**“Fine Feathers Make Fine Birds” – Community Brands and Branded Communities**

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of branded communities. A qualitative study of Apache, an Open Source software community, revealed that creative communities not only create brands but have become brands themselves. We conclude that we should incorporate branded communities and their members in an extended theory of brands and branding.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumers create brands. With the diffusion of network technologies, consumer innovation and creation is taking on new forms that are radically transforming the nature of consumption and production, branding and meaning creation. This paper elaborates on the notion of many well-recognized scholars that the predominant branding concept needs to catch up with reality and that our current understanding of brands is ripe for review (Holt 2002; Kozinets 2002; Pitt et al. 2006; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004b). Especially in the last decade of the previous century technological innovations, such as the mobile phone, the Internet and social software portals such as Facebook, have fundamentally changed our lifestyles and created opportunities for collaboration, participation in the market system, and sharing (Belk 2010; Giesler 2006; Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau 2008; von Krogh et al. 2008).

Similarly, for brands and branding new opportunities arise. Due to an increasing availability of worldwide communication and production capabilities and a general revival of community and tribes in our postmodern society (Cova 1997; Maffesoli 1996), communities are given the means to create community brands (Füller, Lüdicke, and Jawecki 2007) and become brands in and of themselves that members as well as consumers identify with. Meanwhile, grassroots community activity has taken on institutionalized forms of communal production, such as the Open-source organization and the Apache Foundation, and gradually developed into the realm of marketing and branding.

Linux and Apache are well known examples where community members not only develop their software but also create strong brands (Pitt et al. 2006). Community-driven brands like Apache – comprising the leading open source web server and other software products, or Mozilla with their main sub-brands Firefox, Thunderbird, Sunbird, and many others, are initiated, created, owned, and driven by user communities and not by companies and their marketing departments. Community brands, in general, are gaining momentum. They emerge in a wide range of consumer goods as well. Members of consumer communities, for example interested in gaming, skiing, or beer-brewing create, brand, and market their own products - games, skies, or beer, respectively (Kozinets et al. 2008). Those brands create significant brand value. Recent research in this area has studied the value of community brands as compared to commercial brands (Füller et al. 2007), and how brand community practices create value (Schau, Muniz and Arnould 2009).

However, how communities are creating brands and the value of the community itself is yet to be studied. To this end, we first problematize traditional views of brands and brand creation, and argue that theories of co-creation and customer integration fall short to explain the dynamics of branded communities. Second, we aim to show that communities have taken over important brand functionalities typically fulfilled by brands. By introducing the concept of branded communities we argue that creative communities have become brands in themselves, offering significant meaning for members and non-members alike. Based on our findings, we discuss community brands and branded communities in the context of existing theory and theorize on how community brands may impact markets currently dominated by company brands.

BRANDS AND BRANDING

From proprietary towards open brands

Over the years, brands had transformed from simple markers of identification attached to products to complex social phenomena (Berthon et al. 2007; Mühlbacher et al. 2006). Furthermore, as brands are increasingly perceived as cultural agents that are also expected to give back to the society and fulfill civic obligations (Holt 2002). According to Holt (2002), it is this recurring mismatch between the predominant branding concept and consumer’s expectations which results in an ongoing advancement of brands and branding. It is the inefficiency of the predominant branding paradigm, which creates the necessity for brands and branding to move it one step further. However, consumers according to Holt “are revolutionary only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles.” (Holt 2002, 89). Holt’s view implies that consumers depend on branding efforts of corporations. Only then the advancement of brands and branding under corporate control will continue.

One exception to this is the Open Source (OS) movement. Pitt et al. (2006) argue that, in relation to the Open Source movement, brands and branding are moving towards a fourth and final phase, in which brands will provide the same functions for consumers, but it is unclear which benefits these brands provide for ‘producers’. This does not mean that profit-seeking corporations cannot benefit from OS brands but rather that some of the traditional functions of brands for producers, such as financial incentives, vanish when brands are nonproprietary (Pitt et al. 2006). Indeed, the proliferation of information and communication technologies, together with the re-emergence of new forms of communities (Cova 1997; Maffesoli 1996), challenges the predominant understanding of the roles of corporations in building brand value. For instance, the benefit of reducing consumer’s search costs is challenged by the increasing availability of search technologies. Similarly, the risk of buying the wrong product or brand is reduced by the open access to other consumer’s reviews and ratings. Many of the benefits brands provided in terms of risk reduction and limitation of search costs proved very valuable at a time when communication and sharing was limited. In an open environment, such as the Internet, sources of brand value have changed (Schau et al. 2009).
Active Consumers and the Brand

Recently, the active role of the consumer in the creation process of brand meaning has attracted scholars’ attention. While traditionally the consumer was ascribed a rather passive role, the advantage of integrating the consumer as a co-creator of value has been stressed by several scholars (Payne et al. 2009; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004a; Vargo and Lusch 2004). A recent study shows that „where consumers are given large degrees of freedom to create or co-create with organizers, they feel authenticity, a type of soulfulness and meaning, and they respond with enthusiasm, energy, and action” (Sherry, Kozinets, and Borghini 2007, 30). Today, it is widely accepted that consumers can and often do shape, appropriate, and co-create the meaning of commercial brands (Cova and Pace 2006; Kozinets et al. 2004; Muniz and Schau 2005; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Producers may develop and introduce a brand on the marketplace, but consumers and other stakeholders, then, may modify its meaning in unexpected ways. Consumers may openly denounce brands (Klein 2000), challenge the producer-intended meaning (Kates 2004; Thompson et al. 2006), decide upon legitimate brand ownership (Kirmani, Sood, and Bridges 1999), or even hijack a brand (Muniz and Schau 2005; Wipperfürth 2005).

Despite the influence consumers have on existing brands, an increasing desire among consumers to interact with the market in new ways has been observed (Cova and Rémy 2007; Szemin, Carrigan, and Bekin 2007). Modernity has widely alienated workers from production processes (Slater 1997), workers lost ownership of the products they produced (Bocock 1993). This is a profound detachment of work from workers. Following Marx, the process of production is an important means for self-expression and advancement (Marx, Engels, and Arthur 1970), which led consumers to act out their creativity within their own private domain. New media technology has fundamentally altered consumers’ possibilities to create and has taken much of the constraints of organized, de-enchanted work. Producers’ lack of willingness to give off control and integrate the consumer in the production process resulted in the emergence of new, emancipated consumption communities. These communities have a strong influence on existing brands, as shown above, but more importantly, they can also become active players on the market themselves (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

It is our aim to carve out the specific idiosyncrasies of community brands and branded communities. Communities as developers of brands are a very recent phenomenon which has not yet been studied. Hence, if we are to study the value of those community brands we first need to explore how the community perceives their brand; whether they think of their creations as a brand at all; and how they describe the inner values of the brand of itself and in comparison with other non-community brands. To this end, we researched a prominent and successful ‘creative crowd’, members of the Apache Foundation and its contributor community.

In order to look at the phenomenon from different perspectives, respondents were chosen based on several criteria. Degree of community involvement was the first criterion. While some respondents took over central roles within the community (e.g. President of the ASF), others were only loosely connected to the community through their day-time job. Four of the interviewees have either founded their own company based on Apache products or were working for such a company. Second, we looked at the duration of community involvement. While four of the respondents were members of the initial Apache Group or involved with the software shortly after and thus community members since the very beginning, others could not look back on such a long history of community membership. The status role respondents held in the community was a third criterion. While nine out of the 12 interviewees were members of the Apache Software Foundation, four respondents additionally were members of the Board of Directors, which has the social oversight over the communities’ development. Other roles of respondents included project chairman, documentation contributor, Vice President for conference planning, and simple code commiters (see Table 1 for interviewee profiles).

We used a semi-structured interview guide composed of four parts. Interviewees were first asked to introduce themselves and report about their commitment and current role within the Apache community. In a second part we asked for the respondents’ view of the historical development of the community. The main part of the interview revolved around Apache as a brand; whether community members perceived it as a brand; about the uniqueness of Apache as a brand; their motives to contribute; and the perceived overall meaning of Apache. Finally, we focused on the relationship of the Apache brands with other brands such as Microsoft, as well as possible future developments of the community and the brand.

All interviews took place at the „ApacheCon Europe”, the official conference of the Apache Software Foundation. The conference provided a perfect context to interview prominent community members in their natural setting of discussing strategically important future perspectives of Apache. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and produced a total of 7h and 50 min. of information. We tape-recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The interviews were content-analyzed and interpreted until theoretical saturation (Goulding 2002) was achieved. Typical verbatims were selected to demonstrate our main findings.

FINDINGS

The meaning of the Apache brand

At first sight, the Apache brand does not differ from any commercial brand. In this part of the paper we describe the brand’s social, symbolic, and commercial value and demonstrate that the community itself embodies a great part of the Apache brand value. An important aspect of the brand’s social value is its ability to connect like-minded people, create a sense of community, and provide a platform for exchange as the following statements demonstrate:

“It’s an immediate connection that we have ... So when I meet someone now there is little chance that we actually have commonality on the project we are involved with. But we are part of that larger community and there is an immediate connection.” (Steven)

In this regard Apache is not very different from many commercial brands which also create a sense of community among members, such as for instance Harley Davidson. However, in contrast to many other brand communities, it is not the product which is at the centre of the Apache community. The “community over code” principle
present in the community demonstrates that it is the community and the social relations between members which are valued above everything else; or as the following interviewee put it:

“...there is this slogan that the community is more important than the code. And that's more than a slogan. If there are technical decisions there is a real effort to resolve the community issues before solving the code issues. It's interesting to see these folks putting aside technical issues in favor of interpersonal issues.” (Steven)

In contrast to Apache, many other OS communities did not survive,

“...because they did not put community first. This is where Apache has got it right. They talk about the community ... and then the code. ... That's one reason why Apache survived...” (Peter)

The importance of the community and the social relations between the individual members fits well to Cova (1997)'s notion that the link is more important than the thing, and further corroborates Schau et al.'s (2009) notion of value creation through community practices. In their search of meaningful relationships to others consumers are increasingly looking for brands, which enable them to connect with others and enable them to engage in meaningful activities.

“...there is also a community of experts within the Microsoft community. But I definitely think that we have the upper hand in terms of giving something back to society ... our software can make a difference in life and I believe that is more Apache than it is Microsoft.” (Thomas)

It is evidenced here that the Apache brand has much more to offer than many commercial brands; much more than just functional and hedonic benefits. The Apache brand derives much of its meaning from the motivation to give something back to society and thus find meaning in life. Being a member of the Apache community is not just a personal expression of preferences and social belongingness. The Apache brand can be seen as a lifetime partner, a valuable companion for one’s identity construction and something that is worth living for. This idealistic and ethical notion is hardly found elsewhere.

“...the way the people become members is through peer recognition. You have to contribute for a certain amount of time and then someone might nominate you for membership and as the members we vote on that membership.” (Steven)

Membership has to be earned by excellent contributions and commitment. The only way to become a member is by acceptance of the existing members. During their first involvement with the community, not only their work is under constant review but also their personality to determine whether they fit the community and the so called “Apache Way”.

“But I think what is difficult is to teach the new commiters the ‘Apache Way’, the way you have to behave when you are in a project.” (Chris)

The „Apache Way” does not only guarantee that projects are executed in a specific way but also safeguard the special community culture by teaching new members how to behave. While many commercial brands have to deal with a rather heterogeneous user group and the resulting conflict about who is a legitimate brand owner and who is not, this is different with the Apache brand. As the brand cannot be separated from the individual community member it is essential for the brand that the right people are chosen to represent the brand. The brand is the community, and the individual members are the brand. What the brand stands for is not prescribed but evolves through everyday community interaction, communal practices, and the behavioral patterns of its members.

A series of benefits arise from the member selection process described above. These benefits result from the fact that group membership and thus brand association is not open to everyone, as it is the case with most commercial brands, but rather a number of qualities need to be fulfilled in order to be accepted as a member.

“The other side of the brand is personal branding. The fact that I am a member of the Apache Software Foundation opens lots of doors.” (Bill)

“...they said: ‘You are just a contractor, we do not care what you say! Then I sent an e-mail using my apache.org account and afterwards all the technical guys came to me and said: ‘Oh you work for Apache. You said something yesterday? So it changes perception.” (Chris)

As the above statements demonstrate, being associated with the Apache community does carry a lot of value in the IT area. Community membership can be transformed into individual assets in the workplace and beyond. This strict and extensive process of becoming a community member upholds the high status and prestige associated with Apache. Referring to Simmel (1906), especially in communities with restricted access, membership is perceived as more valuable. The prestige and status associated with membership...
of the Apache community manifest itself in various situations, such as for instance during job interviews.

“... there are stories, like people going to job interviews and mentioning that they are a community member...
It makes the people listen, because it does carry some value.” (Roland)

Just as with commercial brands, members make us of the Apache brand to communicate their identity. However with most commercial brands, use of a specific brand does only provide limited information about the true personality of the brand owner. One might wear designer shoes in order to be perceived as classy or elegant, however the receiver of the message has only limited possibilities to check for the validity of these claims. Due to the members selection process this is somehow different with the Apache brand. The receiver of the message can draw conclusions on the person’s behavior and skills, his sub-cultural background, work ethics and morality. Hence, not only the community brand creates value for its creators and users but also membership in the branded community of Apache, in particular.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper explores the phenomenon of community-created brands using the example of Apache, an open-source software community well known for its expertise in programming and its market-leading web server. Our findings contribute to theory in at least two important ways. First, we were able to show that brand development is not restricted to managerial strategy and action but in reality emerges as a grassroots activity of communities. Contrary to commercial brands, community branding processes naturally evolve as side effect of the communities’ natural, everyday activities. Freely available software can be monetized. Apache’s market share and the amount of sponsorship for Apache demonstrate its market value. Second, voluntary community work pays back in a number of ways, which are beneficial and of enormous value for the community, the individual, and society at large.

In the case of Apache, every community member is able to and actually engages in communicating about the brand and community identity. Every single member becomes a marketer of the Apache brand. As identification with and self-expression through Apache membership is much stronger for community members than for employees of traditional companies, Apache members turn out to be true and credible evangelists of the Apache brand. Additionally, the Apache foundation gives some guidance to members how to communicate, thus ensuring that the values of the Apache community brand are passed on. This stands in stark contrast to profit-oriented companies where usually not all employees consider themselves being ambassadors of their brands. The Apache foundation constitutes a platform where all members actively contribute to the brand. In companies brands are usually crafted and executed by marketing departments, or even outsourced to agencies. The average employee plays a minor role and is often a rather passive stakeholder. Admittedly, brands as Apache are not faced with pricing or distribution issues as the brand is distributed via the Internet and for free. Hence the community concentrates on product development and market communication tasks. Yet, they provide a role model for authentic and sustainable brand buzz and culture as depicted by Holt (2002) and others.

In addition to the unique brand building process, Apache offers an attractive and unique brand meaning and value for its members and non members to identify with. Apache stands for high quality software and a group of very knowledgeable, highly intellectual, self-motivated computer geeks who aim to write the best software. The prestige and status granted from outsiders manifests this position. Community values, such as “community over code”, demonstrate their orientation towards the human element, which is solidly based in community philosophy. The genuine belief in what they are doing, their independence and non-commercial interest considerably enhance credibility and authenticity. As Apache is not following the dominant market logic of increasing revenue and profit it is not forced to run after quantitative growth but rather concentrates on fulfilling user expectations. With community brands consumers are able to escape the branding mill of commercial brands who try to exploit the brand’s value by attracting more and more customers thus diluting the brand’s power as a source of identification for its consumers. Instead, as we have shown above, the Apache brand carefully selects its members and thus determines who is associated with the brand and who represents the brand. On the one hand this increases the value of community membership and on the other hand endows the community with some control over how the brand is perceived. This stands in contrast to many commercial brands, where brand association is largely determined through the market.

Previous research (Schau et al. 2009) already demonstrates that brand community practices create value. However the value created in these communities can almost exclusively be retrieved inside the community and is mostly limited to the consumption of the brand. Our study contributes to research in this area by showing that brand community practices can also create value outside of the community and in contexts not related to consumption situations, for instance on the job market. Due to careful member selection processes, Apache community membership equals a strong ‘employer brand’. Also in traditional brand communities issues evolving around members or brand user selection in the form of brand user legitimacy struggles can be observed (Kirmani et al. 1999). As communities such as Apache do not only provide desired meanings as citizen artists, but also provide consumable products, they may become true alternatives to commercial and profit-oriented organizations, and build a new form of self-organized and volunteer-based organization, not only in terms of product innovation but also in terms of branding.

Recognizing the concept of community-created brands, we can draw several implications. Similar to the concept of community-based and user-based innovation we touch on new community-based marketing approaches that may emerge by trying to leverage the value of community brands. Like open innovation concepts are trying to leverage the creativity and innovative capabilities of users for new product development, open marketing concepts are able to leverage the branding activities of communities. Community brands are much more organic and holistic entities, marketed by the community, by its sponsors and users in a process of constant mutual exchange of economic, financial, social, emotional and intellectual value. Consumers’ ability and capability to do so pose new challenges onto commercial brands in terms of authenticity and customer proximity.

Community brands have radically changed our view of brands and branding. The phenomenon of community brands shows that the concept of brands and branding is not limited to the product domain and that it is much better described as a complex social phenomenon including community membership into a new understanding of contemporary branded communities.

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