Viral marketing: Motivations to forward online content

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 May 2008
Accepted 1 August 2008

Keywords:
Viral marketing
Electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM)
Motivation
e-Maven

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing popularity of viral marketing, factors critical to such a new communication medium remain largely unknown. This paper examines one of the critical factors, namely Internet users’ motivations to pass along online content. Conceptualizing the act of forwarding online content as a special case of a more general communication behavior, we identify four potential motivations: (1) the need to be part of a group, (2) the need to be individualistic, (3) the need to be altruistic, and (4) the need for personal growth. Using a survey of young adults, we examine the relationship between these motivations and the frequency of passing along online content. We also investigate if high trait curiosity can indirectly lead to more forwarding by increasing the amount of online content consumed. Results show that Internet users, who are more individualistic and/or more altruistic, tend to forward more online content than others.

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1. Introduction

The Internet is now the “new normal” way of life for many Americans to get their news, book travel reservations, do research for school or their job, check out the weather, and seek out romantic partners among other activities (Rainie, 2005). For those who consume entertainment, news and information online, recommendations from friends are important sources for that information. This new online environment is conducive to a new form of marketing communication commonly referred to as viral marketing. Viral marketing typically starts with the marketer creating some form of electronic content such as a video or a mini-site, the aim of which is usually brand-building. The URL (web address) for the electronic content is made available to Internet users, who, after viewing the content will decide whether they want to pass the URL along to their friends. If the URL gets forwarded and the Internet users receiving it also keep passing the URL along, the electronic content has the potential to reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral). For ease of exposition, we call hereafter the act of forwarding electronic content e-WOM and the Internet users who are more readily motivated to pass along content in general and/or if the particular content fits well with the Internet user’s forwarding motivation, will more likely reach a large group of Internet users (i.e., become viral).
and spread. E-mavens are on the other hand, conceptually similar to the notion of Internet mavens (Belch et al., 2005), except that we include both email and the Internet. Although the market maven construct has been shown to act as a personal trait (e.g., Laroche et al., 2003), we define e-mavens here primarily by high frequency of forwarding online content and leave the potential to explore e-mavens as a personal trait for future research.

Not restricted to any specific type of information, we conceptualize e-WOM as a special case of a more general communication behavior, in which individuals communicate through e-mails or instant messaging to accomplish certain communication goals. Although not widely studied this way, the forwarding of electronic content can be viewed as part of a conversation and as a possible forum for interpersonal communication. We therefore develop our theoretical model of e-mavens’ motivations based on the interpersonal communication literature and discuss their hypothesized effects on the action of forwarding electronic content as well as an action preceding forwarding, namely the consumption of electronic content. We then empirically test which of these motives are indeed operating.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Motivation to forward electronic content

Viewing e-WOM as a conversation between two sources implies a need to understand the process involved in the transmission of information from person to person. While a number of theories are proposed to explain why we engage in interpersonal communication, we adopt the conceptual framework proposed by Schutz (1966) as it provides a useful framework for integrating the various motivations that potentially underlie the forwarding of online content. Specifically, Schutz proposed a three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behaviour which he called FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation). He postulated that people engage in interpersonal communication because they are motivated to express one or more of three interpersonal needs: inclusion (need to be part of a group/need for attention), affection (show appreciation and concern for others), and control (need to exert power in one’s social environment).

Exactly how these motivations are specifically related to the forwarding of online content is not clear. Therefore, we examine various literatures to identify specific motivations related to the three dimensions of interpersonal communication in the online context. First, although the literature on word-of-mouth communication focuses on product-related information, the motivations that influence e-WOM should share some of the same characteristics. The second major area we review to identify pertinent motivations for the e-maven is the literature on Internet usage. Lastly, for reasons to be described in detail later, we focus on research that is applicable to college-aged students. In the next section, we use the FIRO framework to identify the key motives associated with the e-maven’s propensity to engage in forwarding online content.

2.1.1. Inclusion

According to FIRO theory, the interpersonal need for inclusion refers to the need to be recognized as participants in human interaction and some terms that connote the relation include “belong”, “join”, and “togetherness” (Schutz, 1966). However, an essential aspect of the concept of inclusion is the desire to be identifiable or different from other people (Schutz, 1966). This leads us to postulate two primary motives underlying the interpersonal need of inclusion—the need to belong and the need to be unique.

2.1.2. The need to be part of a group

According to the belongingness hypothesis, human beings possess “a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary, 1995:499).

2.1.3. The need to be different

As mentioned earlier, the need to be different can be derived from the need to belong and the need to be unique. New technologies open new possibilities to express uniqueness online. For example, Dichter (1966) proposed that some people share information with others as a means of expressing love or friendship. For example, Dichter’s (1966) research revealed that individuals can construct or assert their sense of self by using WOM to gain attention and connote status.

Vignoles, Chryssouchoou and Breakwell (2000) propose the notion of market maven. An individual who actively disseminates information through word-of-mouth communication is referred to as a market maven. The key point here is that the act of forwarding online content to others in the same network allows the e-maven to differentiate him or herself. This leads us to our second hypothesis.

2.1.4. Affection—the need to be altruistic

Affection is defined as the need to maintain a satisfactory relationship, leading individuals to engage in behaviors related to intimacy, warmth and emotional involvement (Schutz, 1966). Since people driven by the need for affection desire relationships that are close and personal, we posit that this need is closely related to the concept of altruism or concern for others (Price et al., 1995). We often consider altruistic acts as selfless, or in other words, actions that are based on love and affection. We propose that in the context of forwarding online content, altruistic motivations may be the most relevant indicator of the need for affection. For example, Dichter (1966) proposed that some people share information with others as a means of expressing love or friendship. More recently, Price and her colleagues found that concern for the welfare of others (altruism) was one of the key antecedents of marketplace helping behaviour. Evidence from the WOM literature provides support for the premise that consumers are often driven by altruistic motives both in online (Phelps et al., 2004) and offline environments (Sundaram et al., 1998). These findings were substantiated recently by both practitioner (Keller Fay, 2007) and academic research (Henning-Thurau et al., 2004) examining consumer motivations to publish their experiences on online forums. Based on our review of the literature we propose that:

H3. Altruism positively affects the online forwarding of information.
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