

Chapter 2

The Creation and Management of Online Brand Communities

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ABSTRACT

Online brand communities are a specific type of virtual community, which gather admirers and consumers of a given brand on the web. Their captivating nature, plus their marketing effectiveness compared to their costs are attracting the interest of both researchers and marketing/brand managers.

This chapter intends to identify, describe and analyse the main issues concerning their creation and effective management.

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade online brand communities have received a lot of attention from both academics and marketing professionals.

In times of complexity, with demanding consumers and intense global competition, the Web has given marketing and communication managers new tools and new opportunities to improve the effectiveness of their action. Online brand com-

munities provide one of the most interesting and powerful examples.

This is mostly for their ability to establish and enhance relationships between companies and markets, reinforcing the brand image of their products, as well as customers' brand awareness and loyalty. In doing so -not irrelevant in times of scarce financial resources given the economic downturn- they are a rather low cost solution.

Several companies have endowed themselves with a brand community, each revealing different functional or strategic aspects.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-869-9.ch002

This chapter intends to identify and describe specific characteristics of online brand communities and to analyse creation and valorization strategies.

ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

Online brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Cova and Cova, 2002) are a specific type of virtual community (Rheingold, 1993; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002), characterized by the fact that different people with the common trait of being "admirers of a brand" are gathered together (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

As for any other online community, they base themselves upon relations, resulting from three basic elements (see Prykop and Heitman, 2006):

- people (community members);
- a shared interest (in the brand);
- a common space of interaction (the platform).

So, they are marketing tribes (Cova and Cova, 2002), made up of different people, either customers or not, coming from different countries, with different socio-demographic features, who have in common an interest in the brand (Kapferer, 1992; Fournier, 1998) and want to interact with both the firm and their peers.

The brand is the mediator for this online interaction, and benefits foremost from the positive social interaction within the community. Brands tell stories (Semprini, 1992) and the most truthful and strongest are those that people recognize some common, personal traits in. This recognition process helps customers to accept these stories, to make them their own.

As "passionate consumers want their brands to become a form of self-expression" (Brady, 2004), brands acquire much more sense beyond a simple positive reputation. This way, in fact, they enter the customers' imagery, generate some

identification processes, becoming "lovemarks" (Roberts, 2006).

Online brand communities are good places to carry on the process of social construction. Within online brand communities this process is co-managed by both marketers and brand admirers (see among others Muniz and O'Guinn, 2005); in fact, the latter help the former to transform and enrich the brand sense through a co-construction process.

The consequence, in the brand value system, is that its identity is not just "the brand concept from the brand's owner's perspective" (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000), but the synthesis of its original identity with the customer's experience, which is both functional and emotional, within the brand community context. Through the brand community's constant re-actualisation, customer participation and interest is renewed. What happens to consumers is something similar to being called to co-create an open work, a plurality of meanings, co-existing all together, within a single significant (Eco, 1962).

The brand community acts as a multiplier of meaning (Musso, 2005): in fact, it is the perfect place for brand sense and meaning co-creation.

In this virtual space people can experience the brand, feel part of its world (identity, culture, values, image) and share opinions. In doing so, they develop "a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2002, p. 412) in the exchange.

ADVANTAGES FOR FIRMS FROM ONLINE BRAND COMMUNITIES

Firms can get several advantages from the creation, be it spontaneous or planned, of an online brand community.

First of all, they help companies to get closer to their markets and to learn more about their actual and potential customers, in order to understand

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