Target and position article

Managing customer engagement at trade shows

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\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

Customer engagement is a buzzword in today’s business landscape. It is a key driver of a firm’s long-term success. Marketers overwhelmingly agree that engaged customers are valuable because, in all likelihood, they will keep coming back to transact business. In this study, which uses the novel context of B2B trade shows, the authors link engagement with two outcomes – intention to attend the next show and intention to purchase from exhibitors. Based on data collected from attendees before and after the show, they propose and test a conceptual model of customer engagement. They show that satisfaction with the trade show fully mediates the impact of behavioral engagement on the two outcomes. They also find that marketers i.e., the show organizer and exhibitors, benefit when visitors become engaged with the trade show in a fully comprehensive manner, even if some visitor segments may initially have low anticipation with regard to the upcoming event and the activities involved.

\section{1. Introduction}

Over the past decade, managing customer engagement has become an important issue among business executives worldwide. It is a key factor driving a firm’s long-term success (McCarthy & Schadler, 2014) and has pushed several global brands such as Apple and McDonald’s to explicitly mention superior customer engagement in their mission statements. Over 75% of marketers polled recently say they expect to be responsible for managing the end-to-end engagement over the customer’s lifetime (The Economist 2015). The topic has become a cornerstone of the marketing discipline and is widely considered a top research priority.

Existing research suggests that an engaged customer, in general, is good news for a marketer because such a customer keeps coming back and will enhance firm performance (e.g., Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Enjoyable and memorable engagement with a firm’s offering typically manifests in the form of customer retention and repeat purchases. Existing engagement research, however, has focused largely on goods and services such as nursing homes (Verleye, Gemmel, & Rangarajan, 2013), social media brands (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014), other general “products/services” (Kumar & Pansari, 2016) and TV programs and other media (Calder, Isaac, & Malthouse, 2016). These instances involve products and services in everyday use and therefore become part of the daily routine. By contrast, trade shows in the B2B domain present a very different scenario. They tend to be major events, where the attendee must plan the visit carefully, well ahead of time. This includes arranging for travel, deciding which suppliers to meet and thinking about other activities to do at the show. The event itself is marked by “sensorial overwhelming, information over-load, and physical fatigue” (Rinallo, Borghini, & Golletto, 2010, p. 252). Some attendees come “to escape the daily routines and have time to reflect on broader issues” (Borghini, Golletto, & Rinallo, 2006). After attending such a climactic event, attendees reflect on their experience long afterwards. Thus, events represent a very different context to study engagement when compared with existing research. More importantly, the limited empirical research in this domain does not address the link between engagement and tangible outcomes arising from it. In this study, we develop a framework and research methodology for understanding engagement and apply it to the trade show context, an under-researched communications channel in B2B marketing.

Trade shows are a vital part of the B2B communications mix with expenditures outpacing both advertising and direct mail...
Trade shows feature three inter-related groups of actors – the show organizer, exhibitors and attendees. Each plays an important role in delivering value. Our focus in this paper is on the show organizer and visitors which is unique since most trade show research has an emphasis on exhibitors. The show organizer promotes the show as a premier event for the industry, featuring many educational events and activities for attendees while offering opportunities for social interaction and networking. The show lasts around 3–4 days where a concentrated group of interested buyers and sellers assemble together helping achieve multiple objectives on both sides. For example, exhibitors may be looking to acquire new customer leads, introduce new products, build awareness, and find distributors (CEIR, 2006), while attendees may want to place orders, seek new product information, compare suppliers, network with others, and catch up with industry trends (Godor & O’Connor, 2001; Munuera & Ruiz, 1999; Smith & Smith, 1999). The trade show is thus a great setting to study visitor engagement behaviors and understand how key metrics link to tangible outcomes.

We focus on two such outcomes – intention to purchase (relevant for exhibitors) and intention to return to the show next time (relevant for the organizer). These metrics are well-supported in the literature (Gopalakrishna & Lilien, 2012). The show management is keenly interested in maintaining and elevating the show’s image and perception within the industry. Thus, understanding the outcomes and effectively leveraging the key drivers to improve visitor engagement is a top priority. Note the value chain – a good experience for attendees will likely bring them back to the show next time, which in turn, is great for exhibitors because they get enthused about participation when they see high interest and engagement from visitors.

Conceptually, our research draws on the theoretical framework by Maslowska, Malthouse, and Collinge (2016), who note that the pursuit of goals is central to customer engagement. To satisfy needs and wants by pursuing goals to reach a desired end state (Fishbain & Bhar, 2005), customers progress via a three-step process – anticipation, realization and reflection (De Keyser, Lemon, Klaus, & Keiningham, 2015; Morewedge, 2015). Anticipation involves fantasizing or savoring experiences that one could have or that are about to happen (Kumar, Killingsworth, & Gilovich, 2014), referred to as ‘Anticipated Behavior.’ Realization is the customer’s participation in activities as he/she encounters the trade show and other related aspects such as the ambience and surroundings, labeled as ‘Actual Behavior.’ Reflection is about judging the value of the exposure they just had, which customers remember and recollect. Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, and Illec (2011) note that satisfaction is a consequence of behavior – thus, we label the third phase as ‘Satisfaction with Trade Show’.

We expand the above framework by adding ‘social media behaviors,’ i.e., individuals sharing their experience with others (Maslowska et al., 2016). Aspects of the customer’s actual behavior can prompt dialogue about the show, for example, on social media. Such behaviors may affect future attendance and purchase because in discussing the trade show visitors may elaborate on their experiences. The elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that people will attend to information and expand on it in their own words.

In linking with the two outcomes, the actual behavior and/or dialogue about the trade show may directly drive the outcomes or have an indirect effect via satisfaction. It would be important to understand this process from a theoretical and managerial standpoint. Also, as noted before, visitors have a variety of goals and therefore will vary significantly on the nature and extent of anticipation they have about the upcoming show. Thus, the impact of actual behavior on outcomes will also vary across individuals.

We explore these issues empirically in order to understand the customer engagement dimensions that drive outcomes via the following research questions:

- Is the dynamic process model (i.e., anticipation, realization and reflection) a valid representation of customer engagement in B2B settings?
- Does satisfaction with the trade show mediate the impact of actual behavior and dialogue about the trade show on outcomes?
- Do the customer segments defined by motivations vary in terms of outcomes generated?
- Does the degree to which actual behavior matches anticipated behavior impact engagement and marketing outcomes?

Our paper contributes in several ways. First, we empirically test a conceptual framework involving three phases of customer engagement in a novel B2B setting that includes dialogue about the event on social media. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to do so. Second, we show that the drivers of outcomes for different stakeholders vary. For example, if visitors high on the social dimension spent more hours on the floor, it increases their purchase intention. For visitors low on the social dimension, taking part in more social activities (happy hour), increases their intention to return next time. Third, our analysis of pre- and post-show measurements suggests that satisfaction with the event fully mediates the link to purchase intention. Finally, we show that, contrary to common marketing wisdom, a ‘one size fits all’ approach may improve outcomes in specific customer segments.

In the sections below, we first describe our conceptual framework based on a review of the relevant literature. Next, we describe the empirical setting and the results from testing the conceptual model. We then discuss the results from our regression model that relates several aspects of customer engagement to two outcomes. We follow with a discussion of the managerial implications of our findings and conclude with directions for future research.

2. Literature review and conceptual development

Hollebeek, Srivastava, and Chen (2016) define engagement as “a customer’s motivationally driven, volitional investment of focal operant resources (including cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social knowledge and skills), ... into [trade show] interactions in service systems.” The definition refines their earlier one that describes customer engagement “as a dynamic, iterative process” that is “context-based or stakeholder-specific” (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 260). Despite a large body of research that discusses measures of customer engagement, there is little work on understanding and testing the dynamic process that develops over time, especially in B2B markets.

We use the definition offered by Hollebeek et al. (2016) to establish the scope of customer engagement, and show how it can be used in the context of B2B trade shows. The conceptual framework shown in Fig. 1 extends our understanding of customer engagement by describing it as a dynamic process that unfolds over time. There is limited research that views customer engagement as a process (Viswanathan et al., 2017 is a recent exception); therefore our work advances the engagement literature in a fundamental way. The Hollebeek definition and others suggest that customer engagement has cognitive and behavioral dimensions (see Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, & Carlson, 2017 and Maslowska et al., 2016 for extant definitions).

In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of the engagement process, offer more detail about the meaning of engagement in a trade show context and explain how to harness the process to generate positive outcomes. Beginning at the left of Fig. 1, show organizers must have some idea about how potential visitors should think...
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