



## Succeeding on social media: Exploring communication strategies for wine marketing



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### ABSTRACT

Despite the growing popularity of social media as a platform for communication, little research explores the use of communication within these platforms from both the brand and consumer perspective. This research provides an in-depth investigation of Australian wine brands active on social media. The research employs two studies, consisting of netnography and in-depth interviews. Three main communication orientations are found to elicit different responses amongst consumers, impacting factors including brand recall, relationship building, brand personality perceptions, sense of community, and product performance perceptions.

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### 1. Introduction

While many retailers indicate that social media is an important communication channel for their business, most are unaware of the best ways to engage and connect their audience through social media communication (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2017). With over 65 billion businesses using Facebook pages to connect with consumers (Kaplan, 2017), this dominant social media platform has become increasingly crowded as marketers attempt to engage customers via social media content. Understanding the role of marketing communications efforts by retailers within social media platforms such as Facebook has become an important theme in the digital environment. The social media era offers retailers many new ways to communicate and engage with customers (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfält, 2016). Grewal et al. (2016) describe that when done well, online, mobile and social media offer tremendous opportunities for retailers to communicate with customers in a personalised manner. However, little research has addressed the varied way in which this communication can be delivered.

In this article, we apply a draw from retailing literature,

specifically that surrounding personal selling and communication efforts through social media platforms and hence make the following contributions. Firstly, we adopt the theoretical underpinning of the sales person selling orientation and customer orientation (SOCO) as proposed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). Previous research regarding selling and customer oriented strategies has focussed on offline retailing and sales efforts (Franke & Park, 2006; Jaramillo, Ladik, Marshall, & Mulki, 2007). Secondly, through the observation of a number of brands currently active on social media by conducting a netnography, we demonstrate the relevance and applicability of the SOCO perspective for online retailing communication strategies. Thirdly, this research extends the sales and customer dominated orientations to demonstrate an additional orientation evident in social media communication, which relates retailers who heavily communicate brand related experiences, termed the 'experiential orientation'.

This exploratory study was conducted in two phases, including a netnography of active Facebook pages, and a series of in-depth interviews with social media users to provide further investigation of the proposed selling, customer and experiential orientations. This allowed the researchers to uncover key consumer attitudes and behaviours related to these communication styles. This paper is structured such that the first section examines social media as a new platform for brand communication. In order to understand brand communication and marketing efforts within

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social media, we then discuss the relevance of selling and customer orientations. The Australian wine industry is then justified as an important research context in which we study the communication orientations. The two-phase qualitative research design is presented, leading to key findings, contributions and directions for future research.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Social media as a communication and engagement platform

Social networking platforms have emerged as a popular marketing communications avenue, with over 65 billion businesses, globally, registered with the social media site, Facebook (Kaplan, 2017). The rise of such platforms has created a space in which customers have access to immediate interaction, multiple feedback loops, and dynamic conversations with retailers, and other customers; and hence engage with retailers in ways which were not previously possible (Brodie, Ilic, & Hollebeek, 2011). The interactive properties of social media have transformed consumers from passive observers to active participants, with social media platforms serving as an ideal forums for brand-related advocacy (Chu & Kim, 2011; Riegner, 2007), customer-led content generation (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012) and customer-created product innovations (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). While social media sites enable these interactive consumer experiences, contribute to the development of customer engagement with specific brands, and hence facilitate social and network value (Brodie et al., 2011), there has been little conceptual examination of how this engagement can be facilitated through marketing communication efforts.

Practitioners have led a surge of interest in the area of online customer engagement, as they rapidly adopt social media tools as mechanisms for interacting with consumers. An increasing amount of industry blogs, websites and guides on the best practice for social media marketing have emerged in the past five years (Lamberton and Stephen, 2016). Whilst the list of guidelines, strategies and approaches for social media marketing efforts appears endless within the industry context, academic research and empirical evidence in this area remains scarce. Despite the growing potential and interest in the utilisation of social media for marketing communication purposes, little academic research exists in this specific area, particularly relating to how the receivers of the message perceive those messages. Online brand communities such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, FourSquare and Google+ allow marketers to create, customise and distribute persuasive advertising messages for products and services (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2011), however the effect of those efforts are yet to be established, providing a valuable area of contribution of this study.

### 2.2. Communication orientations in social media

Whilst originally established as a measure of salesperson orientation, the concept of sales and customer orientation (Saxe & Weitz, 1982) is appropriate to the current study, assisting in classification of online marketing messages. The concept of customer orientation has been linked to customer value and business performance, with a majority of studies focussing on customer orientation in an offline context. The original conceptualisation of customer orientation and corresponding development of Saxe and Weitz's (1982) Selling Orientation-Customer Orientation (SOCO hereafter) scale stems from the measurement of the 'marketing concept', a concept defined as the willingness to recognise and understand the consumer's needs and wants, and a willingness to adjust any of the marketing elements to satisfy those needs and wants (Houston, 1986). Over the past three decades, organisations

have advanced the marketing concept to include the creation of value with customers' needs in mind (Jaramillo et al., 2007). Such organisations who perceive themselves to be focused on serving customers' needs are said to have a 'customer orientation'; conducting business activities that enhance customer value rather than a 'selling orientation' (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). Saxe and Weitz (1982) define customer oriented selling as 'the degree to which salespeople practice the marketing concept by trying to help their customer make purchase decisions that will satisfy customer needs' (p 344).

A range of researchers have explored the potential effects of customer orientation on numerous variables determined to be important for both the organization and its employees, in addition to customers. The impact of customer orientation has been explored from the consumer perspective, with results indicating that customer orientation positively influences customer relationship development (Williams, 1998) and satisfaction and loyalty (Goff & Boles, 1997; Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor, 2002). There is limited research examining the role of customer orientation in an online context (Poddar, Donthu, & Wei, 2009; Tsiotsou, Rigopoulou, & Kehagias, 2010). Further, there is no current literature that examines the role of customer orientation in online social networks, a significant area which involves both marketer to consumer communication and consumer-to-consumer communication.

### 2.3. Research context

Small to medium sized wineries (those which crush less than 999 tonnes per annum), represent a significant majority (95.1%) of Australian wine producers as of 2016 (The Australian and New Zealand Wine Industry Directory, 2016). Considering the high levels of competition between small to medium sized wine producers within the Australian wine industry, it is not surprising that many brands are seeking new and innovative ways to communicate with consumers. With a distinct lack of distribution availability, most of these SME wineries are reliant on their own efforts to retail wine from the virtual or physical 'cellar door'. Social media sites such as Facebook have become an increasingly popular consumer touch point, with the viral and social capabilities of these online networks creating a new forum for consumer interaction (Barber, Dodd, & Ghiselli, 2008; Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010; Keller, 2009). Many wine brands have adopted social media to portray and communicate not only wine sales and product details, but family history, regional information and details regarding events, thus deeming this context suitable due to the common demonstration a multi-layered approach to online communication.

In a recent cross-cultural study of social media usage in the wine business (Szolnoki et al., 2014), Social Media was ranked as the third most common way in which Australian wine brands communicate with their customers. Eighty-seven percent of Australian wine brands surveyed had a Facebook page for their winery. Australian wine brands indicated that utilising social media to attract new customers (78%) and communicate with customers (76%) was of significant importance. In addition, Australian wine brands indicated that they are using social media in an attempt to achieve advertising of their winery (66%), public relations (66%) and to provide information about events (63%). Communication with other wineries and companies was the least important reason for using social media (29%), whilst 16% of the wine brands indicated that their objectives regarding social media use were not clearly defined. Other objectives of social media use listed included brand awareness, brand personality, increased sales, and development of an online profile (Szolnoki et al., 2014). This research indicated the proliferation of social media as a communication and branding tool within the Australian wine industry. In addition, the

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