



Chapter 19

Brand Fandom Insights: Marketing Themes and Trends From Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to discuss themes and trends, from a marketing practitioner's perspective, regarding the importance of brand fandom and how it is managed in a media-rich environment. With the rise of digital media and the evolving changes in our media ecosystem, fans have the ability to be more engaged with their favorite brands and their respective brand fan communities than ever before. This chapter produces original research with viewpoints from expert practitioners representing multiple "cult" brands, cause brands, and media organizations built to enable and serve fans and their favorite brands.

INTRODUCTION

Originating from cattle ranchers more than a century ago to keep track of a herd, branding was originally a tool to let a rancher know cattle ownership. Today, brands are ubiquitous in modern society. The effectiveness of branding rose in the 19th century as producers of consumer-packaged goods, like Coca-Cola, began to use names and symbols to distinguish their goods from others (McLaughlin, 2011). In the 20th century, brands have become more than a symbol with marketing legends like David Ogilvy, the "Father of Advertising," defining brands as "the intangible sum of a product's attributes" (Lloyd, 2019, para. 4). Today brands are powerful tools of identity; often the symbolic representation of a product, service or idea purpose, promise, differentiation, and positioning while at the same time often communicating

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social and emotional benefits. Marketing scholar Philip Kotler states, “Marketers need to target not only the minds of the customers, but also their hearts and well-being” (Kotler, 2016. para. 9).

The power of brands in today’s media landscape cannot be ignored. Brands carry emotional and identity attributes and when communicated effectively can create brand fans. These brand fans are powerful. For any commercial endeavor, the identification and activation of fans are essential to both short-term and long-term business success. In fact, the fans of any brand are typically their most engaged and profitable customers. While some estimate only about 15% of customers are fans, the digital space is able to activate their fandom- making them 50% more attentive to brand ads and 40% more likely to share their experiences, thus ultimately influencing others (Russo & Gregori, 2017). The most successful brands can typically attribute their success to reaching a “cult-like” following or what is often referred to as a “brand tribe.” Brand tribe members collectively identify themselves with a brand and are brand advocates because of their trust, usage, and pride in the brand (Economic Times, 2019).

In our digital media environment, it is essential for all businesses, large and small, to identify and activate their brand fans. In our age of social media platforms and profiles, brands are often used to differentiate people and their symbolic reference can be even more powerful in peer-to-peer communication. Brands are most successful when they become part of the culture and their identity adds to a person’s or group’s identity. In *Harvard Business Review*, Douglas Holt (2016) states:

Digital technologies have not only created potent new social networks but also dramatically altered how culture works. Digital crowds now serve as very effective and prolific innovators of culture—a phenomenon I call crowdculture. Crowdculture changes the rules of branding—which techniques work and which do not. If we understand crowdculture, then, we can figure out why branded-content strategies have fallen flat—and what alternative branding methods are empowered by social media. (para. 3)

With the importance of what Holt (2016) calls “crowdculture,” the goal of this chapter is to focus on themes and trends, from a marketing practitioner’s perspective, regarding the importance of brand fandom and how it is defined and managed in a media-rich environment. Considering the rise of digital media and the evolving changes in our media ecosystem (e.g., digital innovation from companies like Google, Amazon, Facebook and others enabling greater personalization and empowering fan voices), activating and supporting brand fandom has become a focus of marketing practitioners. This chapter will explore the literature on brand fandom as well as produce original research with viewpoints from experts representing multiple “cult” brands, cause brands, and media organizations built to enable and serve fans and their brands. Further, this original research examines the roles marketing technology and social media have played in building, nurturing and expanding brand fandom.

Literature Review

Today’s digital ecosystem has profoundly shifted the way communication and marketing professionals engage with audiences. Data-driven social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest, as well as blogs and collaborative message boards have provided fans a new way to engage with brand fan communities. The massive amount of data available to brands today has changed the way brands communicate- moving communication strategies to “activation” type strategies vs. traditional marketing communication. Brand activation encourages fans to advocate on behalf of the brand, creating a sense of community and culture. Best-selling author and the 2018 Best Small Business Coach in the

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