



Creating emotions via B2C websites

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Abstract Compared to offline media communications, business-to-consumer (B2C) websites possess unique characteristics that affect the likelihood of generating emotional reactions to the web experience itself, the brand, fellow customers, and employees of the firm. The emotion-causing antecedents elucidated in this article are the website's vividness, interactivity, challenge, interaction speed, machine memory, and allowable social interactions. Depending on how a website performs on these dimensions, positive or negative emotions may result. For example, using machine memory to automatically generate purchase recommendations based on prior consumption patterns may be perceived as pleasantly surprising, while a firm sending unsolicited emails based on a user's cookie trail may be annoying. Regardless of the valence of the resultant emotion, the feelings generated may attach to the brand. Because a goal of brand managers is to get consumers to associate positive emotions with a brand, a pre-condition to developing and managing a website is understanding these emotion evoking antecedents and their ramifications.

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1. The online experience

Features that online media, but generally not offline media, possess include offering users the opportunity to interact with the website, effect the challenge involved during the user-website interaction, control content, and connect with other people. In addition, the web host can learn about the user and capitalize on this knowledge via machine memory. We start with the supposition that all media can be emotive, not always in a positive way, noting that features unique

to the Internet confer emotion-evoking advantages that offline media lacks. Prompting and attaching positive emotions to a brand increases customer loyalty, trust, and market share (Fournier, 1998; Steenkamp & Dekimpe, 1997).

Consumers increasingly turn to the Internet to search for, evaluate, purchase and, in some cases, virtually consume products. Online consumer decision processes can be cognitively demanding and highly emotive. Websites must therefore be carefully managed, and offer an engaging customer experience. How is this done? Research pertaining to web use in general has unearthed antecedents (Novak, Hoffman, & Yung, 2000) leading to *flow*, which Hoffman and Novak (1996, p. 57) define as "a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by

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machine interactivity . . . [that is] intrinsically enjoyable . . . accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness, and . . . self-reinforcing.” However, these authors caution that their research “has not considered the specific elements of commercial Web site design that facilitate a compelling experience, nor how this experience is likely to vary across the wide range of commercial sites found on the Web today” (Novak et al., 2000, p. 33). The overarching objective of the research effort here is to fill this void.

More specifically, the contribution of this article is threefold. First, based on an extant review of the literature, we present a conceptual model of six characteristics unique to business-to-consumer (B2C) websites that affect the likelihood of generating emotional reactions to the web experience itself, the brand, fellow customers, and employees of the firm. These feelings subsequently attach to the brand, thereby affecting consumer behavior. In addition to highlighting the antecedents causing emotions, we note which are or are not under the control of the webmaster. Second, while the intent of the model is to show how to create positive emotions, we share examples of how underperforming on these characteristics can cause negative emotions. Indeed, because users are exposed to multiple content elements within a website (such as FAQs, email enquiries, and payment systems), various brand or product announcements (video clips and brand descriptions), and interface with a variety of actors (customer representatives and fellow chat room guests), it is reasonable to assume that web environments are particularly prone to evoking multiple feelings—some good and some not. Insights on mixed emotions are shared. Third, we present managerial implications. Collectively, these insights are directed toward brand managers, promotion coordinators, and IT staff responsible for website design and maintenance.

2. Causes and consequences of emotions

Studies on emotions within marketing usually begin by distinguishing emotions from closely related concepts such as affect, mood, and attitude. Briefly, affect is a reference to a valenced feeling state. Both moods and emotions have valence, as well as arousal, and can therefore be thought of as specific examples of affect. Cohen and Areni (1991, p. 191) note, “The distinction most commonly made between moods and emotions is that emotions are more intense and stimulus specific than moods.” Thus, downloading a stimulating video may make

one feel excited or playful, which is a positively valenced affective state with high levels of arousal. For our purposes, emotions are of short duration and object specific, in contrast to moods which are of milder intensity, longer-lived, and “may be elicited and maintained without conscious awareness of the feeling state, its cause, or its influence on current activities” (Cohen & Areni, 1991, p. 191); for example, a person might get out of bed in a bad mood. Emotions are characterized by the presence of action tendencies, such as flight; bodily symptoms due to arousal, including accelerated heart rate; and facial expressions, such as smiling (Plutchik, 1994). Significantly, emotions can create affective traces that are attached to the object that prompted the emotion, thereby affecting an individual’s attitude toward that object. This affective trace, unlike the emotion that prompted it, can be long-lived. Readers may be familiar with the adage: I forgot what you said, but I remember how you made me feel.

Plato and Aristotle made reference to the trilogy of the human spirit: thoughts, feelings, and desires (see Cohen & Areni, 1991). It is now generally accepted that mental activity involves both cognitions and affect. The former has a stronger effect on attitude formation, but the latter has a pervasive and, oftentimes, not subtle effect (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006). For extant reviews of emotions-related literature, see Bagozzi, Gopinath, and Nyer (1999) and Watson and Spence (2007).

Some scholars are skeptical about the ability of websites to evoke emotions (Leong, Huang, & Stanners, 1998). However, web practitioners counter by noting (a) the multimedia richness of the medium (Carton, 2002; Philport & Arbittier, 1997); (b) evidence supporting the emotive potential of combining words, pictures, and sound (Allen, 2001); and (c) the ability to form relationships via personalization and interactivity (Lindstrom, 1999). In a series of empirical studies there was evidence that opinions concerning a website’s visual appeal are formed within 50 milliseconds, and that this near spontaneous reaction can carry over to assessments of other features on the website (Lindgaard et al., 2006), conceivably causing an individual to disregard or discount evidence not consistent with that individual’s initial reaction. This finding speaks volumes for the need to carefully manage a website.

An example of a website that evokes positive emotions for many visitors is that of BMW (www.bmw.com). Prospective owners can configure the car of their dreams, a task that is exhilarating for some. In addition, the website also showcases BMW art cars from the last 30 years, offers a Lifestyle

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