were evident at the time of the study (Bowen, 2009). The number of likes for posts, users' and Google's comments on posts and shares to other users were also considered.

4.1 Sample and Unit of Analysis

A total of 59 Facebook posts from November 2013 to February 2014 were analysed to gain a snapshot idea of the types of social media message strategies for branding which were evident at the time of the study as well as how Google managed them for eWOM. Four months were considered enough to determine the types of message strategy and engagement on Google's Facebook brand page. The unit of analysis was a social artefact, namely Google's Facebook brand page posts. These posts were retrieved from Facebook, converted into a Word text file and organised into message strategy categories by applying and extending Swani et al's (2013) types of social media communication for branding. Miles and Huberman's (1994) guidelines for qualitative data analysis were also followed (see Bryman, 2012).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are now explained and discussed in accordance with the types of social media message strategy for branding as put forward by Swani et al (2013).

From November 2013 to February 2014, the Google Facebook brand page generated 59 posts which elicited 59 877 likes, 12 105 user comments and 10 611 user shares. Of these, 13 were posts with emotional content, 31 were posts with the company brand name, and 14 were posts with the company brand name as well as some emotional content, which were treated by the researcher as a new category. Surprisingly only one post contained a hard selling approach where Google promoted a client's product. This amounts to an overall engagement rate of 4.94%, which is far above the average – as put forward by Ken (2014) and Singh (2013).

These findings are elucidated in the tables below.

Table 2. Posts containing emotional content

No of posts with emotional content	Number of likes	Number of user comments	Number of comments by Google	Number of shares by users	Engagement rate
13	33694	4023	0	6825	8.37%

The 13 posts containing emotional content had an engagement rate of 8.37% and also the most number of likes of all the posts during this period. Topics during this period concentrated on congratulating historical figures with their birthdays or remembering heroic figures, wishing brand fans a happy new year, fighting for a free web and a call to sign a petition to reform government surveillance. Even though the engagement rate for these posts is high, the general theme of the users' comments concentrated on trying to solve customer issues that they could not solve through other channels and on self-promotion in that they posted links to their own pages or businesses. There was no evidence of Google responding to these posts or steering the posts in the direction of a meaningful conversation about the brand. Even if the posts were intended to elicit a conversation in the form of a question, users simply promoted their own businesses or pages. The number of shares of these posts is indicative of eWOM activity, with 6825 shares to friends and connections in other networks.

Table 3. Posts containing the brand name

No of posts containing brand name	No of likes	No of user comments	No of comments by Google	No of shares by users	Engagement rate
31	15131	5862	0	3299	2.58%

Most of the posts during the time of the study contained the company brand name by creating and promoting specific Google applications that ranged from Google Glass, Google Search, Google Chrome,

Google maps, the Google doodle competition and other interesting doodles (image appearing on the search engine page usually linked to a specific event or figure), Google Play, YouTube, Google Trends, the Google Science Fair or sharing links to media coverage about the Google brand (for example an article in *Fortune* magazine reporting on Google being the greatest place to work for). Once again, the engagement rate for these post is impressive, but the general theme of the users' comments were negative comments about the brand and mostly self-promotion in that they posted links to their own pages or businesses. Most of the comments were from Muslims in Afghanistan protesting against a defamatory movie that was uploaded onto YouTube and asking for it to be removed. There was also no evidence of Google responding to these posts or steering the posts in the direction of a meaningful conversation about the brand. The number of shares of these posts is indicative of eWOM activity, with 3299 shares to friends and connections in other networks.

Table 4. Posts containing a hard selling approach

No of posts containing brand name	No of likes	No of user comments	No of comments by Google	No of shares by users	Engagement rate
1	168	75	0	42	2.24%

Only one post contained a hard selling approach. However, this was not directly for Google products but indirectly for an online shopping festival in India – for which Google was in all probability compensated. The general theme of the users' comments was negative commentary about the brand and mostly self-promotion in that they posted links to their own pages or businesses. The number of shares of these posts is indicative of eWOM activity, with 42 shares to friends and connections in other networks.

Table 5. Posts containing company brand name with some emotional content (new category)

No of posts containing brand name	No of likes	No of user comments	No of comments by Google	No of shares by users	Engagement rate
14	9314	2023	0	1039	4.60%

During the time of the study, 14 posts contained the Google brand name with some emotional content which were treated as a new category. Topics included promoting the Google search application by linking it to the Westminster Dog show, sharing interesting and funny pictures, and using the search application when stressed out and in need of better organisation during the workday. Some posts referred to the Google maps and linked them to emotional content, for example a unique image of a polar bear of the Canadian tundra (in Churchill, Canada), searching for Santa and the overall holiday spirit. Others linked a brand name application to a historical figure or event. Once again, the engagement rate for these posts is impressive but the general theme of the users' comments were negative comments about the brand and mostly self-promotion in that they posted links to their own pages or businesses. The number of shares of these posts is indicative of eWOM activity, with 1039 shares to friends and connections in other networks.

With regard to research question one: From the findings it is clear that message posts on the Google Facebook brand page at the time of the study mostly contained the Google brand name, followed by the Google brand name with some emotional content, posts with only emotional content and only one post which had a hard selling approach. A fourth category, namely using the brand name linked to some emotional content, was thus also evident. However, the small number of posts with only emotional content elicited the most likes and shares from brand fans, followed by posts concentrating on only the Google brand. This is in line with research conducted by Jenkins (2011) who found that Facebook posts that included emotional content were a particular effective social media strategy to encourage eWOM.

With regard to research question two: Although the Google Facebook brand page had some impressive statistics with regard to the number of likes and the overall engagement rate, closer investigation revealed that this engagement was more about complaints and spam (in the form of self-promotion) than about a

valuable brand conversation. Although millions of fans liked the Google Facebook brand page, there was no real evidence that the brand fans formed an emotional bond with the brand – which was also visible to other members of the same network. However, many posts were shared with Facebook friends on other networks, which could have resulted in more valuable brand conversations (Wallace et al, 2014). When compared by the number of likes, only about 1% of the brand fans actually responded to Google's posts, albeit unconstructively. From Google's side, there was no attempt to respond to brand fans' queries, to encourage a brand conversation to elicit eWOM or to control the number of spam messages. Based on the number of likes on the Google Facebook brand page, the company had many opportunities for users to strengthen the brand's image by endorsing and sharing its brand messages; however, the number of unanswered complaints was also harmful to its reputation (Muñiz & Schau, 2007). This is in line with Owayang et al's (2010) finding that many brands still lack a suitable strategy and vision to embrace and encourage eWOM.

The Google Facebook brand fans did not act as brand advocates (Swani et al, 2013), but used the opportunity to address complaints which they could not solve via other channels, provided mostly negative comments about the Google brand, and promoted their own businesses and pages.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

The study has the following limitations.

- A single case could be questioned, but is useful for comparison with similar studies in future.
- Only one social networking site was included in the study and Google's communication on other social media networking sites could differ from its communication on its Facebook brand page. The company's social media communication was thus not considered from an integrated brand perspective.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Swani et al's framework (2013) could also be applied to Google's Facebook brand page and contributes to the existing body of knowledge on social media branding. However, another category was also identified, namely using the brand name with some emotional content, which also elicits eWOM. Although the engagement rate on the Google Facebook brand page was impressive, no valuable brand conversations took place. The conversations were merely one-way, with Google simply posting messages containing the Google brand name, emotional content and the Google brand name with some emotional content without monitoring the responses or trying to make the most of the conversations started.

Social media branding is still in its infancy and companies should use their brands to make the most of this opportunity to have a social media strategy linked to their vision and mission. The right type of social media brand messages can have a powerful impact on the brand's image, especially brand messages that are linked to emotional content. Although a message cannot be controlled once it is posted on social media, the company can still monitor messages and steer them into a valuable brand conversation. Future studies should include studying social media branding communication by using more social media sites as well as using more than one case from an integrated brand perspective. It would also be useful to conduct more consumer-oriented studies with regard to eWOM.

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