Evaluating Facebook brand content popularity for service versus goods offerings

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ABSTRACT

Marketers using social media are struggling with its successful implementation, specifically in engaging their audiences through creation of popular brand content. Yet, creating popular brand content can lead to positive financial and brand outcomes. This research examines Fortune 500 companies' brand content strategies that contribute to Facebook content popularity metrics (i.e., number of likes and comments) for service versus goods offerings. Building on psychological motivation theory and the noted differences in culture and capabilities between goods and service firms, the article analyzes the key differences in service and goods brand content strategies in terms of branding, message appeals, and vividness. The findings from a multivariate multilevel Poisson model show that the use of corporate brand names is more popular for service messages whereas the use of product brand names, images, and videos is more popular for goods messages. Furthermore, service messages generate a higher number of comments than goods messages.

1. Introduction

For brands, the utility of any social media site stems from users’ engagement which makes brand content popular (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Popularity of brand content on social media influences brand relationships, brand awareness and loyalty, sales, and brand purchases and may even provide brands with differential advantages over competitors (Akpinar & Berger, 2016; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012; Swani, Milne, Brown, Aseaf, & Donthu, 2017). While most scholars focus on the importance of social media to organizations, limited efforts try to unravel effective social media content strategies (Kumar, 2015; Swani et al., 2017), specifically in terms of promoting service versus goods. Indeed, research calls for studies to investigate why social media brand content becomes popular (Kumar, 2015; Marketing Science Institute, 2014). In response, the current research analyzes Fortune 500 companies' brand content strategies that contribute to Facebook content popularity metrics (i.e., number of likes and comments), particularly focusing on comparing popular brand posts offering service versus goods.

Although many marketers find some success in Facebook through brand fan membership and fan likes, they continue to struggle to effectively engage their fans by promoting liking and commenting actions. Emarketer (2015) estimates that fan engagement in Facebook message posts of top brand pages is only 4.3%. Furthermore, recent changes to Facebook architecture create more hurdles for marketers, who now have to shift their efforts from promotionally based content to engagement-based content to achieve more consumer reach and engagement (Kacholia, 2013).

The Marketing discipline, as evidenced by its six journals on service marketing, considers the tangible goods-service distinction to be important (Baron, Warnaby, & Hunter-Jones, 2014; Martin, 2012; Russell-Bennett & Baron, 2016). As such, it has recognized goods firms and service firms have different cultures and capabilities. Service firms establish service systems with higher active interactivity with consumers whereas goods firms focus on supply chains with lower active interactivity with consumers (Grönroos, 2011). Consumers’ evaluation of services is tougher than for goods due to the variability in offerings which makes usage of social media important for service firms. Service firms concentrate their social media marketing efforts on building better company brand reputation and brand relationships, managing consumer perceived risks associated with services, shaping expectations of services, and instigating consumer interpersonal communications that help their brand, as consumers have increasingly relied on word of mouth (WOM) when making purchase decisions (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; Grönroos & Gummerus, 2014; Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Thus,
K. Swani, G.R. Milne

marketers cannot adopt similar social media content strategies when promoting services versus goods (Swani, Milne, & Brown, 2013). Therefore, investigating the social media content strategies that become popular when offering services versus goods is important.

What social media content strategies should marketers implement when offering services versus goods? This research addresses this question. In particular, we investigate the popularity (i.e., number of likes and comments) of Facebook content strategies in terms of brand strategies, message appeals, and the use of vividness (images and videos) when offering services versus goods. We argue that certain characteristics likely affect the popularity of social media brand content. Specifically, we contend that the popularity of social media communications across goods and services depends on the use of (1) branding strategy, (2) message appeals, and (3) vividness. We build on the traditional communication model (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Shannon & Weaver, 1949; Yadav & Pavlou, 2014) to understand how consumers process and respond to social media brand posts and rely on WOM psychological motivation theory to argue that saliency of motivations to transmit content instigates brand post popularity (Berger, 2014; Swani et al., 2017). The empirical investigation analyzes 1467 Facebook message posts of Fortune 500 companies and tests their popularity by measuring the number of message likes and comments. In this analysis, we classify service and goods Facebook brand message posts based on company accounts (brand community) (Zaglia, 2013) as offering either services or goods and test the moderating effects of offering type on popularity of various message strategies based on the use of branding, message appeals, and vividness.

This research contributes to the social media, services marketing, and WOM literature streams by providing theoretical and empirical support for the relationship between Facebook brand post content and popularity metrics. In particular, we unravel effective brand content strategies for services versus goods. In this research we simultaneously model two modes of transmission, message likes and comments, by estimating a multivariate multilevel Poisson regression model which allows one to model multiple count outcomes variables in a nested data structure. The results indicate that the use of corporate brand names generates more likes and comments in service than goods messages. However, the use of product brand names and vividness (images or videos) generates more likes and comments in goods than service messages. Overall, service messages generate more comments than goods messages. This research provides significant and directly applicable implications for marketers to improve brand post popularity when promoting services and goods.

2. Facebook popularity indicators

Extant literature suggests that likes are valuable because they signal popularity. Jeong and Kwon (2012) argue that the online context raises the value of online popularity indicators because of the information asymmetry of the online shopping experience; specifically, customers are unable to physically experience online content and therefore seek cues that justify purchase. Importantly, the authors note that online product popularity is likely to be a demand driver because of the “bandwagon effect”; that is, perceived popularity is related to a desire to imitate others’ behavior. Accordingly, Facebook likes are appropriate brand popularity metric.

First, to gauge the validity of likes as a key brand content metric, we conducted focus groups with marketing managers, social media managers, and website designers (n = 22). They indicated that likes are indeed indicators of brand loyalty and produce credible WOM. The following quotes represent these themes:

While likes may or may not result in sales, it does result in word of mouth. Word of mouth is very important for us.

Just as consumers rely on reviews by strangers, they also rely on likes from strangers.

Just as I personally do not like Facebook sites randomly, I do not think my consumers are liking my Facebook site randomly. When they like my site they definitely are sending a message to their network. I would not tell the world I like a site if I do not really like it. I feel responsible for what I recommend to my friends.

Second, we explored the empirical relationship between Facebook fan likes and brand value in the apparel, soft drink, luxury, fast-food, credit card, and retail industries. In summary, the correlations between fan likes and brand value (BrandZ, 2014) were strong, ranging from 0.425 (luxury) to 0.979 (soft drinks). This is consistent with studies that indicate that both Facebook fan likes and brand post likes are linked to WOM and that WOM leads to positive financial and brand outcomes (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012).

In addition to likes, viewers demonstrate engagement by commenting on brand page posts. Comments augment the content of the original posts, further popularizing brand content. Thus, both liking and commenting are powerful measures of brand content popularity (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Shen & Bissell, 2013; Swani et al., 2017).

3. Literature review

3.1. Social media communication model

Understanding brand post popularity means understanding the flow of content that occurs in social media sites. We use the communication model to explain the transmission of content that occurs in social media (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014). The communication model states that a source encodes (creation) and then transmits a message through a medium (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; Lasswell, 1948; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). The receiver then receives and decodes (processes) the transmitted message. Furthermore, in an interactive medium, after decoding the receiver encodes and sends/directs the message back to the sender and, in the case of social media, perhaps to others.

Fig. 1 presents the flow of communication that occurs between marketers and consumers on social media sites. Unlike traditional communication models, the social media communication model incorporates the role of networks of friends. Here, the source is the marketer, the medium is social media, the receiver is the intended consumers, and the feedback is the flow of communication primarily between target consumers and their networks of friends. The marketers encode the message according to the offering type (services vs. goods) and send appropriate messages incorporating brand strategy, message appeals, and vividness to target consumers through social media. They promote brand names in their communications to increase brand awareness and loyalty and use various message appeals and/or vividness to entice audiences to interact with the messages to increase popularity (De Vries et al., 2012; Swani et al., 2017).

The consumers receive and decode the messages. This decoding process involves information processing in which receivers elaborate on the messages to understand them, integrate them into their cognitive schema, and possibly take appropriate actions (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). In this decoding stage, consumers are likely to be motivated to share the messages depending on message characteristics. Consumers are likely to encode (by commenting, liking, or sharing) the messages, and the intended receivers are primarily their networks of friends and associates. The networks decode and then likely encode the shared messages. This encoding process is analogous to WOM behaviors that help popularize brand content messages (Swani et al., 2017). Therefore, marketers strive to select appropriate brand strategies to motivate audiences to spread their brand messages.
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