Putting the Roots Back in Grassroots: Consumer Activism Through Social Media

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Using netnography we examine consumer activism in an online community which promotes consumer actions to reward corporations for doing something beneficial to society. Specifically we investigate the way members of the virtual community at Carrotmob.org aims to influence change in consumer purchasing efforts. We collected our data through publicly available chatrooms on carrotmob.org's blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other user-generated content media.

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Putting the Roots Back in Grassroots: Consumer Activism through Social Media

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“The existence of united groups of online consumers implies that power is shifting away from marketers and flowing to consumers” (Kozinets 1999:258).

Social movements are activists’ collective efforts to transform the social order (Buechler 2000) often with respect to consumption and marketing (Kozinets and Handlerman 2004) in terms of anti-brands (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006) and other forms of resistance to consumption (Penaloza and Price 1993). Such movements organized to resist various industrial or marketing practices, comprises of the goal, the activists, and their adversary (Melucci 1989; Touraine 1981). While activism traditionally entailed activists meeting and engaging in protests, the Internet has given rise to web-based activism. Vegh (2003) classifies web-based, or web-enhanced, activism into three categories: awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization, and action/reaction. Awareness/Advocacy entail providing contrary information to raise awareness on a given issue, organizing the movement, and engaging in lobbying efforts; Organization/Mobilization may comprise of calling for offline action, and calling for offline action that maybe more effectively conducted through the internet; finally, Action/Reaction involves online attacks on various sites of interest by hackers or “hacktivists” (Vegh 2003).

Social media has facilitated the rise of a new form of activist known as the ‘slactivist.’ While this term is somewhat derisive, it aptly describes consumers who care for social causes but only up to a certain point of engagement and effort. These consumers will sign on-line petitions and join Facebook activist pages but do not have the desire, and/or resources to engage in traditional activism such as protests (Caplan 2009). We contend that Internet activists who influence slactivists to the point that they engage in real-life action ways create win-win situations. The consumers win in terms of garnering psychological well-being thorough their contributions towards societal welfare; the corporations win by being rewarded for their efforts to adopt socially responsible practices; the society at large benefits through these practices; and the activists win through achieving their goals of encouraging corporations to adopt socially responsible practices, thereby planting seeds for industry-wide changes. This win-win situation mirrors the latest AMA definition of marketing perfectly and illustrates the power of consumers in today’s world. In this paper we focus on examining the way consumer activists, interested in forming cooperative relationships with firms, engage with other consumers using social media to influence their typical purchasing behaviors in order to create a win-win situation for all involved parties. Therefore, we explore Carrotmob, an online consumer activists’ movement, which exemplifies cooperative consumer activism and word-of-mouth (WOM) activities facilitated by Internet and social media.

Carrotmob

Carrotmob, focusing upon fostering cooperation between consumers and corporations, are organized in cities across the US and the world. The organization hosts events that entail businesses competing to do the most social good (e.g., increasing energy efficiency, reducing carbon footprints or start recycling). Carrotmob is essentially a viral phenomenon that is spread through consumer word-of-mouth (WOM) through YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and the Carrotmob blog. Consumers register on Carrotmob’s website, (www.carrotmob.org) and organizers send alerts (through email, blog, Twitter and Facebook) when a local store or firm adopts socially responsible practices. Carrotmobbers then mob the business or perform a “buycott” (Friedman 1996) and purchase products that they normally would not buy. In addition to their primary Facebook site with nearly 6,000 members, organizers create a new page for each town in which a mob is organized (e.g., carrotmob NYC, carrotmob Berlin, carrotmob Portland). As the company’s website notes Carrotmob’s master plan and “model is not threatening, not expensive, not time-consuming, not uncomfortable, not ‘radical,’ not confusing, and not negative.” (www.carrotmob.org). Through engaging in friendly competition, the Carrotmob movements for specific locales generate new ideas, urge new cities to participate, and challenge existing movements to continue their efforts.

Method

The authors engage in netnography (Kozinets 2002), otherwise known as online ethnographic research (Maclaran and Catterall 2002) of the Carrotmob website, its blog and affiliated social media pages on Twitter and Facebook and other media coverage of their events. Both authors accessed the above social media cites and made individual field notes of their experiences, thoughts and ideas as they emerged from the member’s interactions and commentaries before any comparisons were made in the analysis stage.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our data analysis illustrates how consumers use social media to transform consumer behavior to reward companies that choose engage in practices that benefit the society at large, for example green efforts focusing on benefiting the environment. We present a model of how contemporary social media drive consumer action through the power of viral marketing where consumer activists target other consumers.

Due to the widespread use of computers and the Internet, online consumer activists have the means to reach a wide range of fellow consumers through listservs, online communities, and even spam e-mails similar to Kozinets et al.’s (2010) The Network Coproduction
Model. However, the present research involves consumer activists, not outside marketers, marketing their own events to other consumers in the network. Consumers in the social media network become one-time participants in the events that generate excitement and, we contend, are of some psychological benefit to the participants. In response, companies who wins a bid for a mob event may promote their business as being “more green” to other consumers at a later stage.

We contend that the ever-rising popularity and access to the internet has given rise to this class of ‘casual’ activists. Thus, the key to effective consumer activism that targets the casual consumer is to propose action, on the consumers’ part, that does not require much effort. In addition, we posit that Carrotmobs essentially entail value co-creation. While consumers may not co-create an actual product, or a service, they contribute to co-creating the firm’s overall value chain proposition through the firm adopting greener practices that, for this consumer segment, adds value to products or services. In the bargain, these consumers change the industry as corporations compete to gain the carrotmobbers’ business realize that consumers are essentially rewarding them for adopting greener practices. This insight may encourage more firms to become green, thus contributing to changing industry practices, as they realize that socially responsible behavior can be profitable.

References

Source 2.0: Reading Source Cues in Online Communities
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“Granted when he is actually playing basketball there maybe scowls on Lebron’s face but darn this is Vogue not Sports Illustrated! He should have been in a great suit.

You also have to keep in mind that Vogue has only had a handful of Black People on their covers in their 100 plus history so when they do it stands out. This is the reason why diversity is needed in the editorial rooms of these magazines that we enjoy so much. If I saw the proofs of those pictures I would have vetoed it right away. And maybe just maybe it wouldn’t kill Vogue and other fashion magazines to try models/actresses of different hues on their covers.

This is about perspective and the acknowledgement that loyal readers of this magazine have different perspective and that should be taken into account.

Vogue you are not alone in this. There’s plenty of blame out there.” (Style.com; March 27, 2008; online participant DectStyle30)

The quotation above is from an online discussion of a controversial Vogue magazine cover that some critics deemed racist and derogatory. African American NBA player Lebron James and supermodel Gisele Bündchen are featured together to promote the magazine’s annual “shape” issue celebrating the human body. The controversy arose when an image was circulated online and in the media that juxtaposed the cover with a WWI propaganda poster for the U.S. Army featuring King Kong and its demsel in distress (see appendix). Claims that the two celebrities had re-enacted the essence of the poster and that the black athlete had been portrayed as a dangerous predator of the white woman brought up heated discussions amongst Internet forums posters. In this paper, we develop theoretical insight