



Say yes to Facebook and get your customers involved! Relationships in a world of social networks



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Abstract This article investigates the role of Facebook in the establishment of relationships between brands and their fans, extending the link between relationship marketing and online consumer behavior. We explore what drives a user to connect with a brand profile on Facebook, to participate and interact with the community, and to share content published by brands on their own personal walls. To understand this relationship, we employed both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. The qualitative study was based on in-depth interviews of online marketing specialists and on a focus group comprised of Facebook users who were brand followers. The quantitative study was based on a structured questionnaire, which gathered responses from 650 Facebook brand followers. Results show that while Facebook users are willing to connect to brands on Facebook, they do not seem to interact or to frequently share brand content themselves. As a consequence, brands must strategize to establish a relationship with their brand profile fans.

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1. How to consolidate the Facebook fan-brand community

Much has changed since February 2004, when Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes, and Eduardo Saverin launched Facebook from their dorm room at Harvard. What was meant to be a digital

directory for Harvard University students—a niche social network—has become an online meeting place that allows people to communicate efficiently with friends, family, and co-workers around the world.

Every day, millions of people share their goings-on by updating their status on Facebook. They impart thoughts and opinions by posting messages to their walls; leave personal notes and comments on those of others; communicate using the chat tool; say “hello” with Pokes; exhibit photos of their trips, parties, or other events; organize football matches with friends via Event Creation; and share

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videos. Facebook is an online network focused on relationships (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011).

In this new era, Facebook ranks as the world's most viewed website, with 972 million regular users in January 2013 (Socialbakers, 2013). One aspect that differentiates Facebook from other networks is the way in which it welcomes businesses, opening the platform to users through applications, penetrating websites via social plug-ins, and transforming itself into a privileged marketing channel enhanced with social ads. Companies have reacted to the emergence of Facebook with enthusiasm, and brand profiles have proliferated accordingly.

These brands strive to create and consolidate fan communities, but it remains unclear whether Facebook's dramatic impact on interpersonal relationships will extend to relationships between brands and their fan communities. The question is: How should brands present themselves to obtain best results via the Facebook platform?

Unlike participants in most virtual worlds, Facebook users—or 'Facebookers'—tend to have profiles that fairly represent their actual personal characteristics and context (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). In general, users of social networks are extroverts who are willing to risk more, and men outnumber women (Underwood, Kerlin, & Farrington-Flint, 2011). Ross et al. (2009) suggest that Facebookers' personality traits are correlated with visit frequency and time of use. Extroverted people have a higher probability of belonging to social groups and communities on Facebook; neurotic, more fearful people tend to use Facebook tools that convey a feeling of greater control, such as posting on their walls. Experienced Facebookers, who are familiar with the platform, spend the most time per day on Facebook. Openness to experience is the personality factor most associated with trying out new methods of communication and using a social network to seek out novel experiences, Facebook included (Butt & Phillips, 2008).

Only 5% to 10% of users produce content on the Web (Ang, 2011). That is, the vast majority prefer to 'show' rather than 'say,' sharing content instead of creating it (Zhao et al., 2008). Nevertheless, Facebook consumers tend to become 'prosumers,' taking over brands in a phenomenon referred to as 'brand-jacking.' A research study by Elliott, Fleming, Reitsma, Martland, and Jaddou (2012) notes that 71% of Internet users under the age of 21 are content creators.

If the general user pattern is true, companies must understand how to increase a user's predisposition toward engaging in social networks; that is, their willingness to participate (WTP). The goal is

to encourage user progress through the following participation levels: viewing, forwarding, commenting, creating, moderating discussions, and judging/mediating conflicts (Parent, Plangger, & Bal, 2011). Companies should co-create by providing a platform that gives a voice to consumers, enabling them to associate in communities of 'swimming pools' (connected to an idea), axes (connected to a leader), or networks (interconnected)—in short, to participate in collaborative marketing via Facebook (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2. Target: The online consumer

With the development of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of e-commerce, a new kind of customer has emerged: the online consumer (Solomon, 2009). This buyer has a different purchase lifecycle and a distinct decision-making profile. Most importantly, the online consumer's decision cycle is shorter than that of the traditional consumer.

Social network users live in a 'statusphere' of constant affirmation based on what they like and do not like—a statusphere created by their participation: pressing a key or a 'like' button, or updating their profile status on the network. The Facebook wall displays this panoply of interactions, representing a showcase of all user activity and network contacts. Because of the diversity of users that frequent Facebook and the freedom that social networks allow, brands must define their target audience more specifically as they determine how they want to be present on social networks.

3. The quest for the click-through: Brand presence in social networks

With so many customers and potential customers participating in social networks, it's hardly surprising that companies are joining the party. A study commissioned by global office solutions provider Regus (2010) revealed that 40% of companies on social networks worldwide use the networks to attract new business, 51% to communicate with contacts, 51% to communicate with customers, and 58% to gather business intelligence.

The influence of the Internet on purchase intention has been growing. A study by InSites Consulting (2011) revealed that in Europe over 50% of social network users are connected to brands, 36% have commented on a brand, 42% dialogued with the brand, 53% reacted to comments from the brand, and 51% consulted information. This suggests that consumers prefer to react to brand updates rather

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