Websites and Internet Marketing: Developing a Model for Measuring a Website’s Contribution to the Brand

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ABSTRACT
Websites play a pivotal role in contributing to the brand identity of an organization and an even greater role in stimulating the brand-consumer relationship. This manuscript proposes a framework for measuring the Brand Contribution Index (BCI) for a website. The authors commence the study by identifying eight significant website dimensions viz. Relative Importance (RI), Popularity (P), Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Domain Age (DA), Site Compatibility with Social Networks (SCSN), Keyword Research (KR), Site Quality (SQ) and Site Accessibility (SA). The Brand Contribution Index is a weighted measure of these eight dimensions. The authors further proceed to segment the websites according to their BCI and create segment profiles by using Hierarchical Cluster Analysis. This will help the organizations in studying the performance of their websites in the context of the BCI and create strategies to subsequently improve this performance across the website dimensions where the website is demonstrating a poor score.

Keywords: Brand Contribution Index, Hierarchical Cluster Analysis, Internet Marketing, Website Analysis, Website Dimensions

INTRODUCTION
The majority of benchmark and performance criteria for website evaluation follow a generalist quality management approach for website design. This is very useful for website designers but fails to recognize the critical link between brand positioning and website elements (Virtsonis et al., 2008). The world of the ‘offline’ brand has benefited substantially from the digital medium which websites offer. Nowadays, Websites increasingly supplement the value and equity of offline brands. The world of a typical ‘Online’ brand, where products are solely available online, revolves significantly around the internet. Nevertheless, brand architecture, in today’s world is incomplete without the benefits that the digital medium has to offer. Brand websites have become an important tool for advertisers (Song & Zinkhan, 2008). Brand websites provide various functionalities. Consumers can read product or brand information, watch TV commercials, customize virtual products, download music, chat with other visitors, or have a direct dialogue with an organization behind the brand. By supplying a broad range of functionalities, these websites
provide the brand with a platform to foster relationship with potential and actual customers, based on a continuous dialogue (Flores, 2004; Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2004; Dou & Krishnamurthy, 2007; Holland & Baker, 2001).

This manuscript aims to address this intrinsic problem by focusing on relevant website dimensions which cater to increase in consumer-brand perception by increasing Site Visibility, Accessibility and Navigability. Appropriate consumer experience, good consumer perception and ability to locate what they are searching for, leads to high consumer satisfaction levels (Ahuja & Medury, 2010). This further heightens the need for a careful understanding of website dimensions which eventually will shape the ability of the websites to contribute to (a) the consumer experience and subsequently, (b) the brand.

The decision makers at e-business companies have continued to make vast investments in developing websites for e-business without having clear knowledge of what factors contribute to developing a high quality website and how to measure effects on e-business success (Irani, 2002; Thornton et al., 2003). The success of an e-business company is more likely when it’s website is developed to provide the highest level of website quality among alternative websites & this study shows that online customers mostly prefer to select the most preferred sites. If more customers select the website, the higher the likelihood of improved business performance. There exists a relationship between website quality, preference, and business performance (Carnero et al., 2005; Lohse et al., 1999; Ngai, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Brand Presence

In recent years, the offline and online spheres of strategic brand management are becoming more and more inter-connected. This is not only because offline companies sell their products over the internet as an alternative distribution channel (Levin et al., 2003), or that firms more frequently run integrated brand communication campaigns both offline and online (Bartel-Sheehan & Doherty, 2001; Srisuwan & Barnes, 2008). The connection goes beyond these links, as companies that commercialize their products offline, now seem to cross over the offline borders and offer new products and services online. Apple is an example with the iPhone and the iTunes shop on the internet. Another example is Nokia with its Ovi web portal. The reverse is also possible, and online companies may benefit from launching products that are available in the offline market. For instance, Google has made its Google Docs useable without an internet connection (Martin, 2008). Recently, this company has just launched a new mobile phone that uses its own operating system. This new launch created expectations among consumers who waited patiently for the new product (Ricker, 2008).

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Regular communication between organization and consumer reinforces organizational image and product messages, builds brand awareness and strengthens brand recall. By creating meaningful brand encounters, the consumer – brand relationship can be strengthened. When consumers are regularly in contact with a brand, they may begin to perceive it as a person, a trusted friend who is part of their everyday life, thereby strengthening their loyalty towards the brand. Customer – brand loyalty in cyberspace demonstrates an evolution from the traditional product driven, marketer-controlled concept towards a distribution-driven, consumer controlled and technology-facilitated concept. When consumers engage in a brand relationship (Ahuja & Medury, 2011), they begin to perceive the value related to the brand. Brand knowledge affects future purchases via a brand relationship path that includes brand satisfaction, brand trust and attachment to the brand. Finally, consumers who have greater expected benefits and utility from an ongoing relationship are more likely to commit to it. Having a regular touch point to interact with the customer results in learning related to the brand and generates a positive attitude by
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