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Will social media kill branding?

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Abstract The traditional branding paradigm involved heavy upfront investment and tightly managing the image via controlled communications in hopes of creating dominant brands that could be leveraged to cultivate loyalty and a long-term, steady stream of profits. However, social media can drastically alter consumers' behavior and their brand preferences. This rapidly evolving landscape has left managers at a loss, and what they are experiencing is likely the beginning of a tectonic shift in the way brands are managed. In this article, we take a close look at the building blocks of branding and also examine the core of social media. After careful analysis of the two, we discuss the likely impact social media will have on the practice of brand management. We conclude that it will extend beyond the narrow confines of the use of social media as a message platform, to the core of how markets are targeted and products are delivered. We make recommendations regarding how companies can manage various facets of branding in this new marketplace.

1. The worth of brands and the changing landscape of social media

Each year, *Business Week* publishes a listing of the world's most valuable brands. In 2012, Coca-Cola retained the top spot with a brand value of $77.8 billion (Modi, 2012). A look at the top 20 most valuable brands (see Table 1) reveals some interesting insights. First, many of these brands were created decades ago, with Coca-Cola being more than 100 years old. Even the newer brands—such as technology giants Microsoft and Apple—were founded about 35 years ago. Second, for these companies, their brands are the most valuable assets. While this is a desirable position to be in, it takes a long period of dedicated and focused effort to cultivate these brands. And, once companies have created these assets, they are justifiably concerned about maintaining them. The same holds true for lesser-known companies and their brands.

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Table 1. Best global brands: The 20 most valuable brands, 2012

Rank	Brand	Industry	2012 Brand Value ($B)
1.	Coca-Cola	Beverages	77.839
2.	Apple	Technology	76.568
3.	IBM	Services	75.532
4.	Google	Technology	69.726
5.	Microsoft	Technology	57.853
6.	GE	Diversified	43.682
7.	McDonald's	Restaurants	40.062
8.	Intel	Technology	39.385
9.	Samsung	Technology	32.893
10.	Toyota	Automotive	30.280
11.	Mercedes-Benz	Automotive	30.097
12.	BMW	Automotive	29.052
13.	Disney	Media	27.438
14.	Cisco	Services	27.197
15.	HP	Technology	26.087
16.	Gillette	FMCG	24.898
17.	Louis Vuitton	Luxury	23.577
18.	Oracle	Services	22.126
19.	Nokia	Electronics	21.009
20.	Amazon	Services	18.625

* Source: Modi (2012)

Recent years, however, have seen a dramatic growth in social media. Twitter has more than 230 million active users, who send 500 million tweets on a typical day; there are more than 100 million blogs; and Facebook just surpassed 1 billion users, making it the third largest 'nation,' with a population exceeded only by China and India. Services such as YouTube, Flickr, and MySpace have become a part of everyday routine. Social media is a rapidly evolving space with no definitive sense of what direction it may take. This is proving to be disruptive to brand management, and understandably concerns exist that social media may threaten the very essence of branding.

Many authors (e.g., Edelman, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011) have lamented that businesses do not seem to appreciate social media's full impact. Indeed, industry seems to be in a state of confusion. As revealed by a Harvard Business Review Analytical Services study of 2,100 companies, while two-thirds of respondents were actively using social media, many felt it was still an experiment with an unclear future. Only 7% successfully integrated it into their marketing activities; most companies were still trying to understand the likely impact of social media on branding and searching for best practices regarding its use.

Against this backdrop, we specify the foundation of branding. We also establish the core characteristics of social media. With a clear understanding of the two, we outline (1) the implications of social media on branding and (2) strategies for utilizing social media to create and manage brands.

2. Deconstructing branding

Brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to marketing efforts (Aaker, 1991). The ultimate aim of branding is favorable response from consumers/customers. Companies attempt this by marketing products to customers, highlighting differentiating characteristics. Differentiation lies at the heart of branding. In its absence, products cease to be brands and instead become commodities, which makes charging a price premium impossible. Differentiation allows companies to control their prices and command loyalty for their brands.

Brands can be differentiated according to their physical attributes. For example, Bounty is known as the "thicker, quicker picker-upper" paper towel and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese claims that "It's the cheesiest." However, most successful brands reach beyond physical attributes in attempt to build emotional connections with consumers. A look at the top 10 slogans with the highest recall rates underscores this point (Kohli, Thomas, & Suri, 2013). Nike's slogan, "Just do it," which posted the highest recall rate, appeals to the user's motivation to excel. Similarly, the slogan with the second-highest recall, McDonald's "I'm lovin' it," aims to create a loving bond between the customer and the fast food giant.

Once companies establish differentiation that is meaningful to consumers, they must create brand knowledge: awareness about the brand and its image. Traditionally, this entailed significant financial investment in advertising and promotion budgets in order to garner marketplace notice. Heavy financial backing was particularly important in the early stages of the product life cycle. This created a high barrier to entry for new brands; however, once they were established, it protected them in turn by building a barrier against upstart brands and effectively shut those out of competition for the top spots. This underscored a need for heavy investment in branding, but one which could only be justified if it provided proportional returns for the dominant brands over a long time span later in the product life cycle.

Thus, companies make significant marketing efforts to be successful. Since new products experience a high rate of failure, the introduction of new brands is a risky undertaking. The marketplace for most products is also very crowded, making it difficult for new brands to appeal to customers in ways previous brands have not yet tried. As such, finding a sizable target market that sees value in a new brand is very difficult. Even if consumers were to find a new brand appealing, entrenched brands have cost advantages that make them formidable opponents: economies of scale, lower learning curves, and established relationships with channel members. Nonetheless, the goal of marketing efforts is to get customers to patronize products by getting them noticed, inducing trial, and developing loyalty and repurchase of the brand.

Attracting favorable consumer response is another challenge. Assuming that sufficient marketing efforts are made, brands can get noticed. However, consumers are likely to desert their existing choice and try a new brand only if this differentiation is meaningful and closer to their exacting preferences. This lies at the heart of the marketing philosophy and is important to our discussion. Once consumers develop a preference for a brand, they patronize it for three reasons:

1. brand inertia (i.e., desire to stay with the same brand if it satisfies their needs);
2. assurance of product quality; and
3. expression of self and aspirations.

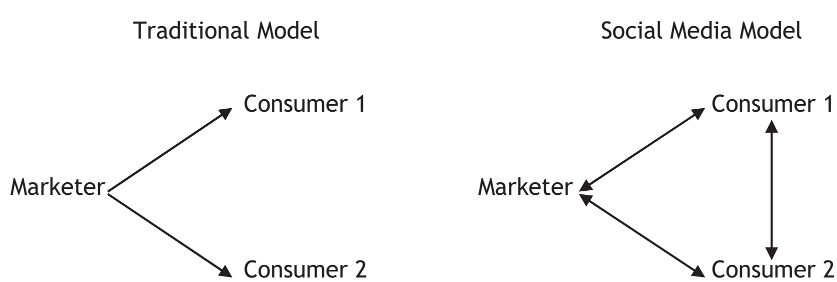
Consumers are cognitive misers, and hence parsimonious when it comes to using information. As a result, they desire to stay with the same brand if they are satisfied. Even a 'good enough' brand may restrain them from trying new brands. Consumers may also be risk averse in terms of monetary and time investments associated with trying new brands, leading them to stick to brands that offer an assurance of quality (e.g., Tylenol vs. cheaper, generic acetaminophen). Finally, consumers like to stay with the same brands because they express the consumers' identity and/or capture their aspirations. This is a more stable state and not easy to disrupt. It may even be based on brand preferences acquired by the consumers over a long period of time. This could explain the success of brands such as Jeep Wrangler: Even though the Wrangler performs relatively poorly in objective product quality reviews by publications such as *Consumer Reports* and others (Gorzelany, 2012), consumers continue to patronize the brand because of its ability to connect to their aspirations for off-road adventures.

3. Deconstructing social media

In the past, consumers used the Internet passively to read or watch content that was of interest to them. However, the advent of Web 2.0 created a seismic shift in consumers' behavior and their interaction with the Internet. The focus shifted from just consuming to creating and sharing content via social networking sites, blogs, and wikis (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Easier access through new platforms such as tablet PCs and mobile phones completed this transformation from an isolated Web interaction to a truly social experience. The growth has been phenomenal. By 2012, share of smart phones increased to more than 50% of mobile subscribers; and Facebook, arguably the most dominant of social media sites, took just 8 years from its inception to sign up half the users on the Internet, surpassing the 1 billion mark.

Social media can be defined as consumer-generated media that covers a variety of new sources of online information, created and used by consumers intent on sharing information with others regarding any topic of interest (Blackshaw & Nazzaro, 2004). *Consumer-generated content* is the key. Social media employs mobile and Web-based technologies to share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content. It has transformed the traditional marketing communication model—which, for the most part, was a one-way path from the marketer to customers with some feedback flowing in the opposite direction (see Figure 1)—and has created a paradigm shift. Not only are consumers more in command of the communication flowing toward them, but they also can initiate communication directed toward marketers. Further, interaction between customers has increased dramatically.

Figure 1. Communication models



Social media is not intended primarily for marketing. Consumers carry on discussions and exchanges, paying scant attention to branding or marketing. Marketing, from this perspective, is a small and peripheral part of the social media consumer culture. A quick review of Facebook updates and tweets suggests that consumers are not focused on brands; however, marketers are keen to explore this avenue and thus intrude on consumers' dialog. Since consumers have control, they can block out marketers in a variety of ways. Thus, it is not a surprise that in spite of having highly detailed and targeted data—the holy grail of marketers—Facebook ads have met with limited success, prompting Facebook to try "promoted posts for users" at a test price of $7 (Oreskovic, 2012). User reaction has been less than enthusiastic, underscoring our point that it is very difficult to make people pay attention to what marketers want them to hear.

Social media is also unique in that consumers not only control the information they hear from marketers, but also what they pass on to others if they find it useful or interesting. This information could be based on communication from marketers or users' own personal experiences with the brand. So, this affects not just communications about brands, but also what consumers expect from brands. In other words—and this is important to recognize—social media can impact the design and delivery of brands, and has the potential to do this on a much larger scale as consumers become more adept at taking control and influencing marketers through its use.

Finally, social media has the inherent ability to make information more accessible, to move it, and to amplify it. These are the building blocks for 'viral information,' a fairly recent phenomenon that is becoming increasingly popular within social media. Brand awareness spreads much more virally through social media than traditional media, especially through 're-tweets' that appear on Twitter accounts and 'shares' on Facebook profiles. People may also learn about brands by going to blogs and social networks, and by letting others know their opinions (Yan, 2011). There is amplification of reputation with the aid of social media over traditional mediums (Barwise & Meehan, 2010).

4. Impact of social media on branding

By studying how it may influence each key component of branding, we can discuss the impact social media is likely to have on the future of branding. The first step in successful branding entails the creation of meaningful differentiation. While some may argue that how a brand is positioned lies in the mind of the consumer, we argue that is the end result of an effective branding process. Creating differentiation should rest squarely with marketers. Of course, if they don't create a focused positioning based on meaningful differentiation, consumers will take over, especially in the age of social media. That would be an undesirable outcome. As mentioned in the section on branding, marketers of successful brands have to create meaningful differentiation for their brands, and then build brand knowledge through marketing efforts. When done correctly, creating differentiation is a detail-oriented process that takes into account consumer preferences and the competitive landscape. It is a data-driven exercise that culminates in marketers making a conscious choice about the positioning of their brands. Extensive control of this process is crucial for success. Our assertion is that marketers should create a brand's positioning at its inception. This is an easy issue to address, and social media will have limited impact on this.

A second point we brought up in our earlier discussion on branding was the importance of building an emotional connection. This is significant for two reasons. In general, physical attributes are easier to duplicate, and hence rarely provide a true strategic edge. More importantly, in the age of social media—when it is easier to share information and evaluate physical attributes—brands that rely solely on these are more susceptible and unlikely to do well in the long run. Building emotional connections, though, takes time and effort. And, with smaller brand building investments in the age of social media, even though this is a worthwhile strategy to pursue, it will be more difficult to execute.

Once brands are out in the market, social media can disrupt their position because marketers have very limited control and consumers are more likely to trust their peers rather than sponsored commercial messages. As such, branding based only on heavy messaging from marketers will not work. Brands will become more transparent, and the ones that lack authenticity or the ability to deliver quality cannot succeed.

The next step in the branding process entails creating brand knowledge; that is, building awareness about the brand and its image. This is a daunting task, requiring substantial investment over long periods of time; once accomplished, though, it protects established brands against new entrants. Social media has the potential to disrupt this on both dimensions. Brands can get noticed with smaller investments, if they are creative about their use of social media and/or connect with customers. And, longer time horizons are not needed because social media has the ability to move information faster and to amplify it. This poses a significant threat to established brands while providing an easier opening to new entrants, in essence creating a more volatile marketplace. This will also disrupt the traditional branding practice of investing heavily in hopes of higher returns, and will shift the landscape toward brands that can thrive with lower market shares and those that cater to more focused segments.

Sustained marketing efforts are needed to create the brand knowledge necessary to induce trial and develop loyalty. While creating brand knowledge is almost exclusively the domain of advertising, inducing trial is heavily dependent on advertising and promotion, and developing loyalty is largely a function of consumers' experience with the product. As we discussed in the previous section, marketers will have less control over the content their consumers view, create, and share.

Decades ago, companies had an easier time marketing; back then, network channels were dominant, providing extensive reach and captive audiences. Heavy reliance on television advertising was disrupted first with the advent of cable television and then DVRs, because consumers had the option of 'zipping' and 'zapping': fast forwarding the advertisements or changing channels, respectively. Companies were able to alleviate these problems, to some extent, by inserting their brands into program storylines via product placement. However, multiple channels only increased the amount of control consumers have over the information they receive, and social media allows them to actively create and share the information. So, social media poses a major hurdle on this front.

Traditionally, creating brand knowledge via marketing efforts was an expensive exercise with a low rate of success; it made the introduction of new brands a hefty gamble. Since social media now has the ability to do this cheaper and over a shorter time horizon, newer and more innovative brands can afford to take the (now) lower risk. It levels the playing field in favor of niche brands that don't have deep pockets. So, we expect more brands will be introduced, and have a higher success rate. Even if the success rate remains the same, it can be said with near certainty that in absolute numbers more brands will be entering the market—and succeeding.

By the same logic, dominant brands will get attacked more often and will have to cede their place more frequently. This is another serious challenge for companies. Even after brands are successful, they will have to fight harder against new entrants to retain their position, making it more difficult to recover investments in a shorter time span. The very basis of the old paradigm of investing in a brand and capitalizing on it later is threatened because there will be less certainty about how long established brands can continue to provide strong returns. It is important to appreciate that this will likely limit the investments companies are willing to make to build major brands in the first place.

The final step in the branding process entails garnering a favorable consumer response. As discussed earlier, people patronize brands for three reasons: brand inertia, assurance of product quality, and expression of identity and aspirations. So, how does social media impact this? Brand inertia will remain stable for the most part because if people (by definition) stick with their brands, social media will have little influence on this. However, if individuals buy brands because they are assured of their quality as vouched for by others, social media can be very disruptive; a better-quality brand can easily replace an existing brand of choice. Social media makes brands more transparent, so they need to be good to be successful. Moreover, social media's ability to access information, transmit it faster, and amplify it will make it easier to compare brands—and brands that are established on the basis of physical attributes will find it more difficult to protect themselves. Finally, brands that are purchased because consumers have an emotional bond with them and/or are seen as an expression of their identity will continue to thrive because that is a stronger bond and a more stable state of affairs that is not easily disrupted. However, building this bond will become more challenging as upfront investments will likely be constrained. On this front also, branding will be impacted in ways it has never been before.

Overall, consumers are most likely to respond if an offering really meets their wants, and social media makes it much easier to learn and share information about brands that may best suit one's needs. Combined with the previous point, companies will feel tremendous pressure to create brands that are tailored to customers' needs rather than use general brands to reach for the highest market share. In other words, markets are likely to get more fragmented in response to varied customer demand.

In conclusion, branding in its traditional form is threatened on multiple fronts because:

- branding will become more transparent and reliance on physical attributes will decrease;
- newer brands will be easier to introduce, leading to a higher frequency of attacks on established brands, which will reduce their life span;

- heavy investments in building megabrands—which lies at the heart of the traditional branding paradigm—will be more difficult to justify; and
- there will be a shift toward creating niche brands targeted at smaller segments.

Also, while the number of brands in specific consumers' purchase portfolios may purposefully remain the same—and social media does not alter that—we expect to see faster transitions in and out of that bracket.

The magnitude of impact is likely to vary across product categories. Distinctive and dominant brands will remain strong among certain types of goods (e.g., convenience, everyday purchases) as long as these goods can keep their promises; this is because consumers are reluctant to switch. However, customers may shy away from brands that do not offer sufficient value to justify premium prices. Shopping goods (e.g., washing machines) are particularly vulnerable. Their purchase is preceded by an extensive information search that is often based on physical product attributes—a task that has been made easier by social media. As such, this sector can expect disruption. At the other end of the continuum, "Luxury brands are something that people display with pride. [Luxury brands] are an embodiment of who they are as a person" (Carr, 2012). Brands like Louis Vuitton and Mercedes will continue to flourish and face a more stable landscape because their buyers are likely to boast about these purchases. Customers pay a premium not only for the inherent quality of the brand, but also because they want to have a relationship with that brand. We expect these types of brands to see gains from social media.

Some evidence already exists to support our assertions. In the first study of its kind, Golder, Irwin, and Mitra (2013) investigated the persistence of brands over varying lengths of time. Using a dataset of 625 market leaders in 125 categories from 1921 to 2010, the researchers analyzed market leadership over periods ranging from 5 to 89 years. Across the board, lives of dominant brands at the top have shortened in the modern era (1995—2010) to 12—24 years, compared to 29—52 in earlier years. This may still be considered a long time frame, but it has certainly decreased. Golder and colleagues also found that food and household supplies (i.e., convenience goods) persist longer as market leaders, providing support for our assertion regarding dominant brand lack of disruption caused partly by customer inertia. Further, shopping goods have below-average rates for market leadership, providing support for our assertion that social media can disrupt these brands because of their emphasis on physical attributes. Golder et al. did not explicitly address specialty or luxury goods.

So, while branding will maintain prominence, its very nature will change. Reigns of leading brands will be shortened, and we know that once they slip, brands rarely make it back to the top; the reversal rate is only 4% (Golder et al., 2013). This underscores the permanency of the impact of social media on specific brands and the importance of adapting the practice of branding to the new world of social media. We now discuss some strategies for branding in this marketplace.

5. Managing brands in the age of social media

5.1. Accept the new paradigm

This may seem obvious, but we believe the importance of accepting the new branding paradigm cannot be overemphasized. The marketplace has changed, and marketers' thinking must evolve accordingly. Consumers now share information across a plethora of social media platforms at an unpredictable pace that is hardly under the marketer's influence (Divol, Edelman, & Sarrazin, 2012).

The consequence of this lack of control is not just restricted to brand messaging. While communication is central to social media, focusing on it—as most studies have done—takes a very narrow perspective of the impact of social media. Communication created by consumers will also affect how markets are targeted and how products will be created and delivered. The philosophy of satisfying customers' needs and wants will gain increasing prominence across all marketing activities as consumers continue to gain control, learn to use social media to their advantage, and expect to get exactly what they want. More active consumer involvement will also lead to more transparency in branding, so delivering quality will be a necessity. Brand managers stuck in the old paradigm will experience extreme difficulties, handicapped by their limited ability to respond to consumer preferences (Beuker & Abbing, 2010).

Barwise and Meehan (2010, p. 82) claimed that companies should "judiciously revise the marketing playbook rather than trying to rewrite it." We believe that the very fundamentals are changing. The new paradigm will take the dominant position, so companies would be better served by adopting a new way of thinking and modifying their entire branding approach accordingly.

5.2. Think 'long tail'

As we discussed earlier, introducing new brands is an expensive proposition that is only justified if the investment can be recovered. However, creating megabrands has become increasingly difficult as the market is saturated with new entrants, reducing the duration for which brands stay dominant. This, combined with the necessity of catering to the exacting wants of customers in social media, will lead to the creation of a 'long tail' in many markets (see Anderson, 2008). While megabrands are desirable and will continue to exist, the trend will be toward smaller niche brands. This phenomenon will likely accelerate. In essence, markets will have more options, but smaller sales for each option, thus leading to a shorter 'head' and a much longer 'tail' (Figure 2).

Consider, for example, sales of music albums. Most of the top 50 bestselling albums of all times were produced in the 1970s and '80s; none were produced in the new millennium, even though today's market is much bigger (Anderson, 2008). The reason is the greater number of choices available now. In addition, with extensive help from social media, consumers are pickier and less reliant on big, sponsored media. The result is an increasing number of albums that sell well, but are not even close to being considered hits. The same is true for TV programs, books, and cars. In the 1960s, the best-selling Chevrolet Impala sold an impressive 8 million units. That is ten times the number the topselling 2013 Ford F Series managed to move (Holt, 2014). This illustration does not even consider the variations within a model—again, a result of the need for customization to appeal to consumers' exacting demands.

Social media is playing a key role in this elongation of the tail. Consumers now rely more on information from their peers; this limits the power of advertising, making it difficult for companies to justify large upfront investments in it. Social media also makes buyers more demanding and discriminating; power has clearly shifted in their favor, and they can exercise increasing pressure on marketers to cater to their specific needs. Not surprisingly, Frito Lay's CMO believes that the days of mass marketing are over (Culliney, 2014). We believe that breakout successes may continue to happen, but it will be more difficult to plan those and deliver them in a controlled manner. Aiming for smaller successes may be more in tune with the new market dynamics.

5.3. Support the long tail

Two forces—quality assurance and distribution—support the long tail, one powered by social media and the other complementing it. Under the old branding paradigm, marketers had to be very selective about what they put out. Their offerings were vetted and then supported by a lot of money. Effectively, marketers offered stamps of quality assurance. On the other hand, offerings in the tail (i.e., relatively unknown brands) carried risks because their quality could be questionable.

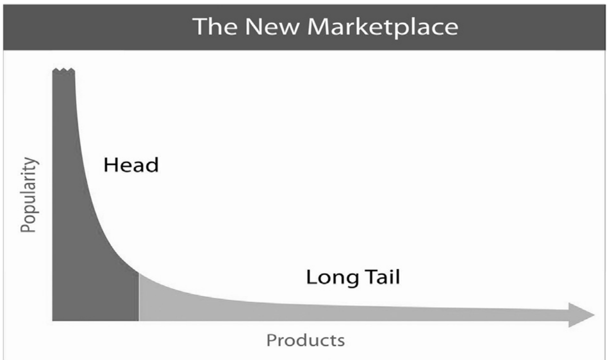
Not so anymore. Social media democratized this process with a much wider participation and the power to elevate the brand, provided the product is good. Today's stamp of quality assurance is word-of-mouth of social media participants. Niches can now thrive because small groups of consumers can spread the word to others who may also want the brands they like. For example, Webster (n.d.) provides specialized banking services. As another example, Zappos offers focused shopping results by search categorization level such as—for example—gender (men), items (clothing), type (shirts and tops), and specific type (t-shirts).[1] Even at this level of specificity reviews are available, and consumers are more likely to pay attention to these for specific items rather than be driven by the image for the umbrella brand. It is difficult to create a branding message to cover every item.

More people are consulting other users' reviews than any other source. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2012 Amazon overtook Google as the first destination of choice for consumers: 30% used it for product research compared to 13% for Google (Davis, 2012).

Another evolving force in the marketplace is online distribution. Amazon alone accounts for nearly one-fifth of e-commerce in the United States (Davis, 2012). Historically, the limited shelf space in physical stores constrained the number of items they could carry. Stores also catered to relatively narrow geographical markets with more homogeneous tastes. This tilted the field in favor of larger brands with mass appeal. Today, however, online distribution is creating a shift in the opposite direction because it is not constrained by shelf space or the homogeneity of local markets. The emergence of the long tail requires the ability to distribute an inventory that is much more diverse. This is difficult to accommodate in a physical store, but much more feasible in an online store. Let us again consider the example of albums. Across all physical stores the top 1,000 albums account for 80% of sales, whereas online they account for less than a third. Even more

[1] http://www.zappos.com/mens-clothing~2S#!/men-t-shirts/CKvXARDL1wEY4tcBwAEC4gIEARgCAw.zso?s=goliveRecentSalesStyle/desc/

Figure 2. The long tail of product success in the marketplace*



* Figure adapted from http://www.reginaldchan.net/long-tail-pro-keyword-research/

interestingly, in a typical box store that carries only a fraction of the albums, the top 100 albums account for 90% of the sales (Anderson, 2008).

So marketers can let the tail 'wag' their decisions by increasing emphasis on online stores and reducing reliance on physical stores. This would streamline distribution in line with the long-tailed market. In fact, at the time of this writing, Staples planned on closing a significant proportion of its physical locations in response to the growth of its online stores, which now account for half of the company's sales (Jayakumar, 2014). Similarly, Radio Shack planned to close about 20% percent of its 5,200 stores (Isidore, 2014). We see this as an adaptation to the long tail: not as a demise of physical stores, but more as a need for online stores. Consequently, marketers are now in a position to rely on physical stores to sell their hits, but may also use online distribution for their brands targeted down the line from the short head.

5.4. Involve customers at every step

To be truly successful, marketers must be in tune with consumers, involving them at every step. Starbucks uses its My Starbucks platform to engage its customers: customers submit ideas for improving products and the customer experience, and 'Idea Partners' from the company respond. Built on a social media foundation, My Starbucks is marketing research, a crowdsourcing tool, and an effective Internet marketing tool rolled into one. Emphasizing social media has made Starbucks very successful: the company is near the top of every major brand ranking in social media (Schoultz, 2014).

Coca-Cola opted for crowd sourcing by nurturing brand enthusiasts via its Facebook application. This keeps fans engaged by involving them in various innovative activities (Moye, 2012). The Facebook page itself was, in fact, created by brand enthusiasts; rather than founding its own, Coca-Cola saw this as a perfect opportunity to create content in tandem with fans (Klaassen, 2009). Not surprisingly, Coca-Cola became the first brand to surpass 50 million likes on Facebook.

Involving consumers need not be limited to major brands. Using an ice cream retailer, Professor V. Kumar from Georgia State University demonstrated how companies can identify influential consumers online, approach them, and involve them in creating new offerings to increase sales (Berkman, 2012). Involvement by customers gives a sense of ownership and makes them social media enthusiasts supporting the brand.

5.5. Rethink brand communication

Finally, since communication about brands is at the heart of social media, we discuss it in more detail and highlight the critical elements.

5.5.1. Work with brand advocates

Consumers are now in control of communication. While it is unrealistic to expect that they will listen with rapt attention to what marketers have to share, it is still a desirable and feasible goal for marketers to shape the dialog. Since not all consumers are inclined to contribute, the key lies in identifying brand proponents and having them lead discussions that are helpful to the brand.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) classifies consumers into the categories of brand admirers, customers, loyalists, and advocates. Others use terms like brand evangelists and social media technology mavens to describe consumers (Foster, West, & Francescucci, 2011). Regardless of the labels, marketers should seek out consumer enthusiasts who—through their online activities—reach a large number of prospective consumers. These enthusiasts represent a small portion of the market. According to BCG, only 2% of a brand's customers are advocates; Rossiter and Bellman's (2012) study of a representative sample of Australian nationals found that only 4% reached the highest levels of brand attachment and could be engaged in social media. Nonetheless, marketers should pursue this coveted group as 70% of U.S. online consumers listen to opinions published in blogs, reviews, and discussion forums (Olenski, 2013).

Fortunately, social media makes brand advocates more visible and easy to identify and track. For example, American Airlines offered high Klout scorers—consumers with big social media footprints—1-day passes to the airline's Admirals

Club in 40 different airports (Delo, 2013). Similarly, Chevrolet offered free test drives when it launched its Sonic model, in hopes of garnering favorable tweets. A brand effectively presented and then advocated by consumers results in strong outcomes.

5.5.2. Find out what customers talk about, get into the conversation, and build relationships

Find out what consumers talk about, understand them, and get into that conversation. The goal should be to build relationships. Customers are not on social media for making purchases, and are likely to shut out brands that push too much; however, consumers *are* looking for solutions, and this provides marketers with a good opportunity.

Procter and Gamble (P&G), a leader in the use of social media, has sites targeted at specific communities. In 2007, the consumer goods company concluded that teenage girls were looking for information about feminine care, but were too embarrassed to talk about it with friends and family members. The solution? BeingGirl.com, a website full of useful content and answers to visitor' questions. The P&G site offered tips for dating, information on how to handle sexual harassment at school, and how to deal with mood swings—all issues that were relevant to its target audience. BeingGirl.com did not focus on selling, but rather on the trials and tribulations of young females. In a similar vein, Reckitt Benckiser's social media campaign for its Lysol brand did not focus on the product, but on exchanges between housewives regarding cleaning without the use of harsh chemicals. In doing so, the firm was able to build trust with its customers (Neff, 2013).

According to a 2012 Forrester Research study, social media sites like Facebook and Twitter account for less than 1% of e-commerce sales; therefore, "Social tactics are not meaningful sales drivers" (Lutz, 2012). Sales generated from social media on Black Friday 2012 were a measly 0.63% of total e-commerce, a drop from the previous year (Schectman, 2012). Retailers have learned a valuable lesson: they are now using social media to get people into stores rather than push specific products.

5.5.3. Give them engaging content to talk about

Marketers should provide good content, because advocates are looking for opportunities to talk about brands. Mercedes is quite adept at doing this, a task made easier because it is a luxury brand and people like to proudly display their connection with the brand. The automaker used fear appeal in its "Impact Safety Survival Stories" to emotionally connect with consumers by sharing actual experiences of how a Mercedes saved drivers' and passengers' lives while traveling (Lamb, 2012). Word-of-mouth marketing is incredibly powerful; therefore, it is important to provide supporters with appropriate tools and good content.

Convenience goods can accomplish the same, and creativity in designing campaigns that are meaningful and exciting is tremendously helpful. These campaigns must be something out of the ordinary and cause for people to talk. Consider Coca-Cola, which recently ran its first all-digital campaign: the "Ahh Effect," targeted at teens. The first URL was ahh.com. However, one 'h' is added to the URL for a new online experience. The URLs will grow longer, ultimately ending up with 62 h's for a total of 61 experiences—certainly a unique, and arguably very entertaining, campaign. Four million consumers have visited the 40 websites (so far) affiliated with the effort, lingering for an average of 2+ minutes each. About half the traffic has been organic; that is, a consumer has shared the media with a friend, exemplifying social media's amplifying capabilities. While immediate sales is rarely an effective goal, there is already evidence of an increase in preference for Coca-Cola among those who have not been frequent consumers (Wasserman, 2013).

6. Conclusion

Social media has the potential to upend traditional branding. The landscape is constantly evolving, and this shift is likely to accelerate with the growth of mobile platforms. In a world where there are more mobile phones than toothbrushes, consumers are likely to leverage their power in social media to be more demanding of marketers. Social media can strengthen or kill a brand; the key to success lies in how quickly companies can change their mindset and adopt new strategies in response to consumer preferences.

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