Chapter 7

Can Your Business Have One Million Friends? Understanding and Using Blogs as One-to-One Mass Media

Soyean (Julia) Kim
Boston University, USA & Kyung Hee University, Korea

Barbara A. Bickart
Boston University, USA

Frédéric F. Brunel
Boston University, USA

Seema Pai
Boston University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we develop a theoretical framework that explains how blogs can be categorized based on audiences’ perceptions and how bloggers use different strategies to shape or shift their audiences’ perceptions and increase the persuasiveness of their messages. We posit that bloggers use two distinguishable communication strategies: (a) developing and sustaining an illusion of relationship between the blogger and the reader in order to individualize the communication, and (b) maintaining a level of ambiguity in their commercial interests in order to conceal the commercial nature of some blogs. We describe the tactics underlying the use of these strategies as well as the efficacy and ethics of these practices.

INTRODUCTION

Rumi: It’s a day of errands for me... wearing vintage collar, Ralph Lauren blazer, Zara skirt, Céline bag and sunglasses, and Rag & Bone boots.

Comment: I remember that blazer! It’s super old, right? It’s neat to see how it still fits into your style now, like 5 years later haha. This is why I can never do a decent closet cleanse--I feel like I’ll want to wear it again later.

Comment: You always look great when things get hectic. And I’ve told you before how well you wear Céline.

Comment: My day started as an errand day and ended up being a shopping spree day! Hope yours was great too!

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This posting by famous fashion blogger Rumi (fashiontoast.com), along with three of the many comments that she received on that day, illustrate how Rumi has successfully created a communication environment where brands are discussed and celebrated but also where friendships and intimate relationships might prevail. Although it is unlikely that Rumi has a meaningful relationship with each of her 133,672 readers, it is clear that many of them believe they have a close friendship with her. They relate to and connect with her at an interpersonal level, sharing slice of life stories, remembering past events, and engaging in brand level discussions. This level of closeness is rather counterintuitive especially if we consider that blogs are, by definition, a form of broadcast media in which a blogger shares his or her views with a large audience. It is therefore worthwhile understanding how bloggers develop different communication strategies that allow them to achieve specific communication objectives.

Although by their inherent nature, blogs are a form of one-to-many mass media, we propose that not all blogs adhere to the principles of traditional mass communication models. On one hand, we acknowledge that some blogs may follow a broadcast model where the bloggers serve as the focal sources or messengers of information and where their readers are the target recipients of that information. These types of blogs adhere to communication and persuasion principles similar to those that govern other forms of mass media communication (e.g., broadcast advertising or print ads). In other blogs, however, readers may feel that they play an integral role in the communication exchange. In these instances, readers perceive the blogs to be interpersonal and conversational spaces. In other words, blogs can be a unique form of a one-to-many broadcast medium that functions like a one-to-one communication model. Indeed, as shown in our introductory example, some bloggers like Rumi are able to relate very personally to, and ultimately influence, a large audience by developing an intimate communication style.

In these cases, readers feel as if they are having one-to-one conversations with the blogger. Unlike advertising and other broadcast media, the overall effectiveness of these one-to-one blogs appears to stem from the personal and intimate relationship that bloggers are able to form with their many readers. The goal of this chapter is to describe how specific persuasion elements actually operate in blogs and in particular what kinds of communication strategies bloggers should use in order to increase the effectiveness and persuasiveness of their messages.

Specifically, in this chapter, by drawing from theory on persuasion in both one-to-one and one-to-many communication media as well as observing a series of blogs, we develop a theoretical framework that explains how blogs can be categorized based on audiences’ perceptions and how bloggers use different strategies to shape or shift their audiences’ perceptions and increase the persuasiveness of their messages. As we develop this framework, we also recognize that some blogs might have direct commercial interests (e.g., a company blog) while others might not have immediate commercial interests linked with the content of the blogs (e.g., a product review blog by an independent news organization). This distinction is important as we believe that readers will resist or yield to persuasion attempts differently based on their perceptions of the existence of bloggers’ commercial interests. Furthermore, we suggest that third party bloggers (those not directly affiliated with a company or product) often try to maintain an appearance of commercial independence even if they have commercial interests of their own. We will discuss the efficacy and ethics of these practices.

BACKGROUND

Although blogs are a form of one-to-many mass media, the interaction between bloggers and readers on many blogs resembles one-to-one commu-