ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to better understand how to deal with company-managed virtual communities in order to build a good relationship with members. The authors explore and compare between companies’ practices and members’ perceptions and expectations. The research is based on a netnographic study which includes 1.5 year of participant observation and 25 in-depth interviews with members and managers. Results point out the gap between what members expect and what companies do. First, instead of being on the sidelines, the paper shows that the company’s visibility within the VC is a pre-requisite to build good relationships with members. Second, it shows that to be successful, reciprocity is no more enough, companies should rather prove benevolence. Finally, the paper draws attention to the necessity of adapting targeting efforts of gratification and benevolence according to the members’ ties with the VC.

Keywords: Company-Managed VCs, Distant Interviews, Netnography, Relationship Marketing, Virtual Communities (VCs)

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the consumer from a passive to an active customer and the development of virtual communities (VCs) directly affect companies’ competitiveness (Garrigos, Gil, and Narangajavana, 2011; Rieder and Voß, 2010; Kleemann, Voß, and Rieder, 2008) and push them to build an interactive relationship with their markets that creates value not only for them but also for customers (Garrigos-Simon, Alcamí, and Ribera, 2012; Garrigos, Gil, and Narangajavana, 2011; Shiffman, 2008). Companies that can measure and appreciate their markets can, indeed, enjoy significant benefits (Palmatier, 2008).

Since their emergence, VCs have been suggested as an interesting business model for their promising opportunities. They foster trust with members and also turn them into regulars to-
wards the sponsoring firms (Porter and Donthu, 2008). Many companies launch business to con-
sumers VCs by providing spaces to customers either in their websites or elsewhere on the Web (Porter, 2004). However, in practice, businesses are still experimenting with VCs. Most of their actions are not deemed successful (Coutant and Domenget, 2011). VCs’ members are skeptical and hostile to the interactions with companies (Stenger and Coutant, 2011) because the latter are associated to acts of spying and to sources of pressure (Cova and Carrère, 2002). Members want to talk only to other internet-users and not to companies. Obviously, businesses want to know how to manage this uncharted territory to achieve strategic objectives.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to better understand how to deal with company-
managed VCs in order to build good relationships with them. We will particularly explore and compare companies’ practices in VCs with members’ expectations and perceptions. To attain our objective, we have conducted a netnographic study that includes a participant observation for 1.5 year in two company-
managed VCs, informal ground discussions as well as distant in-depth interviews. Before describing our methodology, we will briefly present literature on VCs. Then, in order to understand how to build long-lasting relationships with VCs’ members, we will draw on the relationship marketing literature. In a following section, our methodology and results will be presented and discussed. The paper will finish by developing further research-agenda.

**Virtual Communities**

The basic concept of “community” was developed by Tonnies (1957). It refers to a group of people connected with the land and whose lives are bound together by kinship and neighborhood. The individual is inseparable from an organic whole. Progressively, the concept of “community” has largely changed and characterized human networks even those with weak ties (Wellman and Gulia, 1997). With the development of the Information and Communication Technology (ICT), people use the internet to gather, discuss, share opinions and information and develop social ties. These emergent groups have been called “virtual communities” although they do not respect the characteristics of “the community” as defined by Tonnies (1957).

Since Rheingold (1993), many other researchers provided definitions and explanations of key concepts and terms used in this particular field of study. We distinguish between two approaches. Some researchers have considered VCs as social spaces on the web and as communication interfaces such as discussion lists and forums (Wu, Chen, and Chung, 2010; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). Other researchers have presented VCs as a new form of communities created by the use of the Internet. In this framework, definitions converge towards that of Rheingold (1993, p. 6) as “socio-cultural groups who emerge on the web when a sufficient number of individuals participate in public discussions for a while, giving some of their heart so that networks of human relationships emerge in the cyberspace”. This definition underlines some key dimensions of a VC: group of people, social relationships, shared interests, long-lasting interactions and involvement.

Over time, VCs have proven their robust structure on the Web as a social media that continues to attract users even with the fast development of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. Actually, VCs are all over the Web. They renovate even by emerging in the social network-websites themselves, thereby inducing some conceptual confusion. Nevertheless, unlike social networks where relationships are built through nodes of pre-established and interpersonal relationships (Mercklè, 2011), individuals in VCs do not know each other and yet share common interests. In company-
managed virtual communities, what members share, is the common interest to the brand and to its products (Casaló, Flavián, and Guinalíu, 2010; Porter, 2004).

Like the other disciplines, marketing has dealt amply with VCs in different contexts
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The Formation of Usage Intention of Electric Cars: A Comparative Study of Denmark, Belgium, and Italy
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