Social Media and Online Reputation Management as Practice: First Steps Towards Social CRM?

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ABSTRACT

Intensive consumer participation on social media has raised new challenges in terms of reputation management and CRM. This paper tackles the issue of online reputation management in the era of social media (SM). It explores the practices of SM managers using a qualitative research methodology based mainly on online observation and in-depth interviews with practitioners. It is not simply a case of stating what SM and online reputation management could or should be but of identifying what it is from within, from the field analysis of the discourse and practices of professionals. The analysis of the results reveals that online reputation management is organised around five main activities and SM managers have to play five roles relating to various issues and competences. It is also evident that online reputation management is at the interface of Internet monitoring, online communication and social CRM. Finally, companies are not considering social CRM as much as customers would like.

Keywords: Brand, Community, Practice, Reputation, Social Media, Social CRM

INTRODUCTION

We will help your brands to belong to the daily conversations which occur every day between members, promised Mark Zuckerberg¹. With such a promising announcement, the eagerness to be aware of (if not to manage) online conversations has been increasing for those brands and companies who historically have always been concerned by their visibility and reputation. Since the advent of Facebook, Twitter and numerous platforms, both practitioners and academics have been aware of the tremendous potential of an online presence on social media (e.g. Bernoff & Li, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Andzulis et al., 2012). However, it should also be acknowledged that social media conversations can lead to new risks and challenges in terms of brand and corporate reputation (Bernoff & Li, 2008; Jones, Temperley & Lima, 2009; Manara & Roquilly, 2011; Laroche et al., 2013).

The issue of ‘reputation’ in management literature (Fombrun, 1996) and its current variations (online or e-reputation) has attracted an

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increasing interest amongst scholars (Jones, Temperley & Lima, 2009; Alloing, 2013; Castellano & Dutot, 2013). Since the advent of social media, academic literature has focused on the concept itself (relations between reputation and e-reputation in particular), the potential interests and risks with regard to social media. However, online reputation management as practice remains comparatively disregarded; a better understanding therefore is required.

This research article intends to examine online reputation management in practice, from the practitioners’ point of view, especially when facing the challenges posed by intensive customer participation on social media. It is not simply a case of stating what online reputation management could be, as is often the case in managerial literature, but of identifying what it actually is from within, from the field analysis of the discourse and practices of professionals (i.e. social media and/or community managers).

This research work is part of a broader research project dedicated to social media management and customer participation. The results presented and discussed in this article are focused on the specific concept of ‘online reputation’, which emerged as a core issue.

Commencing with the first indications of the issue of online reputation and social media found in academic literature (mainly in marketing), in the second section this article presents the two phases of a qualitative research methodology based largely on online observation and in-depth interviews with social media (SM) managers. In the third section, the main results provide a better understanding of online reputation management in practice, and the five main activities, from monitoring to crisis communication management, which are all involved in the core mission of brand visibility and reputation management. In the final section, the research findings encourage us to examine the modalities of online reputation management in the specific context of the merging of social media and customer relationship management (i.e. social CRM).

**Online Reputation and Brand Visibility in the Era of Social Media: A Review of Published Literature**

Social sciences have taken great interest in the concept of ‘reputation’ and many approaches have been proposed in economics, sociology, communication or management sciences (cf. Alloing, 2013; Castellano & Dutot 2013 for a recent overview). Management literature (and marketing in particular) has shown a specific interest in brand management and more recently in reputation management. This has been reinforced by the rise of social media.

**Reputation and Brand Management**

An impressive range of academic literature has been published relating to reputation and brand management. Concepts such as brand equity (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993), brand image, brand loyalty, brand awareness (de Chernatony & Dall’Olmo Riley, 1998), brand personality (Aaker, 1997), brand identity and brand reputation (de Chernatony, 1999) have become established. According to the authors, ‘reputation’ is used to refer to corporate and/or brand levels; thus the relationship between ‘brand’ and ‘reputation’ can be confusing. Corporate reputation can be considered as “the overall esteem in which a company is held by its constituents” (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003). Reputation is also considered to be an intangible asset (Johnson & Kaplan, 1987; Fombrum, 1996). From this point of view, brand reputation is regarded as a component of corporate reputation, the most visible component of the corporate reputation as a whole.

With regard to reputation, in published works the corporate level appears to be slightly more dominant. Even though image and reputation both result from a perceptual process, the image concept appears to be more consumer-oriented whereas reputation is more open when taking into account all the potential stakeholders. Helm (2011), for example, insists
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