Chapter 11
GeoFree BrandComms: Building and Sustaining Virtual Brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

Marketing literature has established the strategic importance of building communities centered around strong brands—brand communities. Our research adds to the current understanding of brand communities by extending the notion of brand community being non-geographically bound. While prior research acknowledges this characteristic of brand community, it fails to, firstly, illustrate the strategic importance of such freedom, and secondly, provide directions for an operational, tactical, or strategic tool to truly build and sustain non-geographically bound brand communities. We refer to such communities as geographically free brand communities (GeoFree BrandComms). This research presents the conceptual underpinnings and characteristics of GeoFree BrandComms. Further, the use of Weblogs (Blogs) and related technologies such as video blogs, podcasts, and RSS as strategic tools in building GeoFreeBrandComms is explored. We then proceed to posit the applications of GeoFree BrandComms in Web-based marketing strategies that find their basis in strong brands and loyal customers.

INTRODUCTION

This year the Facebook community will welcome its 500 millionth member, far outnumbering the entire population of the United States! It’s size in sheer numbers is third only to China and India! One quarter of Web browsers pay a visit to Facebook and make a revisit to the site almost a daily ritual. Members on this site interact with others, search out lost acquaintances, comment on the lives of others and look for similar communications from others! This is a strong community with active
participation. In fact, the community is strong enough to make the mighty Mark Zuckerberg (founder of Facebook) to alter the very nature of the site. In the past three years there has been more than one occasion on which the Facebook community has made corporate managers at Facebook to rescind and retract corporate policy decisions pertaining to membership privacy. As one reads through this research, it will become evident that Facebook is face to face with a well entrenched community of brand fanatics that have virtually hijacked the object of their affection. With this vignette in mind, one can easily see the wisdom of managing one’s brand in a fashion such that the control of the brand is retained yet the followers of the brand feel involved and important. We suggest ways to conceive, sustain, and grow such a community in the virtual world with the strategic imperatives of brand equity being preserved and protected. In order to comprehend our thesis on this issue, the reader must first understand the socio-anthropological foundations of a community.

A community is an organized network of member entities and the interrelationships. Communities tend to be identified on the basis of commonality or identification among their members, whether a neighborhood, an occupation, a leisure pursuit, or devotion to a brand. Through communities, people share essential resources that may be cognitive, emotional, or material in nature. Recently researchers have drawn our attention to communities built around (and often sustained by) strong brands—brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002).

Brand communities are communities whose primary bases of identification are either brands or consumption activities, that is, whose meaningfulness is negotiated through the symbolism of the marketplace. In an ongoing effort to retain customer loyalty and build a strategy based on lifelong partnerships, brand communities offer a way to enmesh the customer in a network of relationships with the brand and fellow customers as opposed to the traditional one-to-one relation between brand and customer. It is presumed that such an approach would strengthen the bonds with the customer in a much superior fashion, thus building and strengthening strategic brand loyalty.

Muniz and O’Guinn (2001, p.412) posit: “A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand.”

Brand Community is conceptualized as being “specialized” because at its center is a branded good or service. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) further envisioned a brand community from a customer point of view as a fabric of relationships in which they are situated in relationship to the brand, to the firm and to other customers of the brand.

Our research adds to the current understanding of brand communities by exploring the notion of brand community being “non-geographically bound.” While prior research acknowledges this characteristic of brand community it fails to, firstly, illustrate the strategic importance of such freedom. And, secondly, provide directions for an operational, tactical, or strategic tool to truly build and sustain non-geographically bound brand communities. We refer to such communities as geographically free brand communities—GeoFree BrandComms.

We propose that GeoFree BrandComms present relatively inexpensive strategic tools to build brand loyalty and brand equity. We examine the characteristics of such GeoFree BrandComms, and compare and contrast them to the more traditional brand communities (Jeep Jamborees, Harley-Davidson Owners’ Groups [HOGS]). We then proceed to illustrate the use of one such on-line tool—Web Based Logs (Blogs) -- as a possible strategic tool to build GeoFree BrandComms in the virtual world.