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SOCIAL MEDIA - BIG HEADACHE OR SEA OF OPPORTUNITIES ?

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The world today

We live in a digital world surrounded by smart-phones, tablets, laptops and other electronic gadgets (Savulescu, 2011). In 2010 consumers devoted 32% of their media consumption to online channels, up from 26% two years before (Fournier, Avery, 2011). These numbers increase every year and this is an indication that the society is getting even more addicted to the digital world and to social media.

Companies are also very active in this world, they are working to break through the clutter of companies that are present on various social media networks (Mashable, 2009). Different points of view are presented and discussed by scholars and industry experts regarding the changes that the social media

brought along both for the consumer and the companies. Some might indicate that the power now lays in the hands of the consumers while others think that social media opened an enormous window of opportunities for the companies (Fournier, Avery, 2011). Maybe this isn't that black and white and both parties can benefit from the use of social media.

The Social Media phenomenon started showing its' traces around 1997, when not too many people had personal computers and access to the Internet (Burrow, 2012). Nowadays, there exist various categories of social media and amongst them are: Content Communities, Blogs, Social Networks, Collaboration, Entertainment and lastly Reviews and Opinions (Burrow, 2012). This paper will mainly focus on Social Networks, Blogs and Content Communities while discussing the challenges and opportunities that marketers may face while utilizing these for branding purposes.

Nassar states "Imperatively, the objective of branding is to rediscover the core values of a business, displaying the exclusivity of the services that it offers, highlighting its uniqueness, and differentiating its products from those of its competitors" (2012). For the purpose of this paper the afore-mentioned definition of branding will be applied. Prior to discussing the social media challenges that can be turned to opportunities we can safely say that with the arrival of web 2.0 branding activities became even more important. Companies face more competition and as a result need to strategize more carefully prior to taking actions on social media platforms (Chan-Olmsted S, 2011).

The Social Media Phenomenon brought along one major and influential trend to the practice of online Branding and Marketing and it can be identified as the significant power shift towards the consumer (Deighton, Kornfeld, 2009). This trend alone creates many opportunities and challenges for brands that utilize social media (Fournier, Avery, 2011). The paper will showcase how the consumer can challenge the company through social media and at the same time provide provide enormous opportunities for company's growth.

Raise or Fall on Social Media?

To outline and identify challenges and opportunities brought by social media literature review has been conducted and various cases studies have been examined, they will be discussed throughout the paper.

Brands that are active on social media are faced with numerous challenges. Amongst them is the cultural shift that is required from the management to successfully run social media platforms. It is no longer about making profit or pushing the message into the consumer but rather about being an active listener and knowing when to join the conversation and to respond (Fournier, Avery, 2011). It is about being there for the consumers, staying relevant and being creative. Virgin Mobile knew exactly what

consumers wanted they employed Instagram, the photo sharing application available on smart phones. They have asked the online community to share eleven pictures that should not be on Instagram (BuzzFeed, 2012). One may say that it has nothing to do with Virgin Mobile but it's the opposite, people want to get involved in the fun stuff, which is often unrelated to the brand's core mission. However, this brings exposure and interaction with the brand, so desired by many companies.

Figure 1: 11 Things No One Wants To See You
Instagram (Adapted from Brand Lift, 2012)

A report conducted by Ernst & Young points out another challenge that a marketer may encounter while using social media (Ernst & Young, 2012). As previously discussed social media allows the consumer to co-create with the companies, which in turn empowers them. However, not all social media campaigns turn up they way the company would have anticipated. The report indicated that it is risky to give the users the full power without defining and limiting the variety of potential outcomes. The marketers have to always juggle between making the consumer feel empowered and simultaneously controlling the brand image (Hoffman, Fodor, 2010).

McDonalds became a victim of an online backlash after handing consumers the power to co-create user generated content (UGC). UGC can be defined as any content negative or positive that was uploaded by online users (Christodoulides, Jevons, Bonhomme, 2012). McDonalds decided to launch a feel good campaign to praise the farmers that supply them with various ingredients. They wanted consumers to share positive stories about the company using #MeetTheFarmers. However, people decided not to follow McDonald's advice and instead spread the negative impression they have (CBC news, 2012).

These kinds of situations usually cannot be controlled; it can damage the reputation or create more PR for the company depending on how the management will react to it. Larger Brands are especially prone to being attacked, the bigger the brand the more scrutiny it will face (Fournier, Avery 2011).

Figure 2 – McDonalds Twitter Backlash (Adapted from NeonWin 2012)

As previously discussed, social media breaks down to various categories and platforms. This means that more channels need to be managed whilst maintaining consistency and synergy amongst them. At the same time, the brand needs to take advantage of each of the medium's unique capabilities. This creates more work for the brand manager; it requires more monitoring and highly efficient strategizing (Chan-Olmsted S, 2011). Additionally, brand owners need to navigate their content through the UGC without pushing only their agenda (Keitzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, Silvestre, 2011).

One of the advantages of the social media that is highly valued by marketers and brand managers is its ability to facilitate conversations about the brand between numerous members in various communities around the world (Christodoulides, 2009). People who feel strongly connected to a particular brand have the opportunity to spread the message and at the same time hear what others have to say about it. Additionally, social media has the power to invite people into the co-creation process (Christodoulides, 2009). Gatorade, a company providing the world with sport drinks can be used as a great example of a brand that uses social media to co-create, spread the messages and facilitate conversation (Gatorade, 2013). The company had a mission in mind to bring social media to the core of its marketing efforts and as a result they have created the so-called "Mission Control". Mission Control is a room within the marketing department that has a number of monitors that track all the social media dialogues that occur on numerous mediums about Gatorade (VML, 2013). The team responsible for mission control monitors, engages users, conducts experiments and provides the audiences with the most up to date information not only about the Gatorade brand but also about the performance of their favorite athletes (Mashable, 2010).

Figure 3 – Gatorade Mission Control (Adapted from Mashable 2010)

Not all companies find the perfect formula to social media use but Gatorade definitely managed to do so. They didn't only succeeded in attracting large amount of people, they also successfully combined offline and online marketing. They went from being a brand that provides customers with healthy sports drinks to becoming the largest participatory brand in the world (VML, 2013). They not only monitor how the brand is performing on the social media but they allow its fans and customers to gain access to the world-renowned athletes. By doing so, they facilitate conversation, keep consumers interested in their brand and encourage them to interact, communicate and spread the message (Fournier, Avery 2011).

By employing social media and creating online campaigns that involve consumers, brand managers fulfill the human need to communicate. If one examines the Maslow Hierarchy of needs, specifically the three upper rows, social media fulfills our to need to belong and to feel accepted and fit in. Everyone can find its place online and feel that they are accepted and party of a community. If brand managers involve its consumers and fulfill their social needs, consumers will most likely have the incentive to return. Brand managers need to find how to involve consumers without them thinking that they are doing it for the benefit of the brand. Consumers should want to initiate online conversations in support of the brand. (Singh, Sonnenburg, 2012).

Figure 4 – Maslow Hierarchy of Needs Updated to Social Media (Adapted from John Antonios 2013)

Additionally, social media allows the companies to obtain instant feedback on their products, campaigns and services as well as to involve consumer in company's marketing efforts. The messages are spread much faster and since social media is highly integrated consumer's message will be seen across various channels instantaneously (Winner, 2009). The automaker Chevrolet decided to create a new advertisement for its Tahoe model. They engaged consumers by sending them video clips, music and graphics to make their own advertisements and the best one would air during the Super Bowl. The campaign created a PR buzz around the new advertisement and people were anticipating watching the selected add during Super Bowl. This kind of customer engagement was impossible in the age of traditional media (Smith, Zak, 2011).

Social media allows marketers to listen to various stakeholders and obtain free product feedback as well as the recommendations for potential improvements (Winner, 2009) For example, Mountain Dew sends samples to its loyal consumer prior to launching a new flavor and Chiquita Banana monitors the web to hear what people are saying to find new slogans for their campaigns (Fournier.). Additionally, when branding is conducted online the cost of direct marketing falls significantly and the efficiency increases dramatically (Deighton, Kornfeld, 2009).

Through the use of social media the company can finally engage in real relationship marketing and has the ability to respond to an individual consumer or at least shrink the distance between the brand and the consumer (Deighton, Kornfeld, 2009). Many TV shows have Facebook fan pages through which they interact with consumers to see if they like the episodes, ask them what they would like to see in the future, and even allow them to co-create (Chan-Olmsted S, 2011).

Learning and Conclusion

The examples provided throughout the text demonstrate that social media presents the marketer with the opportunity to tap into the enormous collective intelligence available on the web. To use this intelligence the brands need to gain the trust of the consumer by remaining authentic, letting go of some of the control of social media channels and being creative while allowing the consumers to co-create and participate.

This is not an easy task and often times brand managers come up with very creative campaigns but its just does not enough to capture their attention and engage the consumer. In today's realm the brand lost control of how many people it will actually reach, how frequently and what will be the end result. Brands could employ all possible platforms but still be ignored.

Social media has the ability to facilitate the creation of meaning and highlight the uniqueness of each brand only if marketers find the formula to consumers' heart. The challenge remains to target the individual consumer but at the same time please the collective mass. As social media becomes more and more interactive consumers of the 21st century will find new ways of challenging companies.

As we have seen from the Gatorade, Mountain Dew, and Chiquita cases if the company breaks through the challenges encountered while employing social media it will be rewarded by loyal consumers who become brand ambassadors.

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