Blurred Boundaries Between Consumers and Producers Inside Brand Communities: About Some Negative Outcomes

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The paper analyses the erasure of boundaries between consumers and producers within a brand community. An ethnographic approach has been developed within a community of Warhammer fans. The results highlight the negative consequences of the confusion of roles. The porosity featured here is not without risks for employees who overwork to respond to requests from consumer-fans. It also creates a situation where consumers, construed as partners of the company, feel to be exploited in two ways, since they are ready to pay for their cult brands’ products without receiving anything in return for all what they produce.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14971/volumes/v37/NA-37

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The erasure of boundaries between consumers and producers is a hot topic that recent theories in consumer research (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and in marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) have helped to popularized. For the CCT, the performance of the consumer turns her/him into a producer (Kozinets et al., 2004). For the SDL, the company’s co-creation of value together with the consumer(s) is the key process in this new marketing logic (Lusch and Vargo, 2006). With brand communities (Algesheimer, Dholakia and Hermann, 2005; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten, McAlexander and Koenig, 2007), the concepts of productive consumers and of value co-creation have been pushed to the limit insofar as brands are being transformed into virtual platforms (Arvidsson, 2006) used to stage the aggregation of contact persons and consumers united by the same passion. The advantages derived from these kinds of community strategies for the brands are said to be significant (Atkin, 2004), leading to greater satisfaction and consumer loyalty, more information, an amplified word-of-mouth effect, etc. It remains that several harbingers have raised fears about the possibility that things could go wrong, damaging contact persons firstly but also consumers as illustrated by the Warhammer case. It had been said that employee-fans are also part-time consumers, with consumer-fans becoming part-time producers (Manolis et al., 2001). This is particularly true in the case of Warhammer, where the connection between contact persons and fans in the community derives from their shared passion rather than some commercial relationship. Clearly, the concept has a basis in traditional commercial transactions, but these are masked by a Warhammer universe and collective environment from which the concept of money has been eliminated. Player-consumers mainly view staff members as ‘fellow fans’. Thus, through a process that some might define as reciprocal compromise, consumers try to look past the commercial aspects of their representations of contact persons whereas the latter are happy to acknowledge consumers’ expertise and competency and recognize the excellence of their output (Kozinets et al., 2004).

Three ethnographic approaches were used during the study of the Warhammer community: quasi-participant observation (participation in community events but not in the games) was undertaken by one of the authors, whose spouse and children have been Warhammer fans for eight years; participant observation with photographs and CD recordings at the annual ‘Games Day’ event that brought 3,500 fans to Stade de France in Paris on 20 April 2008; non-participant observation and non-directive interviews conducted over a period of two years by the other author, working with a group of Warhammer fans who met every Saturday afternoon at the Games Workshop-the company owning Warhammer-store in the author’s city in South France.

With the development of brand community approaches, today’s contact persons are no longer only being asked to fulfill the role of simple employees but also to act as employee-fans (Rémy and Kopel, 2002). In the case of Warhammer, it is difficult for employees to remain great fans of a brand when they see things from the inside. Over the long run, the Pollyanna vision that permeates the Warhammer community, which consists of believing that employees’ participation in Sunday tournaments is a sign of their passion for the brand, is irritating to staff members, who often find it hard to understand consumers’ jealousy because they are working in such fun conditions. They cannot say anything in return, however, since they too are part of the tribe. They have no opportunity to openly criticise their working conditions or wages, since this would be assimilated with treachery or a lack of loyalty that other players would likely have problems understanding. With their dual role as staff members and community members, employees put themselves into a schizophrenic situation. They can no longer disagree with the company without giving off the impression that they are betraying the community and its members.

This problem for staff members should not detract from a second problem, relating to the mood of consumer-fans. Games Workshop solicits consumers-construed as fans—in several ways. They are asked, where need be, to offer an opinion, come up with new ideas or criticize rules. Customers’ opinions, especially when communicated in online chat rooms, enable Games Workshop to improve its products and bring out new items that will solidify fans’ loyalty, especially since the ultimate consumers are the people who actually came up with the idea for the innovations in the first place. However, some consumers harbour serious doubts about Games Workshop’s role, accusing it making exorbitant profits from players. This criticism is embodied in many players’ joke that Games Workshop’s acronym G.W. actually stands for ‘Great Weasel’. This theme is particularly prevalent on-line. Companies that rely heavily on a Consumer Generated Content approach such as Warhammer can ultimately exploit consumers in two ways, since the latter are ready to pay for their cult brands’ products without receiving anything in return for all of the ideas, stories and connections that they produce to enhance the brand’s value (Zwick, Bonsu and Darmody, 2008).

Passion, which is the cornerstone of brand communities, is what brings staff members together with consumers, offering a lever that helps people to get involved and even transcend themselves. This Warhammer case study has stressed how brand communities overcome commercial activities’ traditional barrier between contact persons and consumers (Godbout, 2007). In this way, brand communities encourage a perception of brand value that prioritizes extra-commercial aspects rooted in emotional interactions amongst fans. However, thought must also be given to the negative consequences of this confusion of roles between employees and consumers in brand communities. The porosity featured here is not without risks for employees who overwork to respond to requests from consumer-fans. It also creates a situation where consumers, construed as partners of the company, aspire to be heard (and even remunerated) for any ideas they suggest.

REFERENCES


