Twitter as a Tool for Corporate Communication: Exploring Interactive Communication Patterns between Fortune 500 Companies and Twitter Users

Kyung Jung Han, Department of Strategic Communications, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, MO, USA
Chang-Hoan Cho, Department of Communication, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korean

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how corporations communicate with consumers in social media. For this, Twitter activities of Fortune 500 companies were content-analyzed, focusing on four factors: shared information, the method of communication, tweet contents, and tactics. The findings indicate that corporations tend to disclose their basic information mostly on their Twitter pages and mainly post organic tweets (65.9%) and corporate news (48.7%). In terms of tweeting tactics, corporations apply the “link” function to connect to their websites, blogs, or Facebook pages. Additionally, among three indexes (Fortune 500 rankings, the corporate activity score, and product group categorization) for evaluating the corporate use patterns in Twitter, the product groups categorized by the Foote, Cone, and Belding (FCB) grid model (high/low involvement and thinking/feeling) proved that the model can be applied to examine the different Twitter activities of organizations. The results of this study can help with the development of a tailored measurement tool for managing consumers, depending on the different categories of organizations and designing future plans within a social networking site (SNS).

Keywords: Corporate Activity Score (CAS), FCB-Grid Model, Fortune 500 Rankings, Online Marketing Communication, Social Media, Social Networking Site (SNS), Twitter

INTRODUCTION

Social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are not new anymore. Such social media have been playing an imperative role as news disseminators and public spheres for social interaction among media users. For example, when news about a one-day promotional event was announced on Twitter, a social medium, many people received their free rewards. Twitter is just as effective during urgent situations or crises. Indeed, when Hurricane Sandy devastated portions of the Caribbean, the Mid-Atlantic, and the northeastern United States in late October 2012, social media users flooded Twitter and established an online dialogue about relief.

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organizations, allowing individuals to become involved in the Sandy recovery. Similarly, the public has gotten information regarding various business issues from social media. Twitter has exploded as a platform in the past two years with growth approaching 700% (Burson-Marsteller, 2012). Given that marketers have realized the importance of social media, they have assigned professionals to manage their SNS as a part of their communication strategy. In practice, many people, including scholars, advertisers, and even political activists, view online social networks as an opportunity to study the dissemination of ideas and to examine viral effects (Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009).

Following such a media revolution, many studies regarding social media have been conducted in organizational contexts (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Pitt, Parent, & Berthon, 2010; Porter, Sweetser, & Chung, 2009; Smith, 2010; Steyn, Salehi-Sangari, & Sweetser, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Xifra & Grau, 2010). Nevertheless, social media do not yet play a role in agenda building for communication practitioners (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009). Only 55% of companies active on Twitter are satisfied with their business value, and marketers are still looking for better strategies for success (Forbes, 2013). Practitioners tend to use social media in the same way that they used other new media when they appeared (Grunig, 2009).

Therefore, the present study explores the current status quo of corporate communication through the SNS and the direction practitioners should take by analyzing the Twitter use of marketers in their marketing communications. Fortune 500 companies, in particular, are the target of analysis because they represent major marketers.

This study will help scholars establish the fundamentals regarding how corporations build traffic and which tactics are applied; it will also further research for the next steps to determine the responses of different consumers and the effects of corporate communication in social media. In addition, the present study aims to help practitioners understand how top companies and others are using SNSs so that they can design better strategies for future planning. Therefore, the current study seeks to assist both scholars and practitioners in understanding the current and future direction of online marketing communication by social media.

Changes in Marketing Communication with Social Media

Social media opened the age of conversation (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012; Gligorijevic & Luck, 2012) and made customer care more important than before because of their viral effect among corporations’ customers. At the same time, one of the changes in the conversation age is that organizations have been engaged with a wider range of stakeholders than in the past. With social media, communication professionals can influence customers’ attitude toward the organizations interacting in the media and subsequent purchasing decisions (Capozzi & Zipfel, 2012). Furthermore, social media can be described as digital, proactive, visible, real-time and from memory, ubiquitous, and networks. Such social media have brought changes in consumer behavior and the way customers interact with companies (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010). For these reasons, marketing with social media is having a significant impact on companies’ marketing strategies (Akar & Topcu, 2011).

Following the trend of the changing media environment and its applicability, many scholars and practitioners have begun to pay attention to the study and use of social media. For example, Eyrich, Padman, and Sweetser (2008) mentioned that social media not only allow practitioners to reach out to and engage their publics in conversation but also provide an avenue to strengthen media relations. They applied this characteristic of social media to their study and explored how practitioners perceive social media as a communication tool and how they use them. Meanwhile, digital media provide tools that facilitate a paradigm shift in the environment, with the potential to truly revolutionize public relations as well (Grunig, 2009).
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