

## Chapter 30

# Consumers as “Integrators” of Marketing Communications: When “Like” is as Good as “Buy”

**Kelley O'Reilly**

*Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University, USA*

**Karen M. Lancendorfer**

*Haworth College of Business, Western Michigan University, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*This case study explores how Falken Tire Corporation (FTC) leveraged motorsports to build brand credibility, and how consumer-based brand equity developed in virtual fan communities via social media marketing. This brand credibility and equity ultimately helped the company to establish powerful marketing relationships, and connect with distinctly different consumer groups. Findings suggest that consumers may be adept integrators of marketing communication channels and across media. Companies with strong virtual communities may benefit from the case study suggestions that are provided and discussed based on the theoretical perspective of customer-based brand equity. Marketing scholars and practitioners alike may find this case study of interest due to the growing desire by companies to develop strong bonds with consumers and their interest in effectively using social media as a marketing tool.*

### INTRODUCTION

Integrated marketing communications (IMC) began generating interest in the early 1990s and has since been accepted by marketers as “...a natural evolution of traditional mass-media advertising, which has been changed, adjusted and refined as a result of new technology” (Schultz 1999, p. 337). IMC can be understood as a broader marketplace view that is sensitive to the impacts and effects of

new technologies and communication channels. In this way, IMC extends beyond traditional mass marketing communication which historically put the emphasis on mass media techniques for brand building efforts (Keller, 2009).

Many consider IMC planning as a process driven by either strategy or efficiency (Gabrielli & Balboni, 2010). Along these lines, marketers evaluate different communication options from a perspective of horizontal and vertical coordina-

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tion, that is, both across and within media with particular focus on the coordination of consumer messaging. This highlights the essence of IMC planning which is a method for coordinating company communications in such a way as to *send* a clear and singular message regarding the company’s unique value proposition. This viewpoint is still fairly traditional, with the company sending communications, and the consumer receiving the communication. However, Keller notes that these traditional techniques may be suboptimal in “...a marketplace where customers have access to massive amounts of information about brands, products and companies... (2009, p. 139). There is no doubt that technology, the Internet, and social media have put consumers more in control than ever before as integrators and co-creators of brand meaning and promotional activities.

It is from this viewpoint that we consider a unique application of IMC that is consumer, rather than company, lead. Necessitated by a high degree of competition and lack of resources for more traditional market spending, the case company explored here focused on a little known motorsport in an attempt to build brand awareness. Consumer fans of the sport, “guided” the company to new alternative media which resulted in consumers, rather than the company, acting as integrators of promotional elements within the communication mix.

The phenomenon of the case study explored here highlights an important new application of consumer-based brand equity and social media marketing; the power of engaging current fans in virtual fan communities as a means to leverage their network of friends and followers. By doing so, companies may come to recognize that driving the friends of fans (e.g. encouraging them to “like” your brand) is a tactic that can create as much brand equity as a focus on increasing traditional market share. As demonstrated by the case company, through the use of social media marketing and consumer driven virtual brand communities, brand “likes” do prove to be as good as brand “buys.”

Marketing scholars and practitioners alike may find this case study of interest due to the growing desire by companies to develop strong bonds with consumers and their interest in effectively using social media as a marketing tool.

## COMPANY BACKGROUND

In 1983, Falken Tire Corporation (FTC), a subsidiary of Sumitomo Rubber Industries, launched the Falken brand in its native country of Japan. Two years later the brand was introduced in the North American market. The Falken brand was originally perceived in the U.S. market as a niche tire within the ultra-high performance replacement market. During its first two decades in the U.S., FTC’s market share remained stagnant at less than 1%, with first tier brands such as Goodyear, Michelin, and Bridgestone controlling the market as shown in Table 1.

Positioned as a mid-range second tier tire, FTC sells through the wholesale and retail aftermarket channels. Most of FTC’s marketing focus is business-to-business with promotional support and trade incentives targeted at the retail channel in the hope that retail salespeople will recommend the Falken brand during their interactions with customers. Over the years, this strategy had proven limited and FTC struggled to make headway against larger competitors who had substantial

*Table 1. 2003 US performance replacement market brands by tier (Listed in order of market share)*

Tier One	Tier Two	Tier Three
1. Goodyear	6. Dunlop	11. Pirelli
2. Michelin	7. Toyo	12. Sumitomo
3. Bridgestone	8. Kumho	13. Continental
4. BF Goodrich	<b>9. Falken</b>	14. General
5. Yokohama	10. Firestone	15. Cooper

Source: Modern Tire Dealer; <http://www.moderntiredealer.com/Stats/Default.aspx>

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