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BUILDING BRAND LOYALTY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

ROBIN INDERPAL SINGH
ASST. PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
SHREE ATAM VALLABH JAIN COLLEGE
HUSSAINPURA

ABSTRACT

The Internet has significantly changed the way our society connects with one another, does business, and socializes. The manufacturers should consider integrating social media into their business activities. This will allow them to attract new customers and reinforce brand loyalty among existing customers. Social media can serve as an excellent platform on which a company can explain certain decisions it has made, request customer feedback, and respond to customer complaints and queries. Companies are executing social media-centric marketing campaigns to enhance their customer experiences and in turn, build brand loyalty. In the current scenario, both manufacturers and consumers are increasingly looking to social media to garner information about each other. Any company that takes advantage of this wave to strengthen its brand loyalty will benefit greatly.

KEYWORDS

brand loyalty, social media.

INTRODUCTION - SOCIAL MEDIA

The Internet has significantly changed the way our society connects with one another, does business, and socializes. Today's youth have never known a world without the Internet, which is a piece of information adults must put into context when they think about and compare, generationally, social networking to face-to-face communications. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, more than 93% of both teens (12-17) and young adults (18-29) in the United States use the Internet regularly, and more than 70% use social networking sites. Furthermore, among online teens, 62% use the Internet to get news about current events and politics, 48% use it to make purchases (books, clothing, and music), and 31% use it to get health, dieting, or physical fitness information. Online social networking presents both opportunities and risks. What follows is a cursory breakdown of both, followed by a series of lesson plans specifically targeting online safety.

ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- **Social skills.** Social networking allows people to keep up with current friends and make new ones. When used in the right way, social media can increase self-esteem and help someone feel less isolated.
- **Independence and self-expression.** Creating your own "home page" allows people to express themselves and discuss their interests. They can join groups and support fan pages, and find out about other people's interests.
- **Digital competence.** Technology is evolving faster than ever before. As teens and young adults learn to adapt to new technologies (or new applications of existing technologies), they will be better equipped to adapt to future technology.
- **Educational development.** Young adults in secondary and post-secondary education will often use social networking to discuss schoolwork and share discussions about assignments.
- **Research.** Young adults can gather information about topics that are hard to discuss with others, such as drug use and sexual health.
- **Additional advantages for youth with disabilities:** Social networking can open up a new world of communication, integration, and community participation. Young adults can express themselves, including their thoughts and feelings, more easily and without fear of the rejection or stigma they may experience in real life. Research also suggests that these young adults may be more willing to ask for help online than in face-to-face situations. Furthermore, young adults who experience difficulty with social skills can socialize anonymously, and can experiment with different personas and practice initiating and maintaining online friendships. They can also respond to others by taking advantage of having time to review and edit communications before sending it on. Ultimately, this skill may carry over into "real life" and give a sense of new courage to make and maintain friendships in everyday life.

RISKS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

- **Sharing one's personal information with the wrong crowd.** Young adults need to be aware that information given out online could also put them at risk of victimization. People looking to do harm could use posted information to identify them or gain their trust. They can also be deceptive by pretending to know a young person. Encourage young people to privatize their online social networking accounts (such as Facebook and Twitter).
- **Bullying.** Harassment may occur online only (cyberbullying), or it may spill over to offline bullying committed by a person who has located his victim online. Cyberbullying can cause significant emotional harm resulting in depression, anger, school avoidance, violence, and suicide.
- **The permanency of online profiles.** Once information has been shared on the Internet, it's out there — forever! Retrieving information that others have read and captured is nearly impossible. Inappropriate pictures, captions, and comments could come back to haunt youth as they start applying to colleges or looking for jobs.
- **Disclosure.** People tend to be far bolder and less discretionary with information shared online versus in person. This means there is a greater risk of giving out information including the presence of a disability that, given a second thought, we might not have wanted to disclose.
- **Additional potential risks for youth with disabilities:** Social networking may further isolate those who may already feel isolated or not included, and can ultimately lead to depression and loneliness. Also, young adults with disabilities must make important life decisions regarding disclosure of their disability (if, how, when, and to whom). Unintended disclosure is possible by posting pictures or becoming fans of disability support groups, for example. While this might not be an issue, it makes the "disclosure" discussion even more important.

The process of empowering youth to make safe and responsible decisions online can be compared to the process by which they may have learned to safely cross the street. First they hold hands with an adult, and then they gain a little more independence and might be watched from afar. Ultimately, they become capable of making safe and responsible decisions on their own. Educating youth about social networking communities must be grounded in the providing of knowledge, skills, and values so that eventually they can be expected to independently exercise good judgment.

BRANDS – MEANING AND DEFINITION

A brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors. A brand thus signals to the customer the source of the product, and protects both the customer and the producer from competitors who would attempt to provide products that appear to be identical (Aaker, 1991). Brands provide the basis upon which consumers can identify and bond with a product or service or a group of products or services (Weilbacher, 1995). From the customer's point of view, a brand can be defined as the total accumulation of all his/her experiences, and is built at all points of contact with the customer

(Kapferer, 2004). A successful brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely (Chernatony and McDonald, 1998). According to Keller (2003a), consumer brand-knowledge can be defined in terms of the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information. Different sources and levels of knowledge such as awareness, attributes, benefits, images, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and experiences get linked to a brand and its understanding by the consumer. The brand, in a sense, acts as a credible guarantee for that product or service, allowing the consumer clearly to identify and specify products which genuinely offer added value (Murphy, 1998). Powerful brands provide long-term security and growth, higher sustainable profits, and increased asset value because they achieve competitive differentiation, premium prices, higher sales volumes, economies of scale and reduced costs, and greater security of demand (Temporal, 2000). The Brand “promise” is the essence of the benefits (both functional and emotional) that customers can expect to receive from experiencing a brand’s products/services, which reflects the heart, soul, and spirit of the brand (Knapp, 2000). Successful brands are those brands which adapt well to the environment and thus survive and flourish in the long term in spite of competition they face.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD BRAND LOYALTY

As the digital revolution changes the way consumers interact, consumer behavior across the world is rapidly evolving. The traditional media marketing tools of television and newspapers are facing increased competition from the more attractive alternatives provided by social media. These media — such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn — are essentially online platforms for social interaction.

The tightened spending on the part of consumers has led marketers to look for more cost-effective channels to reach their target audience. Customers’ loyalty to a brand is based on their experiences, perceptions and feelings about the product or service. Social media is more interactive and provides excellent opportunities for food, drink and consumer goods (FDCG) companies to build long-term relationships with their customers. Consequently, companies are realizing the importance of using social media to connect with their customers.

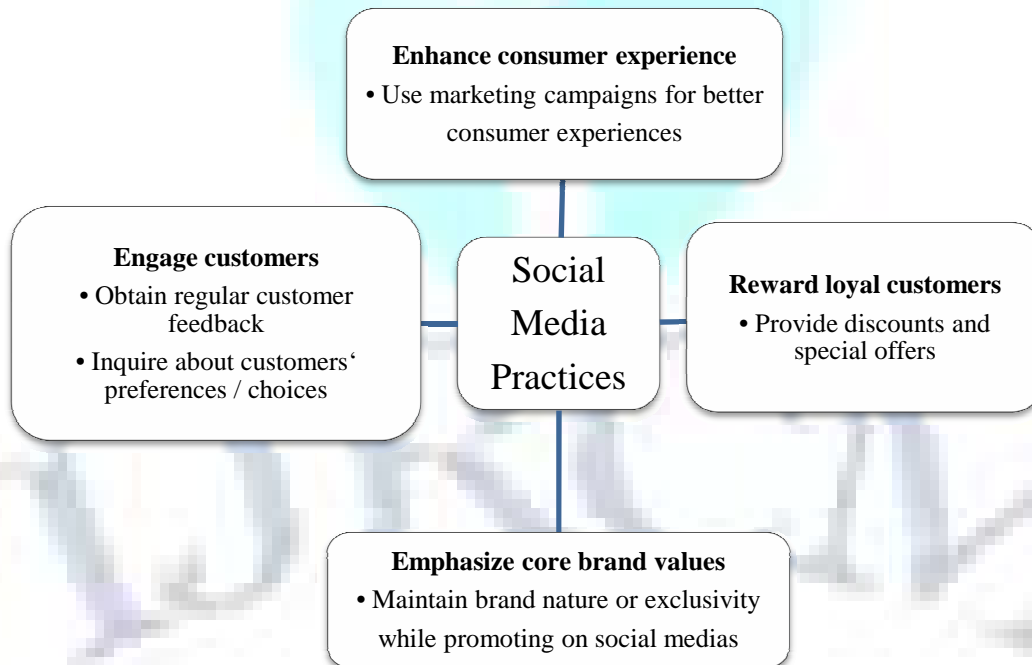
- Facebook is a social networking website where a user (including a company or manufacturer) can create a profile with photos, add other users as friends (including their audience or fans), list interests and exchange messages. Any user can join common interest user groups, meaning that the company can target various groups more effectively.
 - ‘Like’ button – Facebook’s Like button lets users (including a company or manufacturer) share with friends (including their audience or fans) their approval of sites, fan pages or notifications. When the fan clicks the Like button on a company’s page, a notification with a link to the company’s page appears in the fans news feed. This way the company can generate a buzz among its audience.
- Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging website that enables users (including companies or manufacturers) to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters. These posts, called tweets, are displayed on the user’s profile page. On the Twitter platform, other users (its audience or fans) can subscribe to users’ tweets. This is known as following, and subscribers are known as followers.

ENHANCING BRAND LOYALTY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Consumers today want to be more informed about products before they make the purchase. Consequently, manufacturers need to frequently engage with customers to keep them updated about their products. Moreover, marketers believe that customers will remain loyal to a brand if they can relate to and feel connected with a product. It is easier to establish such connections online than offline.

By letting customers know that their brand experiences and opinions on products matter, companies will be able to retain more customers. Further, after the sale of their products, companies need to incorporate customers into their communication channels and give them the opportunity to promote their products. This results in increasing use of social media by FDCG manufacturers. For instance, once a Facebook user ‘likes’ a brand, it shows that one more customer prefers that brand. Subsequently, he or she becomes part of the larger community of the brand. Figure 1 shows some industry best practices for building brand loyalty using social media.

FIGURE 1: SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES BY COMPANIES



ENGAGING CUSTOMERS AND ENCOURAGING FEEDBACK

Social media can serve as an excellent platform on which a company can explain certain decisions it has made, request customer feedback, and respond to customer complaints and queries. In fact, engaging customers with the company’s brand while promoting products can be the most effective way to build brand loyalty.

- In June 2010, US-based women’s clothing company Ann Taylor altered its marketing and advertising practices on the basis of customer feedback it had received via Facebook. Facebook fans (fans represent the number of Facebook users that follow a company) of Ann Taylor expressed their displeasure about the advertising used by its LOFT brand. The ads featured ultra-thin models wearing Ann Taylor clothing — that according to fans — would not look good on most women. In response, Ann Taylor posted photos of its own employees wearing the clothing. Subsequently, many of the company’s fans posted comments on its Facebook page applauding the company’s initiatives, which further boosted its brand image.

- PepsiCo uses Twitter extensively to engage its customers and respond to their queries. It believes that Twitter is the only medium where customers and the company can carry on a continuous conversation about the brand. In fact, the popularity of Pepsi's Twitter account, with over 58,800 followers in March 2011, allowed it to scale back the operations at its US call centers. The company sees Twitter as a better channel for customers who wish to comment or make a complaint. "

ENHANCING CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

The food, drink and consumer goods manufacturers are executing social media-centric marketing campaigns to enhance their customer experiences and in turn, build brand loyalty. These campaigns also help companies attract new customers.

- In January 2011, Anheuser-Busch's Bud Light beer brand went online to engage consumers in the run-up to this year's Super Bowl, American football's showcase event of the year. It invited its Facebook fans to guess the storylines of each of its three Super Bowl advertisements via an application called 'Unlock the Spot.' If viewers could successfully determine the storylines, Bud Light would release an internet-only ad exclusively for them. Through such marketing initiatives, Anheuser-Busch hopes to attract new customers to its products. The company believes that these initiatives will not only keep customers engaged, but will also lead to discussions among customers — which in turn could help build brand loyalty.
- Coca-Cola, one of the most engaging brands on social media, had over 219,543 followers on Twitter and more than 23 million fans on Facebook in March 2011. On Twitter, the company posts its 'tweets' in different languages to engage consumers across the world. Further, it continually tries to make its Facebook home page more interesting and interactive. It posts fan photos, videos and news of its various social initiatives to engage consumers and enhance their experiences when they visit Coca-Cola's home page.

EMPHASIZING CORE BRAND VALUES

Most of the food, drink and consumer goods companies realize the importance of emphasizing their exclusive image and core brand values while promoting their products on social media platforms.

- Tiffany & Co., one of the premier jewellers in the world, had over 801,950 fans on Facebook as of February 2011. The company is an excellent example of a brand that regularly updates its home page, while maintaining the brand's luxury nature, values and principles. Tiffany regularly uploads photos of celebrities wearing its jewellery. Such activities help project the exclusivity of the brand, and encourage conversation among its audience, particularly among women.
- Unilever, one of the leading global consumer products companies, initiated its Sustainable Living Plan in November 2010, under which all its brands are likely to have a defined 'purpose,' which will be conveyed over social media platforms. The announcement of this initiative — which associates Unilever's brands with current social values — has received more than two million comments on Twitter alone, showing that the plan is proving successful. In this way, Unilever is expected to not only highlight its core values, but also gain the loyalty of its customers.

REWARDING LOYAL CUSTOMERS

The food, drink and consumer goods manufacturers post special offers or discounts on their social networking pages. Such deals could make customers return to the brand and reinforce their loyalty.

- Procter and Gamble (P&G) rewards its customers who 'like' or 'follow' its brands, such as Crest toothpaste, on Facebook and Twitter. P&G offers printable coupons or e-coupons and other free internet coupons to these 'loyal' customers. These coupons can be used by shoppers to avail discounts on Crest products.
- Healthy Choice, a brand owned by US-based ConAgra Foods, has offered a discount of 75 cents through coupons, on the subsequent product purchase, for customers who 'liked' the brand on Facebook. Within 25 hours of its launch in October 2010, its Facebook fan base tripled — and, according to company officials, it continued to grow, reaching a total of 53,000 fans within 10 days of launch of the discount initiative.

CONCLUSION

The food, drink and consumer goods manufacturers should consider integrating social media into their business activities. This will allow them to attract new customers and reinforce brand loyalty among existing customers. In the future, the Facebook 'like' button could become the one-click way to join a loyalty card system. These social media channels will work as loyalty platforms, as these channels have the advantage of keeping customers engaged in a social media marketplace. PepsiCo, Dunkin Donuts and many others are launching social media campaigns to engage millions of consumers in the process to enhance brand loyalty. In the current scenario, both manufacturers and consumers are increasingly looking to social media to garner information about each other. Any company that takes advantage of this wave to strengthen its brand loyalty will benefit greatly.

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