

THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT MARKETING ACTIVITIES OF FIRMS ON CONSUMERS' BRAND FOLLOWING BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This study is carried out with the purpose of determining how content shared by brands on social media is perceived by followers, what kinds of content are followed, or which content leads consumers to quit following brands. With this purpose, four different focus group meetings were held in November 2016. In the focus groups, it was found that followers follow brands on social media primarily to keep track of new products and designs of brands and take advantage of brand opportunities such as discounts, campaigns, sweepstakes, etc. On the other hand, it was revealed that unrelated content, advertisements related to other brands and products, and content considered to be political, ideological, funny, interesting, etc. were found unfavorable by followers. In this scope, the study firstly discusses social media marketing and content marketing concepts. It is thought that the study will be useful for brands on social media that are looking for answers regarding which kinds of content should be shared, as well as researchers working in this area.

Keywords: Social media, Content marketing, Reasons for following brands

INTRODUCTION

While a significant portion of brands and firms preferred to stay away from these ecosystems when social media first came up, some innovative and pioneering brands which saw the opportunities provided by these ecosystems took part in them in a short time. Brands in the first stage undeniably benefited from being the first on social media. However, almost every brand in our time takes part in one of more social media channels. Nowadays, it is no longer a matter of visibility for brands to be on social media, where everyone already is. The main factor that will create awareness for brands on social media is the provision of value-creating, useful content. For this, it is necessary to learn about the interests, priorities, characteristics of the target audience, which in summary is to know the audience in every aspect. I should be noted that content shared without knowing the target audience may create harm for the brand rather than utility. In this context, it should not be forgotten to prioritize social media marketing and content marketing concepts for brands on social media, as well as that creative and useful content lies in the center of the way to consumers' hearts.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MARKETING

The concept of social media is defined as technology-based applications that allow users to create information and share this information [Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010]. In another definition, social media is explained as platforms where people communicate with each other, create content and share it with other users, as well as a set of tools for marketers, advertisers and entrepreneurs [Lewis, 2010]. It would not be wrong to define social media marketing as a process of persuasion and communication facilitated through social media channels in order to influence target groups in mutual interaction, as opposed to traditional marketing channels. Social media, in addition to influencing the general attitudes and views of consumers towards

brands, also has important effects in almost every stage including information searching, noticing brands, purchasing behaviors, after-sale communication and assessment [Bond, 2010]. While many studies have been conducted and discussed on the concept of social media marketing, it has a complicated structure that cannot be managed by a single person or a single department [Felix et al., 2016]. Therefore, it is notable that the important thing in social media marketing is to learn well about the reasons of the target audience for following the brand and sharing the content of the brand.

If we look at the objectives of social media marketing, these may be listed as increasing sales, increasing brand awareness, improving brand image, managing traffic on online platforms, reducing marketing costs, increasing interaction by encouraging users to share message and content, learning about the views of consumers regarding the firm or the activities of the firm [Felix et al., 2016]. Additionally, marketers are able to establish two-way communication and interaction with existing and potential customers in a way faster and richer than ever, without any intermediaries [Hudson et al., 2015]. Moreover, social media should not only be used as a tool for market research, but also utilized as complementary to traditional methods in product and category research [Carr et al., 2015].

Social media marketing campaigns usually provide less satisfaction than expected (Zhu and Chen, 2015). Advertisements prepared by brands on social media can attract consumers, be accepted and their content can be followed only as a result of effective advertising strategies. For this to happen, the content of the advertisements should first be liked [Hacıfendioğlu, 2011]. In order to increase the effects of campaigns and advertisement content, campaign managers should first know the target audience closely, and learn about their needs and interests.

CONTENT MARKETING

Content Marketing Institute defines content marketing as an approach of strategic marketing that focuses on attracting and obtaining a clearly defined target audience by creating and sharing valuable, consistent and relevant content, therefore turning this audience into profitable customers [Content Marketing Institute, 2016]. In another definition, content marketing is described as creation of content for creating awareness by attracting the target audience and beyond to the firm, making products and services appealing, reaching the target audience, establishing a relationship with them, and acquiring measurable results by mobilizing them [Penpece, 2013]. Social media content marketing plays an important role in communicating effective content to consumers and therefore making it alluring for consumers to keep connected to the brands [Ahmad et al., 2016]. The digital age we are living in has changed the expectation of consumers in communication with the brand by the help of multiple social media environments [Killian and McManus, 2015]. In the line of this change it is very important for a brand to establish an emotional connection to the members of its social community. This is because emotional connection encourages the consumer's brand loyalty and support. Therefore, brands should create valuable content that will increase communication and closeness by focusing on quality of interaction between the brand and the consumer on social media [Turri et al., 2013]. Marketers should pay more attention to activities of people for effective communication in the digital world, and they should empower and encourage them to participate in this process [Portas, 2015]. In our time, where the shared content on social media is more important than mere presence, brands and firms should understand the fact that the consumer is an important power and creator of value with the help of social media, and they should focus on converting their followers into loyal consumers. Thus, they should include consumers in decision-making regarding the brand, and

make them supporters of the brand on social media. Opportunities created by creative followers should not be ignored, but turned into an advantage for the firm [Akyüz, 2013].

The table below provides important clues regarding the objectives of content marketing studies and factors negatively effecting the success of such studies. It would be advantageous for brands in the first stage to determine the ones important for themselves among these objectives. Again, it would also create positive outcomes for the success of their work for brands and businesses to focus on obstructions they find problematic most frequently.

Table 1. The Objectives of Content Marketing and Obstructions against It

Objectives of Content Marketing	Obstructions against Content Marketing
Increasing customer loyalty	Lack of content creation resources
Increasing number of prospective customers	Lack of effective strategies
Increasing brand awareness	Budged limitations
Increasing sales revenue	Shortcomings in effective measurement
Sustaining leadership in the sector	Lack of transverse channel integration
Increasing website traffic	Shortcomings in employee skills
Increasing customer retention	Lack of variety in types of content
Improving search engine ranks	Lack of management support

Source: Ascend2, [2015]

The willingness of consumers to establish connection with the brand and which content is important for this connection are key things for long-term loyalty [Killian and McManus, 2015]. Thus, marketing managers should collect relevant follower, discussion and like statistics on social media [Chang et al., 2015]. Companies require comprehensive research regarding the target audience for creation of content that will attract the interest of target markets [Baltes, 2015]. Persuasive messages should focus on communication with the recipients and utility in social media marketing [Chang et al., 2015]. The utility of the sent content affects eWOM intentions of followers positively [Chang et al., 2015]. In addition to useful content, competitions, games and other types of entertainment are also the most important factors that affect the interest and connection of consumers to brands on social media [Killian and McManus, 2015]. Social media users consume brand-related content for utility, entertainment and relaxation [Muntinga et al., 2011]. Establishing connection with consumers via creative content makes the consumer-brand relationship easier [Killian and McManus, 2015]. One of the most important elements of creating different and creative content is to know the customers, understand them, and therefore listen to them on social media as the brand. Listening will be helpful for the brand to understand what is important for people and approach them with a more correct and healthy tone, as well as making it easier for different content to emerge [Özgen and Doymuş, 2013].

Primary reasons for following brands on social media may be listed as keeping up with promotions and discounts, following information on the latest products, taking advantage of customer services, entertaining content, and the opportunity to provide feedback [Ali, 2015]. In a study conducted in the US in August 2015 regarding the reasons of the consumers to follow brands, following coupons and promotions came up in the first place, incentives such as gifts and discounts came up in the second place, provision of useful content came up in the third place, and entertaining content came up in the fourth place [marketing Sherpa, 2015]. Again, in a study with 900 people, it was revealed that the primary reasons for the consumers to follow brands were, in order that they liked the brands, following special offers and

promotions. When the reasons for consumers to quit following brands on social media were analyzed, over-sharing of promotional and unrelated content was in the first place, excessive usage of automated message without personal participation was in the second place, and incorrect usage of hashtags was in the third place [Lehr, 2015]. Social media followers of brands state that they do not like excessively formal firm messages and marketing-advertising content. Hence, social media managers of brands should make sure that the content they share in Facebook or Twitter updates is useful for their followers, and avoid content that only include promotion/advertising content regarding their goods and services [Tsimonis and Dimitriadis, 2014].

RESEARCH METHODS

Focus group method, which is a qualitative research method, was used for obtaining the data in the study. Focus groups are informal meetings under the supervision of an expert person, where participants homogenous amongst themselves discuss a pre-determined issue in an environment that allows them to comfortably share their views [Nakip and Yaraş, 2016]. In this study conducted with the aim of determining the content leading to consumers following brands, quitting brand following, establishing interaction with brands and sharing brand content, a focus group activity with four different groups was held in November 2016. A total of 9 people including 6 women and 3 men participated in the first focus group event. While the ages of participants changed in the interval of 24 to 38, all participants were master's degree students. Participants followed at least 3 and at most 15 brands. The second group consisted of 12 undergraduate students including 6 men and 6 women. Their ages were from 19 to 24. They followed at least 3 and at most 25 brands. The third group consisted of 7 master's degree student including 4 women and 3 men, whose ages were in the interval of 24 to 45. They followed at least 5 and at most 25 brands. Finally, the fourth group consisted of 8 participants of ages 20 to 24, including 4 women and 4 men. They followed at least 5 and at most 30 brands. The meetings lasted about 90 minutes. Focus group meetings were recorded in audio and video. Notes were also taken during the meetings.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings obtained as a result of four different focus groups:

Social Media Content Leading Participants to Follow Brands

In all focus groups held, participants stated that they follow brands to closely keep up with new products and designs of the brands, and to not miss opportunities of brands such as discounts, campaigns, sweepstakes, etc. Other reasons for the participants to follow brands included reading comments of other users regarding brands and products, usage of the brand's products, emotional connection to the brand, high number of brand followers, and friends following the brand. It is noteworthy that the participants stated they are affected more by negative comments regarding the brands than positive comments.

Social Media Content Leading Participants to Quit Follow Brands

All participants stated that they quit following some of the brands they previously followed due to various reasons. The reasons were listed as sharing of content considered to be unrelated, funny, interesting rather than the products of the brand, or sharing of political, ideological content; sharing about other brands' products, lack of new updates, constantly sharing the same content, lack of variety of product of the brand, experiencing a problem with the brand, high number of negative comments about the brand, and low number of brand followers.

Social Media Content Shared by Brand Followers on Their Profile

The participants stated that they were not generally likely to share brand content on their social media accounts. However, they accepted that there were some exceptions. For example, they stated that if a brand shares a celebration message for special days and nights (mothers' day, Valentine's day, fathers' day, etc.) or a viral advertisement video, they would share this message or video on their accounts. They also stated that they would have more positive attitudes towards brands that share such content, therefore brands interested in societal values. Additionally, they stated that, when there is an issue concerning the public (incorrect usage of the product, a fact about product that is understood wrongly, etc.), they may also share this content on their account. Another type of content the participants would share without reservations was the content regarding social responsibility activities of the brand. In the focus group meetings, the participants stated that they preferred to send information about the products of the brands that they liked to their friends via messaging, instead of sharing it on their account. Here, the participants stated that sharing would be more frequent if they knew they would benefit from sharing. Very few participants in the study stated that they share products of a brand they liked because of brand loyalty.

Contents Leading to Positive/Negative Word-of-Mouth Communication

In the focus groups, participants stated that, in case a brand surprised them in a positive way about issues like delivery, product characteristics and solutions of various problems, they shared positive comments mostly offline, and sometimes online. Similarly, they also stated that they shared negative comments on social media in cases where they were disappointed. There is a difference between master's degree and undergraduate students in this matter.

The master's degree students participating in the study stated that they preferred to reach the brand personally for solution if the problem they were experiencing was individual, and they preferred to share negative comments on social media if they thought it concerned the public. However, most undergraduate students stated that they made comments on social media regardless of the problem being individual or public.

The participants stated that they were not concerned much with negative content shared on social media about brands, instead, they investigated the issue and quitted using it only if the turned out to be true. The majority of the participants viewed negative content shared about brands on social media as a part of marketing strategies of their opponents.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The advantages of firms taking part in these ecosystems in the first days of social media are without a doubt no longer advantages today. Today, the advantage of presence on social media for brands is based on creative content that will influence the target audience directly. Hence, it is important in this matter to know what kinds of content social media users like and what kinds of content lead them to quit following brands. In the study conducted with the aim of learning about evaluations of social media users towards content of brands in this scope, the following conclusions were reached:

1. The participants most frequently used Instagram among social media channels to follow brands. The reason for this is clearly the suitability of Instagram for visual content. Therefore, it is recommended for brands to increase their visibility on social media channels that are more visual such as Instagram.
2. The discounts, campaigns, sweepstakes, etc. shared by brands are at the top of the reasons why social media users follow brands, and these may lead to online/offline

negative word-of-mouth communication. It is recommended that brands are aware of this reality.

3. Sharing of different brands, products, and funny, interesting, etc. content rather than content about their own products by brands lead them to lose their followers. Brands are instead recommended to share content related to issues such as usage of products, production processes, etc.
4. If brands want their followers to share brand content on their profiles, they need to propose some benefits and never forget important days, nights, celebrations, commemorations, etc. Creating content related to the brand in such cases certainly makes it easier for followers to share such content.
5. If brands constantly update their pages, share recommendations based on the characteristics of the target audience -for example, share combinations about a jacket, sweater, trousers, etc.- or provide content containing expert views on technology products, this will certainly satisfy followers more, and even lead them to share these on their profiles.
6. In order to prevent losing consumers that are influenced by negative comments and therefore stopped buying the products of the brand, and even quitted following the brand on social media, brands should make sure that consumers experiencing problems about the brand reach the brand first without sharing negative comments online.

Consequently, brands should firstly define their audience of followers and then create content in line with the expectation of this audience. It is definitely recommended for brands to share sincerer and communication-oriented message content instead of a formal language with their audience of followers on social media channels, which are social environments. Again, receiving feedback regarding this shared content is also important in terms of measuring success and possibility of revising content.

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