Marketer Legitimacy in Participatory Media: Negotiating the Acceptance of Marketing Communication on Reddit

Ella Lillqvist, Aalto University School of Business, Finland
Johanna Moisander, Aalto University School of Business, Finland
A. Fuat Firat, University of Texas – Pan American, US; Aalto University School of Business, Finland

This paper examines how the legitimacy of organizations and their marketing activity is negotiated in a participatory online media environment where marketers and consumers follow different institutional logics concerning unsolicited marketing communication. We develop a model that illustrates how legitimacy is negotiated in interaction and identify grounds for legitimation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Theoretical framework

It is generally well known that consumers are cynical about and have low regard towards marketing and unsolicited marketing communication in particular (Sher 2011; Star 1989; e.g. Wible 2011). Consequently, as consumers are tuning out the intrusive messages, marketers have started to seek new ways of engaging their customers through social media marketing and techniques of what is now discussed as “content marketing” (Content Marketing Institute 2014; Lieb 2012; Rowley 2008). In this paper, we explore how consumers react to and make sense of this new type of marketing communication in participatory online media. Our aim is to advance knowledge of the nature and intricacies of social media as a participatory communication environment and a new context of marketer-consumer interaction.

We apply the theory of organizational legitimacy (Suchman 1995; Weber 1978) from the perspective of communicative (Cornelissen et al. 2015; Ocasio, Loewenstein, and Nigam 2015) and interactionist, “inhabited” institutionalism (Barley 2008; Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Powell and Colyvas 2008) into the domain of social media marketing (cf. Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010; Kozeits et al. 2010; Lyon and Montgomery 2013; Palmer, Simmons, and Mason 2013). We thus view participatory online media as a new institutional environment for marketing practice. They may be characterized as an emerging organizational field: a collection of interacting and interdependent actors and organizations that participate in a common system of meanings, rules and logics (Scott 2014). We develop the concept of marketer legitimacy to shed light on the ways in which consumers and marketers communicatively coproduce dynamic understandings of their relationship and the legitimacy of particular marketing activities.

The focus of our approach is on the “microfoundations” that underlie institutions (cf. e.g. Barley 2008; Powell and Colyvas 2008) and the communicative, socially constructed nature of legitimacy (Cornelissen et al. 2015; Hardy and Maguire 2010; Wooten and Hoffman 2008). Like Hallett and Ventresca (2006), we draw on the literature on symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959), particularly the concept “definition of the situation” which involves a negotiation and agreement as to “whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honored” during that interaction or set of interactions (Goffman 1959, p. 21). Perceptions are jointly produced in each interaction situation, but a trace also carries over to influence future situations, thus eventually producing more generalized patters of legitimacy. Our approach differs from earlier applications of institutionalism and legitimacy within consumer research as we focus more on how legitimacy is negotiated on the micro-level and look at the evaluation of marketer legitimacy in specific interactional situations instead of the overarching legitimacy outcomes for brands (Kates 2004) or industries (Humphreys 2010a, b).

Data

The data for this study was collected using netnography (Kozinets 2010) from Reddit, a participatory media site mainly focused on linking to and discussing content from other sites. The data include field notes from general observation, a contextualized interview and informal discussion with one informant for background information, 17 relevant posts and related discussion threads from various subreddits and sponsored posts, as well as rules and instructions from Reddit wiki, a total of 440 pages.

Analysis

To examine (1) how situations with marketing content are defined, and (2) on what grounds they are legitimized or delegitimized, we conducted micro level discourse analysis (e.g. Alvesson and Karreman 2000; Putnam and Fairhurst 2001), with a focus on evaluative language use which expresses the writer’s appraisal of something as, broadly speaking, good or bad through affect, judgment, and appreciation (Martin 2000, 2004). In addition, this framework includes analysis of graduation, namely how the degree of an evaluation is adjusted (strong/weak).

In an iterative process, we identified first order codes related to evaluations of legitimacy, assembling them into second order themes and finally grouping them into aggregate dimensions. The process was informed by previous theory, corresponding roughly to Martin’s categorization and to Suchman’s (1995) pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy.

Main findings

The findings suggest that the dominant logic of the emerging organizational field discourages marketing efforts. However, the negative affect is not always present. When marketers are found legitimate, the grounds for legitimation include: (1) object-related grounds, i.e. legitimizing aspects of the product or communication (relevance, quality, and convenience), (2) subject-related grounds, namely the acceptability of marketer behavior (honesty, selflessness, and respectfulness), and (3) relational grounds (equal standing, participation, and common ground). A legitimate position may be attained principally on relational grounds, which is more difficult, or on the basis of the two first categories, i.e. substantial grounds. We label three marketer legitimacy outcomes: the roles of “stranger” (illegitimate), “contributor” (legitimate mainly on substantial grounds), and “member” (legitimate mainly on relational grounds). We also discuss the relevance of definitions of situations and earlier experiences and construct a model of the legitimacy negotiation process.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how the legitimacy of marketing communication is jointly negotiated, situation by situation, in a participatory media context. Our situational and fragmented view of legitimacy emphasizes the possibility to be legitimate in one context and not in another. Based on this study, we argue that as marketers join the institutional field on social media, they should be aware of and adapt to the specific logics which provide guidelines for behavior and thus steer perceptions of legitimacy in those fields. We suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to how differences in communication contexts and situations impact on moral, pragmatic, and cognitive bases of legitimacy in online communication.
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