Chapter 8
The Creation and Management of Online Brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

Online brand communities are a specific type of virtual community, which gather admirers and consumers of a given brand on the web. Their captivating nature, plus their marketing effectiveness compared to their costs are attracting the interest of both researchers and marketing/brand managers.

This chapter intends to identify, describe and analyse the main issues concerning their creation and effective management.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade online brand communities have received a lot of attention from both academics and marketing professionals.

In times of complexity, with demanding consumers and intense global competition, the Web has given marketing and communication managers new tools and new opportunities to improve the effectiveness of their action. Online brand communities provide one of the most interesting and powerful examples.

This is mostly for their ability to establish and enhance relationships between companies and markets, reinforcing the brand image of their products, as well as customers’ brand awareness and loyalty. In doing so -not irrelevant in times of scarce financial resources given the economic downturn- they are a rather low cost solution.

Several companies have endowed themselves with a brand community, each revealing different functional or strategic aspects.

This chapter intends to identify and describe specific characteristics of online brand communities and to analyse creation and valorization strategies.

ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

Online brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Cova and Cova, 2002) are a specific type of virtual community (Rheingold, 1993; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002),
characterized by the fact that different people with
the common trait of being “admirers of a brand”
are gathered together (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001).
As for any other online community, they base
themselves upon relations, resulting from three
basic elements (see Prykop and Heitman, 2006):

- People (community members);
- A shared interest (in the brand);
- A common space of interaction (the
  platform).

So, they are marketing tribes (Cova and Cova,
2002), made up of different people, either custom-
erors or not, coming from different countries, with
different socio-demographic features, who have
in common an interest in the brand (Kapferer,
1992; Fournier, 1998) and want to interact with
both the firm and their peers.
The brand is the mediator for this online in-
teraction, and benefits foremost from the positive
social interaction within the community. Brands
tell stories (Semprini, 1992) and the most truth-
ful and strongest are those that people recognize
some common, personal traits in. This recognition
process helps customers to accept these stories,
to make them their own.
As “passionate consumers want their brands
to become a form of self-expression” (Brady,
2004), brands acquire much more sense beyond
a simple positive reputation. This way, in fact,
they enter the customers’ imagery, generate some
identification processes, becoming “lovemarks”
(Roberts, 2006).
Online brand communities are good places
to carry on the process of social construction.
Within online brand communities this process is
co-managed by both marketers and brand admirers
(see among others Muniz and O’Guinn, 2005); in
fact, the latter help the former to transform and
enrich the brand sense through a co-construction
process.

The consequence, in the brand value system,
is that its identity is not just “the brand concept
from the brand’s owner’s perspective” (Aaker and
Joachimsthaler, 2000), but the synthesis of its
original identity with the customer’s experience,
which is both functional and emotional, within
the brand community context. Through the brand
community’s constant re-actualisation, customer
participation and interest is renewed. What hap-
pens to consumers is something similar to being
called to co-create an open work, a plurality of
meanings, co-existing all together, within a single
significant (Eco, 1962).
The brand community acts as a multiplier of
meaning (Musso, 2005): in fact, it is the perfect
place for brand sense and meaning co-creation.
In this virtual space people can experience
the brand, feel part of its world (identity, culture,
values, image) and share opinions. In doing so,
they develop “a shared consciousness, rituals
and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibil-
ity” (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2002, p. 412) in the
exchange.

ADVANTAGES FOR FIRMS FROM
ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES
Firms can get several advantages from the creation,
be it spontaneous or planned, of an online brand
community.
First of all, they help companies to get closer to
their markets and to learn more about their actual
and potential customers, in order to understand
their tastes, evolution, define their trends and
preferences, see how their products are perceived.
A brand community, in fact, can be assimilated
to a huge focus group, whose panellists’ thoughts,
attitudes, orientations can be monitored day by day
at very low costs, lower than any other investiga-
tion tool. In this focus group aggregates of people
interact, discuss, make opinions, can reward or
destroy a brand. And are free to do it without the
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