

# Branding Strategies for Social Media Marketing

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*Companies are increasingly recognizing the value of social media marketing for their implication in developing and increasing the value of a brand in online environments. As a result, companies devote time and effort to engage with current and potential consumers on social media platforms and co-create of value with brand advocates. This study focuses on social media marketing as part of digital inbound marketing, its uses for organizations and its potential for branding in online settings. These brand-related social media tactics and strategies involve initiatives such as ongoing business-to-consumer conversations, content that is created and shared on social media, consumer engagement experiences, and a brand persona that invites consumers to co-create the brand in online settings, it promotes interaction, participation, and collaboration with consumers. This study concludes with some recommendations on future research.*

**Keywords:** social media, branding strategy, digital inbound marketing, brands, content marketing, social media marketing, value co-creation

**JEL Classification:** M31, O33, M39

## 1. Introduction

Ha (2008) identified the Internet as the fastest growing advertising medium of this decade. Moreover, the internet represents a pull medium because consumers get the opportunity to choose the content and the brands they follow and interact with. In pull marketing, companies are seeking to capture the interest of customers who are already seeking information, advice, a product or a service (Smith and Chaffey, 2013). As a result, the customer is pulling from branded information available in online settings (Pitta and Fowler, 2005).

Currently, there is general understanding that digital media have affected the way a brand connects with a consumer. Digital media includes all the electronic media that disseminate any form of information in digital formats (Smith, 2011) and the most prominent setting for digital marketing is the internet.

Consequently, digital advertising represents a 'form of promotion that uses the Internet for the express purpose of delivering marketing messages' (Smith, 2011). Recent research papers have focused on the prospective of pull or digital inbound marketing that explores how consumers actively seek out brands that provide engaging and valuable content which is relevant to their needs (Halligan and Shah, 2010).

In a previous academic paper, the term 'Digital Inbound Marketing' (DIM) was defined as a new academic concept in online marketing literature, as '*the process of reaching and converting qualified consumers by creating and pursuing organic tactics in online settings.*' (Opreana and Vinerean, 2015). In this paper, DIM was examined according to the three main components and online strategies associated with this

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concept: brand-focused marketing communications, content marketing, social media marketing, and search engine optimization. However, in this research we will focus solely on social media marketing as part of digital inbound marketing, and its potential for branding in online settings.

## 2. Social Media Marketing Uses and Objectives

### 2.1. Reasons for Organizations to Use Social Media Marketing

Research demonstrates that the marketing spending coordinated with social media are increasing as brands are focusing on:

- developing a constant social media presence,
- interacting with their current or potential customers,
- helping them enhance their brand experiences,

Gillin (2007) proposed different motives that explain the brands' shift toward social media marketing, namely:

- Declining response rates. Customers tend to overlook traditional digital marketing advertising in its different forms (banners, search ads, emails, etc.) because they find them intrusive or invasive.
- Technology developments. Advancements in technology that help brands to better engage with their consumers or that help them monitor the effectiveness of advertising campaigns have led to an increase in the attractiveness of social media marketing.
- Demographic shifts. Individuals, particularly young people, have transitioned in digital settings, and the utilization of customary media channels has declined, leading again to an inclination toward social media marketing.
- Customer preference. Trust is imperative on the web and individuals believe their friends and other influencers more than organizations.
- Low cost. A viral campaign on any social media platform can create many more engaged and connected customers than a campaign on TV, and on social media the cost is much lower than on mass media traditional channels.

Brands should focus on investing time and effort in social media marketing because of the following specifications:

- Valuable relationships with existing consumers. Using social media, brands can reach their current customers and develop these relationships, by engaging in interactions that strengthen the communications (Bartlett, 2010; Hackworth and Kunz, 2010; Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014)).
- Reaching new customers. Social media helps brands to reach new segments of consumers who could not be reached via traditional marketing channels (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). Newman (2003) stated that consumers create a "small-world" network where content is easily distributed to a large number of people.
- Raising brand awareness. As an ever increasing number of people are using multiple social media platforms, a brand's presence on various platforms can help propagate its name among a segment of people who are not familiar with it, thus creating brand awareness (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014; O'Flynn, 2012).
- Sales boost. Social media relationships can also have a positive effect on the revenue associated with a brand (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014). O'Flynn (2012) discussed the impact of social media that generated an extra million pounds in sales through Twitter for Sony, and three million dollars increase in sales from their presence on Twitter for Dell.

Social media can also be incorporated with CRM, reinforcing the consumer-centric approach of this digital marketing strategy. As a result, a new concept was proposed by various authors (Trainor et al., 2014; Greenberg, 2010), namely 'Social CRM' which is defined by Greenberg (2010, p.413) as "*a philosophy and a business strategy, supported by a technology platform, business rules, processes and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted and transparent business environment.*"

### 2.2. Social Media Marketing Objectives

Multiple studies have explored the objectives of social media marketing for brands in online settings. Various authors and papers (e.g. Ashley and Tuten, 2014; Bianchi and Andrews, 2015; Schultz and Peltier, 2013; Schweidel and Moe, 2014.) proposed objectives such as:

- brand awareness or reinforcement of the brand among targeted consumers,

- sales growth and stimulation for the brand,
- driving traffic to other online brand-related platforms (such as main website),
- lowering marketing costs,
- lead conversion and nurturing, as well as assessment of customer conversion and analysis of the conversion rate for different social media tactics,
- stimulating consumers to share and post content,
- monitoring customer reviews or questions and offering customer service on social media platforms.

Other social media objectives that could be related to consumer engagement, more specifically, driving consumer engagement and increasing the brand interaction with customers. A 2012 study found that 78% of marketers use social media marketing particularly to develop and enhance customer engagement. Customer engagement is behavior-based, it extends beyond buying, and it is focused on a brand or firm (Doorn et al., 2010).

In social media marketing, it is also very important for brands to create the right premises for user-generated content and then share that content created by brand advocates on social media platforms. Nonetheless, particular objectives related to social media marketing may depend on the industry of the brand (for example, a broad classification of business-to-business brand or a business-to-consumers brand) and the overall strategy of the organization. Considering these patterns, there is a high potential for brands and their social media marketing strategy.

### **3. Branding Strategies on Social Media**

As an interactive and interpersonal marketing tool, social media can serve multiple branding purposes. As such, branded social media activities can be used to *'increase brand awareness and brand liking, promote customer engagement and loyalty, inspire consumer word-of-mouth communication about the brand, and potentially drive traffic to brand locations on and offline'* (Ashley and Tuten, 2014). These branded social tactics and strategies are dependent on social networks and may involve initiatives such as ongoing business-to-consumer conversations, content that is created and shared on social media, consumer engagement experiences, and a brand persona that invites consumers to co-create the brand in online settings, invites interaction, participation, and collaboration with consumers.

#### **3.1. Creative Strategies for Brand Messaging on Social Media**

The plans of action for brands in social media frameworks important because they have an important effect on advertising results.

Creative strategies in advertising and social media marketing can enhance the receiver's motivation, opportunity, and/or ability to process information from an ad (MacInnis et al., 1991). Exploring creative strategies helps marketers and academics in identifying the right options that will yield the highest return on investment and effectiveness. Academics have developed typologies for message strategies (Ashley and Tuten, 2014). At the simplest level, creative strategies can be distinguished as primarily emotional/transformational or primarily functional/informational (Aaker and Norris, 1982). Functional messages have a rational basis, whereas transformational messages focus on the psychological and emotional characteristics of the targeted customers.

Other than this differentiation of rational vs. emotional messages, brands can also explore creative strategies focused on messages that highlight their unique selling proposition and how they are distinct from other competitors.

Otherwise, branding messages on social media can also be aimed to consumers' inspirations. In this case, a brand projects a certain image that the targeted consumer aims to achieve. On social media, brands can also apply creative strategies with messages that provide insights into particular experiences. For example, GoPro is a brand mostly known for its action cameras and their social media presence is focused on transposing consumers into an adventure with each video that is filmed with a GoPro camera.

Ashley and Tuten (2014)'s study focused on consumer engagement for brands in social media and their findings highlight that functional messages have the most appeal on social media. Because of the experiential, participatory nature of social media, it is somewhat surprising that functional and resonance appeals were used by more brands than the experiential appeal. One possible explanation the authors offer is that brand marketers do not want alienate consumers, especially consumers who feel they are in relationships with a particular brand. Additionally, several creative strategies were associated with customer engagement, specifically experiential, image, and exclusivity messages.

### **3.2. Consumer Engagement for Brands in Social Media Marketing**

Customer engagement is believed to be directly and positively related to a number of relationship outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, affective commitment, and loyalty (Brodie et al., 2011). Customer engagement has great potential to affect customer behavior and many authors consider it a successful retention and acquisition strategy for establishing and sustaining the competitive benefits for brand in digital marketing (Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek, 2013; Hollebeek, Glynn and Brodie, 2014).

Thus, considering also the increasing number of people spending more and more time on social media, it is meaningful to study consumers' engagement in this context (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Since engagement is a key benefit for a brand's social media presence, organizations should encourage active commentators and "likers" in their pages, in such a way that leads not only to more commenting and liking, but also to purchase behavior (Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014).

Regarding consumer engagement in social media activities, brands encourage consumers to develop branded content on social networks. Otherwise, consumers can experience branded content, a concept known as 'branded entertainment'. Zhang (2010) explored branded entertainment content on Facebook through an exploratory content analysis based on play theory as a theoretical framework. Zhang (2010) discovered that 70% of brands used the social media strategy of branded entertainment on the most popular social media platform to engage with users using traditional play themes in their content strategy.

In another line of research, Jahn and Kunz (2012) based their study on the use and gratification theory proposed by Katz in 1959. Jahn and Kunz (2012)'s study explored consumer participation (a component of consumer engagement) in Facebook brand pages and discovered that functional and hedonic contents were drivers of participation. Katz's (1959) theory of use and gratification explains consumers' need for communication which is oriented on content, relationship and self, more precisely

- content orientation refers to the information provided via social media, which can be either functional or hedonic; Jahn and Kunz (2012) found that brands that added high-quality content regularly on Facebook experienced higher usage of their brand pages.
- Relationship orientation focuses on the social interactions provided by these social networks.
- Self-orientation refers to the specific needs of each individual in their quest to experience social interactions provided by online networking platforms.

Jahn and Kunz (2012)'s study found that the essential motivators for consumer participation on Facebook brand pages are related to entertainment, particularly by focusing on consumers' need for escapism, hedonism, aesthetic enjoyment, and feelings. On the opposite side, demotivators are aspects that consumers find irritating on social media, such as Facebook posts that cause anxiety and things that dilute human experiences.

Similarly, Medury (2011)'s research found that consumers have a higher emotional attachment for brands once they receive more information and knowledge about a brand through social media. Medury (2011) also pointed out that consumer attachment increased regardless of the type of social media content (namely, functional or emotional) the brands developed and shared.

### **3.3. Creating Brand Advocacy through Content Creation and Brand Co-Creation with Consumers**

Social media helps facilitate interactions and collaborations among current or potential customers and brands. Also, technological developments help with the development of new interactive platforms for consumers to share, create and generate new content related to brands in online environments.

Consumers get the opportunity to share their experiences on social media platforms, and develop new meanings for brands (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2000). This connection consumers develop with brands leads them to influence with favorable or unfavorable information other potential consumers, and these potential consumers will receive brand-related content from reliable sources, which will further lead to more personal brand experiences in online and offline settings. Therefore, the use of social media platforms is changing the online branding process due to faster information sharing (Chordes, 2009).

Involvement and participation in social media is a key component of brand advocacy and co-created branding with consumers. As a result of this change in consumer behavior, branding is no longer a firm-based activity, which used to provide products to consumers with minimum levels of feedback, but a value co-creation activity (Merz, He and Vargo, 2009) which involves the participation of firms and their respective stakeholders. In turn, co-creation is a process of engaging customers in creating value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), as customers are transformed from passive customers to active players (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). In a brand co-created experience, once online customers' intent to co-brand, they provide details of their

shopping experiences and information on their favorite brands, and encourage others to purchase (Gensler et al., 2013).

In social media branding, co-creation reflects a participation from people who seek the opportunity to get involved in the development of brands, products, services with insights, user-generated content, sharing of company-created content, and active interactions related to the brand in online environments.

In addition, encouraging consumers to share positive user experiences via social media can lead to improved brand reputation and sales increases (e.g., by enticing fickle or indecisive consumers to purchase products or services; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

Moreover, sharing and propagating the same message on multiple social media platforms can improve message credibility and confidence in the advertised product (Voorveld, Niejens, and Smit, 2010). De Swaan Arons, van den Driest, and Weed (2014) explain the extremely rapid changes that occur in marketing in this digital age, including the use of social media. They remark that “tools and strategies that were cutting-edge just a few years ago are fast becoming obsolete, and new approaches are appearing every day” (p. 56).

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **4.1. Theoretical Contributions**

The objective of this paper was to contribute to a better understanding of the way organizations approach their branding strategy on social media. The study provides a vital contribution to digital marketing literature by offering branding strategies for social media marketing, gaining more comprehensions on brand opportunities in online settings.

This research integrates social media marketing into a more strategic marketing and management context. Social media marketing provides firms with an opportunity to use social media to develop and create relationships with customers, employees, communities, and other stakeholders. Moreover, social media plays a major role in facilitating interactions among consumers and brands.

Companies expect a number of specific benefits from their presence on social media. Customer engagement was mentioned as the most important one, and the brand advocacy of consumers in sharing and creating content on social media as another important benefit that helps a brand expand in digital marketing.

These branded social tactics and strategies are dependent on social media platforms and may involve initiatives such as ongoing business-to-consumer conversations, created content that is then propagated on multiple social media platforms, consumer engagement experiences, and a brand persona that invites consumers to co-create the brand in online settings.

### **4.2. Implications for Managers**

In addition to theoretical contributions, this research also presents a series of implications for marketing practitioners. Social media marketing can build brands in four important ways: by reminding, informing, persuading, and entertaining consumers. Companies should consistently generate strong content that can be picked up and dispersed by loyal consumers. Thus, companies have to encourage consumers to share their content.

Most importantly, organizations should provide incentives for consumers to share and propagate brand information among their friends on social networks and further. Organizations also should promote their social presence in as many places as possible and enable all site visitors to share accessed content with their personal networks easily.

Researching how branded social content influences the formation of brand schemas would have valuable implications for social media marketers. On a strategic level, social media marketing covers the decisions the management of an organization needs to establish regarding the scope of social media marketing and outcomes they seek on these online environments. The ultimate goal for every organization is to increase sales, be it through new customer acquisition, increased consumption, or up- or cross-selling, and all of these goals can be incorporated in the social media marketing strategy.

### **4.3. Limitations and Future Directions for Research**

Several limitations to the current research suggest potential avenues for future studies. This study is a preliminary attempt to understand how brands use the available social media channels and how they expect to benefit from them. This theoretical article can be extended to encompass an exploratory investigation of the success and failure of social media marketing use for branding purposes, using examples of social media campaign of well-known brands.

Many firms consider customer engagement as an important benefit arising from their activity in social media. A future empirical measurement of the impact of engagement on the perceptions and attitudes toward the brand will help managers to better design and implement their social media strategies.

Future research should be based on the anticipated social media marketing objectives for branding of different organizations from different sectors. Another potential area for future research can be associated with negative actions of consumers related to brand on social media, namely brand boycott on social platforms.

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