

Chapter 5

Citizen Marketing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores citizen marketing, which refers to consumers voluntarily posting product information based on their knowledge and experience. The product information may take the form of opinions, reviews, videos, ads, or entire websites; it is persuasive in that it meets a consumer need for credible peer review of products. Research into information spread by word-of-mouth provides the theoretical foundation for citizen marketing. Because it is found on the Internet where word spreads quickly, citizen marketing empowers individuals to bring change in the form of product design or price. The chapter examines how mainstream marketers are trying to channel citizen marketing through various means, including unfiltered peer-to-peer interaction on product websites.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing is historically considered an activity that business performs to direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers. An integral part of marketing is sending consumers messages that promote goods and services. However, the growth of the Internet and the development of social software have turned the tables in this top-down process by ushering in the age of citizen marketing. Today consumers can speak their minds in a

communication medium that provides worldwide access. Businesses can receive these messages and adjust their products, pricing, promotion, and distribution accordingly.

Citizen marketing refers to consumers voluntarily posting online product information, based on their experiences with the product. The information may be positive or negative and may be in the form of posts, reviews, consumer-generated advertisements, videos, or entire websites. Product information posted by citizen marketers can be found on Internet forums, bulletin boards, blogs, ratings or opinion sites, social networking sites,

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video sharing sites, or even on mainstream marketers' websites as consumer reviews or discussion boards. When individuals voluntarily create content about a product they have used and then share that information on the Internet, they are citizen marketers. Product here refers to goods, services, brands, companies, organizations, or people, such as political candidates.

Consumers are increasingly turning to the Internet to receive more product information. Often what they seek is provided by citizen marketers, who are eager to share their experiences and their knowledge of a product. What makes their words so believable and so persuasive is the fact that citizen marketers are not on the company payroll and are not trying to sell anything. They are consumers who volunteer their time as writers, animators, designers, and videographers to express their opinions about products. They use their own talents and their own equipment to write or videotape reviews; create music, ads, podcasts, and videos; establish blogs, websites, photo sharing sites, and web forums. Sometimes their work looks amateurish, but sometimes it matches work done by professionals. Regardless, it is authentic, it is often passionate, and it has the potential to influence others.

This chapter explores the theoretical foundation of citizen marketing, notes the importance of citizen marketing as it relates to consumer behavior, provides examples, and explains how businesses are trying to leverage this new electronic word-of-mouth.

BACKGROUND

Today's citizen marketers were envisioned by futurist Alvin Toffler (1980) who coined the term "prosumers," thus blending the words producer and consumer. The term was used to describe consumers who educated themselves and became involved in the design and manufacture of products. This is what some citizen marketers are doing

today as they critique products, make suggestions for improvement, and publish their ideas through posts on the Internet.

The term *customer evangelist* was also used prior to citizen marketing and is still used by some to describe passionate consumers who hold positive beliefs about a company and a product and who voluntarily promote those beliefs to others through a variety of channels, including the Internet. Additionally, McConnell and Huba (2003) indicated that customer evangelists regularly purchase the product for themselves and others, provide unsolicited praise or suggestions for improvements, forgive occasional problems with the product or the company, feel part of something bigger, and cannot be bought.

The term vigilante marketing is used occasionally to describe consumers acting as self-appointed promoters of a brand. Munoz and Schau (2007) defined vigilante marketing more specifically as "unpaid advertising and marketing efforts, including one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many commercially oriented communications undertaken by brand loyalists on behalf of the brand" (p. 35).

Although a variety of terms exist, citizen marketing was chosen because it can include both positive and negative commentary, and because it parallels citizen journalism, a term widely used to describe ordinary people posting stories, news, photos or video, as well as comments and ideas for news or feature stories online. The phenomenon of citizen marketing, as it is true of other user-created content (UCC), was made possible by new web technology, dubbed Web 2.0, and by the more widespread availability and use of broadband Internet access. Similar to other UCC, citizen marketing and citizen journalism seem to be done without expectation of remuneration but rather for self-expression, as a way of connecting with peers who have close interests, or possibly to achieve a certain degree of notoriety.

McConnell and Huba (2007) noted that about 10 percent of those who visit a website will interact

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