

Chapter 128

Blog Marketing: Potential and Limits

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INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years blogs have become a familiar feature of the Internet landscape, and the number of blogs multiplied exponentially. A blog is a specific form of online community, organised, coordinated and moderated by a person or an organisation, which attracts a number of participants/members, because of the specific topics posted and discussed on the blog web site. The interest of marketers for blog communities was quickly translated in a number of methods designed to enhance online marketing campaigns (Cohen, 2005):

- gather marketing intelligence: the marketers can collect important information about consumers' reactions to specific product and/or services, by surfing the open-access blogs available on the Internet;
- directly engage blog members to comment on key business topics: some marketers might find useful to post their opinion on

blogs that discuss specific business issues, such as product launch, product characteristics, quality and price levels, in order to initiate a direct dialog with active bloggers;

- advertise on blogs to reach influentials or to target a well-defined niche audience;
- engage consumers in a direct dialogue by opening and managing a corporate, brand, or product blog. These corporate blogs can attract consumers that are passionate about the company and/or its products, providing an open discussion forum for improving existing products or the functional features of the new product ideas. This type of blogs can represent a tool for enhancing company-customer interactions, building mutually beneficial relationships and creating opportunities for value co-creation.

Despite the obvious potential of blog marketing, until now very few studies have explored directly the potential and the limits of this new marketing tool. Some of these limits are related to the existing technology in terms of online interaction and

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communication. However, probably the most restrictive limitation is the attitude of many blog members, who consider blog marketing as a serious infringement of their privacy right and of the rules of ethics established within the blogosphere. For this reason, the exploration of blog members' attitudes and perceptions regarding marketing activities can increase the understanding of the specific opportunities and limits of this form of online community for marketers.

After a brief discussion of the main studies already published on this topic, the research methodology applied to collect both secondary and primary data is presented. The results of primary data analysis are then considered, in direct relation to the formulated research objectives. On the basis of these findings a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of blog marketing communication is developed. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and with propositions for future research.

BACKGROUND

Existing research has focused either on the use of blogs as text-mining source (Rickman and Cosenza, 2007), or on the strategies applied by firms to reach the blog audience (Raab, 2009; Teich, 2008) or to manage corporate communication (Cox et al., 2008). The blog is an extremely attractive tool for virtual social interaction, because it provides opportunities for individual expression in a shared social environment (Ko et al., 2008).

The importance of blog marketing is determined by the popularity of this new type of social media (Raab, 2009). The 2008 report on the state of the Blogosphere published online by Technorati (2008) identifies the demographic profile of bloggers, as well as the most important blogging practices. According to this report, 77% of the active Internet users read blogs. There were 94.1 million blog readers in 2007, only in the US. The European and Asian bloggers are predomi-

nantly male, while in the US the proportion of males and females that access blogs is more even. On the other hand, a large percentage of Asian bloggers are young (18-34 years old), while in the US and Europe most bloggers are 35 years of age or older.

Building on the work of Gruhl et al. (2004) and Kumar et al. (2003), Nakajima et al. (2005) proposed and tested a methodology to search weblogs to find influential bloggers. They found two groups of important bloggers, the agitators, and the summarizers. The agitators are able to generate the buzz – analogous to the trendsetter, while the summarizers are capable to synthesize well various discussion topics that are published on the blog.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to investigate blog members' perceptions and level of acceptance of blog marketing. To achieve this, the following research objectives have been formulated:

- To identify the perceptions of blog members regarding blog marketing.
- To analyse the level of acceptance of blog members regarding blog advertising.
- To investigate the effect of blog advertising on consumer behaviour.
- To identify the variation in perceptions, level of acceptance and consumer behaviour in relation to the gender and the age of blog members.

In the first stage of the research process, a series of articles about blogs in general, and blog marketing in particular, have been collected and analysed. This secondary research material provided useful

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