Brands and Media Gatekeeping in the Social Media: Current Trends and Practices – An Exploratory Research

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine current trends and practices regarding brand communication through the social media, as brand activation in the online social environment rises and proliferates rapidly. Believing that further interdisciplinary contributions are needed to bridge the gap between brand management on the one hand and ICT potential on the other, the authors designed and implemented an exploratory research. They interviewed middle and senior-management executives, working either in companies who promote brands in the social media or in agencies who undertake social media projects and tasks. The authors’ results indicate that gatekeeping remains an integral and very important aspect of social media brand management. Most brands consider what to release rather than what not to. They withhold information based on a narrow campaign-oriented mindset which reflects traditional marketing and public relations’ practices and has not embraced the requirements for transparency and openness that prevail in the digital and social media environment.

KEYWORDS

Brand Campaigns, Brands, Content, Media Gatekeeping, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Brands today create competitive content for most media platforms, including all social media channels, gradually becoming media outlets themselves (Solis, 2010). They are using multimedia storytelling modeled websites, corporate blogs, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, etc. as channels to share content over a wide range of virtual communities and to stimulate potential clients. As brands are becoming online publishers, they tend to enrich social media conversations and then use content marketing tools like Search Engine Optimization (SEO) (Castronovo, Huang, 2012), or tools that facilitate purchase decisions (McDowell, 2011) so as to convert leads to customers and achieve Return On Investment (ROI). This appears to be a more transparent approach to achieve and measure ROI in comparison with traditional media. The greater the ROI, the more a brand acquires the ability to engage in new media platforms. According to a recent Forrester Research report, this is an opportunity for the brands to build a human, authentic image, and to raise brand awareness promoting the quality of their products and services (Wizdo et al., 2016).
Even 3 years ago, 46% of online users were relying on social media when making a purchase decision. Furthermore, more than a third of the members of Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council declared that digital marketing will account for 75% or more of their spending within the next 5 years (Brenner, 2012) underlying a tendency for most brands to own the touch points where they place their advertisements, and agreed that this approach is far more effective than traditional promotion (Bonn, 2012), (Kane et al., 2009). In this economic-societal context, predictions indicate that “by 2016 60% of companies will have an executive in their organization that is directly responsible for an overall content marketing strategy” (Curata, 2015, pp. 14).

In 2010, there were 4 billion subscribers to mobile services over a diversity of content-capable devices. This new landscape forever changes the brand-consumer relationship, challenging brands to enable multi-screen viewing for omni-connectivity and to offer synergistic content tailored to user location and personal preferences. Users already demand high quality condensed information -like TV snacking- with little scrolling or key input (Haikel-Elsabeh, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this new, still fluid landscape where new terms and ideas like “brand journalism” emerge (Bull, 2013), the media gatekeeping filters ought to be reexamined. For more than fifty years, media gatekeeping has been among the most influential contributions in communication theories. Articulated by Shoemaker and Reese, this model outlines five dimensions of content filters, namely: individual influences, professional routines, organizational influences, extra-media influences and the cultural environment. Digital technologies have a profound effect on each of these filters because they enable interaction on a “many-to-many” scale and strengthen extra publisher influences (Cossiavelou, Bantimaroudis, 2009).

The approach of brands as publishers calls for a reexamination of the agenda-setting for potential customers, especially for product and service content that will manage to inspire trust and lead to purchase (Hermida et al., 2012). The relationship among content generator -the brand- and content retriever -the consumer- is crucial for this agenda-setting.

Specifically, it is noted that the individual filter seems to become a fuzzy concept as new practices emerge and need to be redefined and researched. For the second dimension of gatekeeping, evidence shows that brands allowing highly critical comments from both individuals and lobbying groups constitute an exception, while new skills are required to understand and manage online communities (McWilliam, 2012). As the quality of the conversations could matter more than the quantity of followers and as the social media constitute an opt-in environment, new requirements emerge that create complexity and affect the business models of big brands. As a result new strategies and solutions have to be adopted, and this also affects budgeting decisions.

For the third filter, the intra-organizational dimension of gatekeeping, a number of changes are observed: famous brands are hosting online, social media communities, allowing individuals to establish their own virtual interest-based sub-communities and to share knowledge or simply exchange information on product experience (McWilliam, 2012). Managing such communities is a strategic challenge. Leadership issues arise as well as questions regarding measurement of engagement, rather than just raw impressions (Kozinets et al., 2010). Organizational reputation, brand emotions and behavioral intentions are under constant renegotiation: using short hyperlinks to compete with text limitations on Twitter, devising new media crisis communication models (Siah Ann Mei, Bansal, Pang, 2010), integrating mobile features, dealing with legal issues like cybersquatting (usernames’ reservation or tags) or even keeping up with the ever-changing Facebook and Twitter policies to ensure an account’s authenticity (Curtin, 2010) are only some of the potentially harmful issues for trademark owners.

The intra-brand gatekeeping filter also includes the evolving ROI strategies for investments in constantly advanced content management systems (CMS), in updating business models that may
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