Brand Presence in Digital Space

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ABSTRACT

With the growing importance of digital spaces as arenas in which organisations and consumers interact, brand owners can no longer afford to regard digital, online, or i-branding as an optional add-on to branding through other channels. After an introduction, this article reviews some of the principles that need to underpin any brand strategy. The article then reviews the key considerations for organisations as they seek to manage their brand presence in digital spaces. Next, it examines recent developments associated with the social media era, in which consumers expect to have a key role in co-creating the brand. The article concludes with an agenda for the future development of branding in digital space.

Keywords: Brand Relationships, Digital Branding, E-Branding, Multi-Channel Marketing, Online Branding, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

The Role and Importance of Branding in Digital Space

Brands communicate with customers; they capture key values and messages, relating, for instance, to quality, excellence, consistency, reliability, modern, traditional, exciting, socially responsible, or entertaining. Brands are a means of making an immediate impact on new customers, and reminding returning customers. Strong brands have high brand equity and make a significant contribution to business performance and organizational success. In an increasingly digital and networked economy and environment, messages about what an organization or its products and services mean, and the value that they offer increasingly needs to be communicated remotely, through the organization’s presence in digital space, including its Website, mobile Website, and engagement with social media. The Website, for instance, is not just another channel designed to increase visibility and access. It is a shop window, or even a digital destination, through which the organization delivers marketing communication, purchase opportunities, information, advice, customer care, service, and experiences. The Website has the potential to deliver the company’s identity, products and service in the space of a few screens and within seconds; the whole experience comes together for the user, or, if not managed properly, it falls apart. The Website experience is a key element of brand experience of the digital

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brand. However, it is important to recognize that the Website is only part of the brand presence that organizations must manage in the digital space. The categories in the Revolution awards in ‘the digital disciplines’ illustrate the diversity of channels and marketing activities that organizations can use to build brand equity in digital space. These are: integrated marketing campaign, location-based campaign, affiliate marketing, data visualization, email, mobile, online advertising, online PR, search, social media, video, viral, and Website (http://www.revolutionawards.com/about).

The growing importance of digital branding and advertising is demonstrated by the investment that many organizations are making in branding and advertising through digital media. In the UK, online and digital advertising spend grew 2.7% during 2011 to reach £16.99bn, whilst US spend grew 22% in the same period, and totaling $31 billion (www.iabuk.net). All projections suggest that these figures will continue to rise. Increasing investment in digital advertising and branding is associated with higher levels of activity and interest in relation to branding in the digital space. The novelty and continuing evolution of digital channels requires ongoing innovation from both businesses and advertising and media agencies, not only in how they present and represent their brand, but also in how they manage brand communication and the brand experience. Indeed, Chapman (2001), when discussing the rapid rise of Internet brands, such as Yahoo! and Amazon asserts that the role of the brand has changed dramatically, such that brand has become a key competitive weapon in gaining market dominance. Certainly, the marketspace in which the consumer experiences digital brands is information-rich, crowded and dynamic (Simmons, 2008; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013).

In the early days of digital business, some believed that the brand would be less important online than in other channels. They believed that consumers would no longer need the shorthand of brands to assist them in their decision-making processes. Consumers would instead use the wealth of information at their fingertips, accessed through sophisticated search engines and comparison sites to make their own judgments on the suitability of a product, service, or organization, such that brands would become superfluous (Rowley, 2004a; Ward & Lee, 2000). However, even relatively early research, often focusing on Websites, search, and affiliate marketing demonstrated the importance of brands in digital space. It was recognised that too much information can be confusing, and that in a digitized world, with information overload, brands are ever more important, because they save the customer time by reducing their search costs and helping them to make choices in a world that is replete with choice (Rubenstein & Griffiths, 2001; Ward & Lee, 2000).

In particular, for those product categories in which it is difficult to judge product or service quality through the Internet, branding may be an important signifier of quality, reliability and consistency. And further, in rapidly changing marketplaces, in which many purchases are for products or services that are new to the consumer, the continuity and reliability of brands will become all the more important. There is also evidence that experienced consumers return to the same sites rather than ‘surf the Web’.

Defining Branding in Digital Space

Before advancing the discussion of branding in the digital space further, it is useful to propose a definition. Interestingly, not only does terminology vary, with different authors using online branding, digital branding, i-branding, Internet branding, and e-branding to mean more or less the same thing, but definitions are scarce. Accordingly, we offer our own definition of branding in digital space:

*Branding in digital space encompasses the processes whereby a brand owner, (sometimes in partnership with customers and other stakeholders) seeks to communicate, transact, interact, deliver experiences, and build trust and loyalty, with a view to evolving their brand identity and increasing their brand equity.*
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