Stream: Communities and Web 2.0

Abstract

The following paper considers three diverse online brand communities as examples of how businesses create browser-based platforms to engage with their customers and build loyalty. Since the advent of Web 2.0, and the ability for internet users to produce and distribute content easily and cheaply, businesses and marketers question how to be heard in a changed and changing media landscape.

The purpose of this discussion is to show that brand community success is not accidental: I argue that considered choice of tools and platform mechanics can create an online community which supports the needs of the business, and facilitates strong connection between company and a loyal customer base.

The paper begins by looking at social theory on the topic of "community" to understand the factors that define an online community. Three case studies follow, each focusing on a different aspect of online communities and and its contribution to the success of the individual community. These are, namely, the possibility of deep connection without face-to-face contact (Sephora), how the identity of a community can affect the self-presentation of its members (Lego Ideas), the importance of anonymity and pseudonymity for member participation (H&R Block), and how ranking acts as a signal for trust and commitment within online communities.

It is hoped that this analysis of online communities may benefit marketing and communications professionals to understand components of an engaged brand community, and to help in their design of future online brand spaces.

'Watching the advert or consuming the product is no longer enough; the company invites the audience inside the brand community' (Jenkins 2006: 20). Once inside, the audience is supposed to talk about the brand and… within the brand community, they talk the brand community's language, which is itself an enactment of the brand. (Adams, 2014)

Prior to Web 2.0, businesses broadcast their message through traditional forms of media, producing brochures or paying for advertising space on radio, television or in newspapers. Each medium had a captive audience with known demographics, and the message was tailored to the audience. "Web 2.0" describes the second phase of world wide web technology, and Tim O'Reilly, the man responsible for the widespread use of the term, tells us that the web "is no longer a collection of static pages of HTML that describe something in the world" (O'Reilly & Battelle, 2009, para. 14), but instead is characterised by flexible web pages, and platforms demanding the participation of the audience. Sites such as YouTube and My Space had no content until the user became the producer, utilising sharing tools to distribute content across multiple channels to an extended social network. For media outlets and businesses, Web 2.0, as a disruptive alternative to the traditional media landscape, signalled a radical change in how to be heard and how to control the message. Today, many popular brands utilise Web 2.0 platforms by building online communities to engage with brand loyalists and strengthen their brands. Through a series of three case studies, this paper investigates the formation of online communities by business, and the presence of the characteristics of "community" which mark the success of each case study. Firstly, the Sephora community and its sense of camaraderie; secondly, Lego Ideas and the embrace of a geeky identity; thirdly, H&R Block and the importance of anonymity and trust; and finally, how member rankings assist community longevity in each case study. This paper asserts that businesses design online platforms to access and strengthen their customer base via brand communities.

Defining community has long been argued. Traditionally seen as predominantly rural and geographically bounded, the effects of mass media and global transportation meant that many communities became too large to be defined by location (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) summarise the contemporary community as having a shared

connection between members, shared cultural experiences or "rituals" (p. 413), and members who feel a sense of obligation to the community. When talking about brand communities, connection and obligation manifest as a love of, and fierce loyalty to, the brand, and shared cultural experiences occur through the use of the product or service. While many businesses utilise existing social networking platforms such as Facebook or Instagram to form online communities, other businesses design browser-based platforms, incorporating tools to best suit their organisational objectives. Constance Porter asserts that while all online communities display certain attributes, "a community sponsor can foster member engagement [from] understanding and responding to the intrinsic needs of their specific community members" (Porter, 2015, p. 169). In order to attract members that feel connected and obligated to the brand community, businesses construct Web 2.0 platforms, employing tools to foster a voluntary and sustained engagement in the community, and connection with the company.

Sephora is an example of an online community with high member engagement. Part of the Louis Vuitton group, the beauty-retail brand community was created for users of its products to learn about beauty trends, product information, and to interact with each other. The community sits within the main Sephora website, and brand lovers can move easily between community activity and shopping for products. This is a community with a very active administrator, KatieBT, posting several times each day and responding to replies within each thread. Company-led threads include product promotions and discounts via the *Weekly Wow!,* and expert advice via *The Natasha Denona Thread.* Engagement is high, with posts receiving over 1,000 comments regularly. Members post selfies of their makeup efforts and favourite products, affirming each other's efforts. For example, "Hooray! They look beautiful on you, @mermadelove!" (curlychicita, 2018), and "Looks like I need to add this one to my collection; loving the whole look @makeupmaven" (mermadelove, 2018).

Wellman and Gulia (1999) ask whether strong ties are possible in online communities amidst concerns that "life on the Net can never be meaningful" (p. 2) because it is not face-to-face. They assert that strong ties have a range of attributes including voluntary participation over an extended period, mutual interaction, and a shared intimacy through personal similarity. Sephora demonstrates these attributes with high engagement on

threads and real warmth in the comments. Recently, Sephora brand loyalists had the opportunity to meet offline at two stores in either New York or San Francisco, sharing the enjoyment of brand consumption, or "shared ritual" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 413), with fellow fans. Later, one Sephora member articulates on the community board the sense of camaraderie and shared product experience felt by event attendees:

> I [had] such a wonderful time at the NYC meet-up! Shira was a doll, as always, and I met some really wonderful girls (Dani! I didn't get your username but if you see this please say hi!) and got to play with everything my heart desired. The staff at 580 Fifth graciously got us anything we wanted to try, even the old stuff. (michelleshops, 2018)

Clearly, Sephora has sculpted a busy online community, bringing together predominantly young women who share an enjoyment of beauty. While beauty advice and product specials may be the original motivator to join, the sense of belonging and shared experience "encourage frequent companionable contact" (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 10) between members.

Likewise, Lego Ideas is an online community with a strong sense of belonging, for fans of the Danish plastic building blocks. Group identity is strong, reflecting the offline personality of a passionate subculture, and influencing the displayed online identity of individuals within the community. Harnessing the power of fan passion and intellect, Lego Ideas is part blog, part crowdsourced ideation platform, part social network. Members create a profile, commonly using an avatar made from Lego, and display an aspect of identity that aligns with the community. Being part of a subculture with a slightly geeky identity, LuisPG and Alatariel, via their profile pages, are not unusual in their declarations of science-based career and highbrow interests, with opthalmologist LuisPG claiming that he is "Proudly Asperger" (LuisPG, 2018) and loves paleontology, and isotope-geochemist Alatariel citing "vintage video games" (Alatariel, 2018) as one of her likes. Boyd (2006) explains how online spaces define user identity. She describes how the now defunct, social networking site Friendster was initially dominated by three subcultures, including Burning Man festival goers. When a new person was invited to join, they would see the profiles of fellow "Burners" (para. 52), assume it was a Burners site, and include images of themselves

enjoying the festival rather than show other interests; furthermore, they would perpetuate the identity of the community by selecting fellow Burners to invite to join the network. Similar to Lego ideas, the online space was dictating the identity presented (boyd, 2006). Ren et al (2012) assert that "members who have a strong attachment to their online community are crucial to its success" (p. 842). They assert that the design of tools in online communities which create both "group identity… [and]… interpersonal bonds" (p. 843) leads to the strongest affiliation. Significantly, Lego Ideas encourages fans to create and upload their own design, collect 10,000 votes for the design from the community, and Lego promises to review its potential for production: "let[ting] the users do the heavy lifting" (Espersen, as cited in Davidi, 2014, para. 8), as they (rather than the company) sift through the multitude of good ideas put forward by an intelligent fan base. The Lego group identity is thus experienced through shared fandom and, like other online brand communities, as "[m]embers contribute ideas to help the company improve its product" (Ren, et al., 2012, p. 843); interpersonal bonds occur through the creation and sharing of member profiles, and commenting on or supporting other members' ideation. In other words, Lego Ideas uses tools to both promote interpersonal connection and provide a space for an inventive subculture to connect through ideation and shared identity: the result is an active brand community with strong member attachment.

While Lego and Sephora unite fans and advocates through passion of a retail product, some businesses build brand loyalty through trust of a service. Small business tax accountants, H&R Block has created an online community forum for individuals preparing tax returns to ask questions as they arise. In 2012, the platform (in conjunction with social networking) "secured 1,500,000 unique visitors and answered 1,000,000 questions for a 15% lift in business versus the prior year when there was no social media in the marketing mix" (Petersen, 2017, para. 10). On the sensitive topic of tax, pseudonymity is important for members to feel comfortable disclosing personal tax issues and possible solutions: members within the H&R Block community choose non-identifying handles, and although a space is provided for a profile image, the default head silhouette is the norm. However, companies such as Google and Facebook are calling for an international commitment to internet-wide real name usage, in the belief that anonymity causes anti-social behaviour such as trolling, and that tying online activity to a single authentic identity will result in

improved online safety (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). However, what people choose to disclose will differ between spaces "as audience and other contextual factors shift" (Goffman, as cited in van der Nagel & Frith, 2015, para. 11), for example, how we behave and what we say at a family dinner varies from that of a business lunch. Van der Nagel and Frith point out that Facebook will benefit financially from support in this debate, as its technology allows users to like and share external internet pages, and log into a multitude of platforms with their Facebook details, "tying a diverse set of online practices back to the singular identity crafted on their Facebook page" (2015, para. 10). Within the H&R Block platform, on a thread regarding the reporting of Australian superannuation on US tax returns, Ken_in_nc writes, "This is so complicated it makes me wish I had just spent the money" (Ken_in_nc, 2014); and, on another regarding an expected tax debt, jeannettenc posts, "[t]wo weeks ago we got a $3000 'refund' check from the IRS?? As tempted as i am to take the money and run, what on earth?!" (jeannettenc, 2016). Neither of these comments reveal illegal activity or is aggressive in tone; however, the ability to participate with a level of anonymity, separate from a single connected online identity, allows members of the H&R Block community to ask sensitive questions and respond in a relaxed way, without fear of legal repercussion.

Across all three case studies, the use of rankings arises as an important way to signal a trusted and strong brand community. Mark Wills, site administrator of Experts Exchange – an online community for solving IT issues – believes that trust and longevity are key to successful online communities, and that community designers need to include tools to achieve these (TedX, 2012). Using a ranking system, Experts Exchange tasks the Asker with rating the best Responder, with points assigned to the Responder: longevity is achieved as there is perceived value in staying in the community to achieve expert status which, in turn, evokes trust to newcomers who can pose questions to a community with longstanding experts. Donath and boyd (2004) discuss the reliability of online identity presentation using signalling theory. Signalling theory "describes the relationship between a signal and the underlying quality it represents" (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 3). In the case of Experts Exchange and H&R Block, members want to assess member qualities of trustworthiness and knowledgeability. Trusting free tax advice is potentially high-stakes, and H&R Block uses a ranking system similar to Experts Exchange to instil member confidence.

For example, LouisH is a Trusted Council Member with over 600 "kudos" badges assigned to him by Pioneers and other junior members. Members can display a full record of activity by LouisH or any other member: seeing forum activity, assigned kudos, and a ranking built up over time helps gain a reliable and "honest… signal" (Donath & boyd, 2004). While longevity is a key component of all successful communities, the ranking systems for Lego Ideas and Sephora mark different qualities. Lego member Alatariel has a "clutch power" of over 5000, broken down on her profile page into various categories including length of time in community (an original member) and number of projects to reach 10,000 supporters (four for Alatariel). In Lego Ideas, member ranking is connected to participation of both ideation and supporting other members' ideas, signalling qualities of creativity and longevity. In the Sephora community, rankings of longevity and interaction signal brand loyalty, with rank descriptions including Rookie, Go-getter and Boss: members aspire to top status despite the fact that the ranking system is unclear. One user comments, "I do wish we had some sort of guidance on what the levels are or how the advancements work. I've seen at least two folks with fewer hearts and posts than me reach [Hall of Famers] status lately, but I haven't yet." (RGbrown, 2014). Although platform designers could improve the Sephora ranking system to be more transparent, members are motivated to be active online to achieve the top ranking, perceiving it as an acknowledgment of brand loyalty. Businesses use ranking systems as a complete record of individual member activity, to signal the qualities of trust, loyalty and engagement to other members, and ensuring the continuation of a connected community over time.

With the advent of Web 2.0, businesses design and build browser-based platforms as one way to broadcast their message and engage with brand loyalists. These online communities aspire to have ongoing and deep engagement from members, designing and using platform tools to instil a sense of enjoyment in participation, and to ensure that members feel embedded into the community. Three diverse online brand communities were analysed: Sephora uses an active community manager to start conversations, and creates regular content to encourage member connection; Lego achieves engagement through the shared passion of product and pastime, and encourages dedication to community through ideation incentives; and H&R Block builds loyalty to both platform and brand through accuracy and timeliness of advice. All three communities encourage community longevity through ranking

systems, signalling either trust or fan status. Success is no accident: by understanding the components of community and the digital mechanisms that lead to engagement, businesses can create online spaces to grow and connect with a loyal customer base, ultimately resulting in direct access to consumer feedback, ideation for product development, and increased sales, each contributing to overall business success.

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