Using Facebook to Better Engage Customers and Strengthen Brand Identity

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ABSTRACT

With traditional means of marketing, such as banner advertisements, becoming increasingly unavailing, businesses have begun to seek out alternative methods of soliciting custom from consumers. The ubiquity of social networking sites and other Internet-enabled platforms introduces new opportunities for businesses, but in return ask for a radical alteration in their business strategy. This paper attempts to analyse how one such social networking site in particular, Facebook, has allowed businesses to build and promote a stronger sense of community around their brand by engaging users and encouraging them to actively participate in content creation participation. It will also examine the effects this has on stimulating customer loyalty and how it impacts the way that the brand is perceived by consumers, that is, its public identity. A secondary goal of this paper is to impart some rudimentary recommendations on how a business might more effectively utilise Facebook's features to not just endear itself to its community, but to more thoroughly engage it and provide users with a reason for continuing to return. A brief analysis and explanation of how businesses both large and small have utilised the points provided in these conduct guidelines will be supposed towards the end of the paper.

KEYWORDS

Social networking sites, Facebook, Community, Brand community, Brand Identity, Brand loyalty, Customer engagement, Customer participation

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1. Introduction

The rise of the Internet has opened up a multitude of avenues for businesses both big and small, each bringing forth a wealth of new and exciting challenges and opportunities. New platforms that are now able to exist thanks to Internet technologies present a whole new realm of opportunities for those business owners who are adventurous enough to pursue these paths. In more recent years, however, we can observe the rise of one such platform in particular which requires them to adopt an utterly foreign mindset in order to find success: social networking sites. Traditional, aggressive approaches to product promotion have been proven inadequate and ineffective on these websites. Rather than fighting each other for the attention of would-be customers through a barrage of advertisements, businesses are required to not just encourage users to view their content, but to become engaged by it in order to promote a stronger image of the brand they represent.

While there are countless social networking sites and applications that pervade everyday life, there are arguably few that have had as significant an impact on society as Facebook has. This paper will attempt to demonstrate how businesses are using the social networking site to construct communities around their brand and influence how customers perceive them. It will begin by introducing and briefly summarising the history of Facebook, before moving onto an analysis of how it encourages user participation and the formation of online brand communities. Next, it will then propose a set of guidelines by which companies may better solidify their online identities. Finally, it will examine and attempt to explain the success of both large and small Facebook businesses.

2. The Rise of Facebook

In February of 2004, Mark Zuckerberg, a 23-year-old student of Harvard University, launched what was then known as "thefacebook". It was designed as an online student directory exclusive to Harvard University, with the intent of allowing students to more easily find and connect with each other (Phillips, 2007). Since then, however, it has evolved into a service accessible by the general public rather than a closed tool limited only to educational institutions, and has become the now well-recognised social environment "Facebook". As of late 2017, the widely renowned social media giant has gained over two billion active users (Chaffey, 2018). While not the sole player in the marketplace, it by far outstrips its competitors in popularity and, indeed, even owns several of its previous competitors. Its overall market penetration is undisputed, which has in turn led to it becoming something of a de facto for social interaction over the Internet.

Despite being a social platform whose use was predominantly focused towards catering to individuals, Facebook almost immediately began to attract the attention of hopeful business owners. While searching for ways to expand their online presence and thus generate additional revenue, the adoption of this new trend as an outlet for their exposure likely seemed a logical progression in their never-ending pursuit for market dominance. Even while the site remained limited to the university domain, Facebook experimented with business advertising. Among the first to evaluate the potential of this medium was MasterCard, who successfully attracted customers from a Facebook advertisement, Facebook gaining revenue from each card application submitted through the site (Fiegerman, 2013). With the number of users captured by this online phenomenon having seemingly exploded, its possibility as a marketing tool became swiftly apparent to other businesses. In fact, just two weeks after its release to the public in 2006, it was already accommodating over four thousand businesses (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), a number which has continued to climb in its subsequent years.

3. Facebook and Brand Communities

Certainly, by providing access to such an enormous and diverse user base as well as built-in tools by which businesses may create and disperse banner advertisements, Facebook presents an appealing prospect for many business owners. This form of product promotion does have issues, though: it is often difficult to target the specific audience that it is designed for, thus making it rarely cost-efficient to produce these advertisements. This is something that is only compounded by the fact that Internet users are becoming increasingly jaded by banner advertisements, which has led to a gradual decline in their practicality (Ed, 2009). It is thus becoming increasingly less effective to rely solely on these methods to attract customers.

Social networking sites such as Facebook suggest a new paradigm of business to consumer interaction that requires a vastly different mindset to traditional means, yet has the potential to function significantly more efficiently and effectively. As Weber (2009) suggests, the role of a marketer has been changed from that of a broadcaster to instead resemble something of an aggregator: rather than attempting to attract potential customers by promoting their products or services through traditional advertisements, we can observe a shift towards the use of social networking sites to more closely interact with and engage customers. Although it offers many marketing benefits for businesses, it is vital to understand that Facebook is, at its core, a social networking site, not a tool whose use is limited strictly to marketing. Therefore, I argue that businesses will benefit most by precisely controlling how they manage both their interactions with consumers and the mask they broadcast to the public. By engaging Facebook users with relevant content and treating them familiarly, that is, as "friends", companies are able to further encourage brand loyalty (Ramsaran-Fowdar & Fowdar, 2013). The role played by Facebook itself is relatively elementary: it simply provides the means by which a business might craft these central hubs of brand information. It is by gaining a solid understanding of the opportunities that this new paradigm entails and utilising them effectively that their desired results may best be achieved.

One exceedingly useful product that these central hubs enable the emergence of, and perhaps one of the most significant concerning the modern marketing methodology that Facebook capacitates, is the sense of a focused community that they have the potential to develop. Facebook itself appears to acknowledge this potential and, indeed, readily support it by allowing companies to allocate a section of their page specifically for content created by others. These users are then able to share their experiences by posting and replying to comments and reviews, uploading pictures and videos relevant to the brand and, should they decide to "like" or "follow" the page, receive updates whenever the organisation uploads any content itself, thus indirectly showing their support for it (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). In addition, by providing users with instantaneous updates on the content their "friends" have posted, "liked" or "followed", Facebook facilitates the proliferation of brand awareness at a rate that significantly trumps what was previously possible simply through word of mouth (Curran, 2011). These features enable users to better interact with other like-minded individuals, thus contributing towards and strengthening the notion of community that these pages create.

The attitudes not only of the members involved in these communities, but also the content they submit, can play a large role in how brands might be perceived by "outsiders" and other members of the community. This publically available forum that is provided by permitting user comments and reviews creates a readily accessible channel through which customers can assess the quality of the business's services in a way such that all can see, for better or for worse. Weydart (2013) notes that consumers commonly put more trust in other, real consumers as opposed to the unfamiliarity of big corporations. By submitting generally favourable reviews or posts, or even by merely "liking" or "following" the brand's page, users may be perceived as advocates of the brand, thus propagating trust within the community and encouraging fellow users to likewise "adopt" the brand. Contrariwise, reviews or posts that reject the brand can have the opposite effect, cautioning others against employing the brand's services and stimulating the business to correct any faults or issues. We can see, therefore, that maintaining a positive image is crucial for any Facebook business.

4. Making the Right Impression

With this sense of community playing such an important role in a business's identity and, correspondingly, its success, some prominent questions arise: are Internet businesses purely at the mercy of their customers in developing their online identity? How does the organisation assist in building such an image? What measures can it take to ensure that it is received positively by both existing and new customers, and how can its online presence be used to attract, engage and retain users? In this section, I propose several content and management guidelines by which a business can not only more successfully and diligently engage their customers, but by doing so coax their continued return. It is my intention to deliver some enlightenment concerning the factors businesses must consider when building their online image.

My first assertion is that companies should strive to disseminate content that is not just relevant to the intended audience, but also sufficiently appealing, dynamic and interactive. This is something that applies to many types of online communities, and is not constrained only to businesses; by controlling the content on display, they can drastically influence how they are perceived (DiMicco & Millen, 2007). This, of course, first requires that the target audience be established, something that is particularly dependent on the nature of the business itself and thus may prove difficult; though some companies may find it sufficient to simply generate content that is suitable for a more general view of the public, that is, without targeting a specific demographic, other companies may find that they must target a more niche sector in order to realise success. One possible strategy might be to draw inspiration from the variety of content being uploaded by the community and use this inspiration to help tailor any officially mediated content, though this relies on an already active brand community.

A second action that businesses can take is to make an effort to actively interact with users. By replying to community content, answering questions and proving that customers' feedback is being both heard and reacted to, organisations are able to better engage with consumers and strengthen their own identity as well as their relationships with these consumers (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman & Philström, 2012). This is perhaps the most crucial step in the process being outlined, as it is this creation of community and deepening of relationships that forms the very backbone of these Internet destinations.

Finally, businesses may choose to run events or provide exclusive rewards for user participation in various activities. There are numerous ways that this may be achieved, such as by organising special occasions through Facebook's events feature or, alternatively, by hosting contests or providing limited discounts to members who have "followed" or "liked" their page. This can be done to encourage Facebook users to participate more in the business's activities or to "like" or "follow" the organisation's page in exchange for exclusive rewards (Matista, 2013). Companies that employ strategies of this variety should take care, however, for users may be driven only by the incentive of prizes rather than the desire to participate. This behaviour can consequently place the credibility of the business's statistics at risk.

The preceding three points, while not exhaustive, would provide an elementary framework for a successful brand image campaign. As mentioned previously, Facebook already supplies businesses with the means necessary to develop, publish and maintain their presence in a simple, real-time and cost-effective way. The rapid rise of Facebook has provided progressive companies with an opportunity to embrace new methods of public engagement which are quickly supplanting the traditional means of advertisement that were mentioned previously.

5. Connecting with the Consumers

Many businesses have found great success by utilising many of the methods outlined in this paper. It is becoming increasingly rare to find modern corporations that do not take advantage of this new advancement in marketing. This section will attempt to explain how businesses have achieved success through Facebook, drawing reference to several of the guidelines and methods mentioned previously.

One example of a company that has demonstrated how interacting with the public through the use of Facebook may be beneficial to the success of a company's brand is Coca-Cola. Traditionally known for their innovative and entertaining television and theatre advertisements, they have increasingly turned to Facebook as a means of promoting their brand and message (Jackson-Eeles, 2017). Coca-Cola quickly found success, by continuing to encourage user participation and to promote itself through contests, the soft drink company soon becoming the third most popular brand on Facebook (Wakefield, 2012). The company ran successful online campaigns in several regions in order to connect with their consumers and extend their reach, though it was perhaps their South African campaign in particular that best showed the possible success available through a Facebook promotion: within three months, it found a 42% increase in its total reach and was spending approximately three times less on advertising when compared to television commercials (Coca-Cola South Africa, n.d.).

Because of how cost-effective the process of promoting a business through Facebook is compared to many of the traditional methods, it is also an appealing and significantly more feasible prospect for many small or start-up businesses. Though they may not have the funds required to advertise or promote their products as aggressively as larger and more popular companies can, small businesses are still very capable of marketing through Facebook using several of the methods outlined previously. As has traditionally been the case for many small businesses, they are exceptionally apt at forming closer, more personal relationships with their customers, as the face of their business, which is often a real person, is seemingly more relatable than that of large, faceless corporations (Perkins, 2015). Conducting business on Facebook is no exception, and by attempting to form communities and relevant connections with their customers, many have managed to elevate their exposure and increase their profits (Zimmerman, 2012).

6. Conclusion

With the increasing normality and acceptance of social networking and other trends that are now possible due to the Internet and its related technologies, businesses have been forced to adopt new ideas and methodologies in order to keep users engaged and receptive. As traditional approaches to advertising are becoming gradually less effective in capturing and keeping the attention of would-be customers, the sites that symbolise these innovative platforms represent a reprieve for businesses from the currently declining potency of many older marketing strategies that now seem somewhat dated in comparison.

Facebook provides the instruments by which businesses may reap the benefits of social networking, as well as access to what is one of the largest and most regionally diverse user bases on the Internet. These features have enabled businesses to more easily endear themselves to consumers and thus construct a sense of self and community that encourages customers to employ their products or services and remain loyal. By promoting user participation through the construction of strong communities and instilling the image of a flattering and feedback-responsive brand identity in their customers, companies are able to succeed on this radical platform should they invest the time required to do so correctly.

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