Chapter XIII
When Is a Duck Not a Duck?
When It Is a Euro!
Trust-Based Marketing Communications in Virtual Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter tries to evaluate the effects of the propagation of a trust-based marketing message through selected below-the-Web technologies, which are those particular types of information technologies different from Web sites—such as e-mails, discussion lists, BBSs, newsgroups, forums, peer-to-peer, IRCs, MUDs and MOOs—that allow for the creation of virtual communities. A preliminary experiment on informal marketing communications, carried out over 12,000 accesses to below-the-Web communities and regarding the proposal to use the term “Ducks” for “Euros” in view of its similarity with the term “Bucks” for dollars, showed that below-the-Web technologies can be an appropriate tool for building trust among participants when four conditions for the existence of virtual communities are met: (a) a minimum level of interactivity; (b) a variety of communicators; (c) a virtual-common-public space; and (d) a minimum level of sustained membership.
INTRODUCTION

In the present economic environment, characterized by global competition, an increasing level of complexity, and a growing interconnection and interdependence, companies must manage new technological requirements for achieving success on the marketplace (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). On one hand, the Internet and digital technologies provide a powerful means for information searching and propagation without limits of time, place, and costs, as well as an effective tool for the development of computer-mediated communications (CMCs)—that is, those task-related and interpersonal exchanges of messages through electronic media that involve the use of computers (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) and which encourage the spread of new forms of relationships and social networks.

CMC technologies have a positive impact on two fundamental dimensions of communication: content and relation (Pastore & Vernuccio, 2004). As regards to content, new technologies make available multimedia differentiated mailings of a large mass of users, reducing the trade-off between reach (the dimension of the potential market) and richness (the product differentiation), and promoting online strategies for customized product positioning. As regards to relation, new technologies allow various types of communications—such as one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many—encouraging users to play an active role in contents’ generation.

In this way, the Internet offers the opportunity to accomplish socialization processes of content production and consumption activities, thus allowing companies to establish trusting computer-mediated relationships with their customers and allowing consumers to spontaneously express their expectations and desires. On the other hand, today’s global marketplace gives firms no option but to face the growing level of competition through the modification of unilateral relationships in long-lasting trust-based multilateral relationships with markets (Castaldo, 2002; Urban, 2003). In the newly connected economy, the environmental complexity changes itself in its relational-based articulation, which needs trust as a fundamental resource to govern and regulate market relationships: companies are induced to develop partnerships and strategic networks with those economic parties which contribute to the generation of a corporate value—suppliers, customers, governments, and even competitors. In order to manage competition, individuals and corporations need to cooperate and work together (Morgan & Hunt, 1994); consequently, the creation, development, and maintaining of trust is a requirement for building durable and collaborative relationships (Sultan et al., 2002).

CMC technologies offer companies new opportunities to establish and nurture trust-based communications, allowing them the development of a multichannel strategy on the Internet. In particular, below-the-Web CMC technologies, that is those particular types of information technologies different from Web sites, such as e-mails, discussion lists, and so forth, and their cyberspace, that is the electronic place created by a computer system or by a computer network in which they are, represent the means by which companies and consumers can develop below-the-Web communities. By connecting a large number of computers worldwide, the cyberspace eliminates distances and creates a new place rich in information resources made available through computer networks.

The present chapter tries to evaluate the effects of the propagation of a trust-based marketing message through selected below-the-Web technologies, pursuing both a theoretical and an operational purpose. From a theoretical point of view, it tries to prove that such technologies—as a result of perceived competence and goodwill—are better able than Web sites to develop trust among members, since they generate virtual communities (Jones, 1997; Ridings, Gefen & Arinze, 2002). From an operative perspective, this study tries to verify,