



Factors influencing popularity of branded content in Facebook fan pages

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ABSTRACT

Social media is achieving an increasing importance as a channel for gathering information about products and services. Brands are developing its presence in social networking sites to meet brand awareness, engagement and word of mouth. In this context, the analysis of the factors that are conditioning consumer interaction with branded content becomes a matter of interest. This paper aims to shed light on those factors that are expected to impact on Facebook branded post popularity. A conceptual model is developed to reflect the influence of the content's richness and time frame on the number of comments and likes. An empirical analysis using multiple linear regressions is conducted based on 164 Facebook posts gathered from the fan pages of 5 Spanish travel agencies. Results suggest that the richness of the content (inclusions of images and videos) raises the impact of the post in terms of likes. On the other hand, using images and a proper publication time are significantly influencing the number of comments, whereas the use of links may decrease this metric.

This study empirically contributes to the existing literature on the management of marketing strategies for consumer engagement in social networking sites.

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1 Introduction

Social networking sites (henceforth, SNS) have become very popular and have been increasingly attracting the interest of marketers. They account about 6% of all website visits done and 19% of all time spent online (Radwanick, Lipsman, & Aquino, 2011; Tuten, 2008). Social media is achieving more and more importance as a channel for gathering information about products and services and to take profit of new opportunities (Verhoef & Lemon, 2013).

SNS have stimulated new ways of interacting, shaping new forms in which people communicate, make decisions, socialize, collaborate, learn, entertain themselves, interact with each other or even do their shopping (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Hansen, Schneiderman, & Smith, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Consequently, the study of social media and its effects on consumers and organizations is increasingly attracting academic attention while it opens new research avenues for strategists and marketers (Bughin & Manyika, 2009; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Fischer & Reuber, 2011; Urban, 2003).

Among others, benefits arising from a well-designed social media marketing strategy may materialize in a better grasp of consumers' behaviors and preferences, making consumers share the brand's message as word of mouth to their peers, connecting to consumer for improvement and R&D processes, increasing brand engagement and brand message exposure, as well as driving traffic to corporate websites (Hettler, 2010; Smith & Zook, 2011; Tuten, 2008).

People are gradually shifting their trust to recommendations and experiences from other consumers. SNS allow users to publish and interchange opinions and experiences about brands and their products and services. Several studies confirm the influence of this user generated content on purchase intention, and that this influence applies for different kinds of products and services (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dhar & Chang, 2009; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Rehmani & Khan, 2011; Sierra Sánchez, 2012; Ye, Law, & Gu, 2009).

This behavior, known under the term of word-of-mouth (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007; Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Moldovan, Goldenberg, & Chattopadhyay, 2011; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009), contrasts with more traditional marketing communications and seems to be gaining importance with the rise of Web 2.0. Social media marketing should be oriented first, to understand clients; second, to create custom-made online content; and third, to define a fitting strategy in a way that strengthens the reputation of the brand (Hettler, 2010; Heymann-Reder, 2011; Kilian

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& Langner, 2010). It is therefore a matter of interest to know which characteristics should have this online content in order to be spread by consumers without any enforcement or cost, just because people like to share the content to their peers in a fashionable but direct and personalized atmosphere (Agresta & Bough, 2011; Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Fournier & Avery, 2011; Hettler, 2010).

Content is the instrument that stimulates interaction. Brands must publish pieces of content trying to address customers' motivations delivering interesting content for them when and where needed. Successful content is adopted by customers, adding value by sharing it and producing derivative or original content that spreads through peer-to-peer interactions. Thus, content reaches popularity, thanks to those customers who positively interact with it, contributing to its spreading and becoming brand advocates who can influence purchase decisions of others. Postmodern consumers bring the challenge of addressing these incentives individually and collectively (Sashi, 2012; Scott, 2007; Simmons, 2008; Smith & Zook, 2011).

Within Facebook, dissemination of branded content or posts can be achieved through several mechanisms. Users who are fans of the brand will see in their walls this branded content, and then they can interact with it by liking, sharing or commenting. Each of these actions potentially promotes the content to all the customer's friends' walls. Consequently friends of fans can also contribute to exponentially disseminate this content.

Like most SNS, Facebook allows brands to create profiles and interact with users. Fan pages are brand oriented profiles that provide additional functionalities like detailed analytics and better content and fans administration. Facebook characteristics "provide unique and interesting conditions for investigating the interaction of multiple selves and the incorporation of brands in consumer self-expression" (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012, p. 396). From brands point of view and according to the classification of Dholakia, Bagozzi, and Pearo (2004), Facebook combines characteristics of small-group communities, based on pre-existing offline relationships, with those of network-based communities where a member without pre-existing relationships connects around the brand through its fan page. As members of a brand community, participation incentives are based on personal benefits. Nevertheless, fans can also act as brand evangelists spreading branded content through their friends' network where motivations to interact came from social benefits. This double affiliation, to personal and brand communities, is essential to understand word-of-mouth and the paths through which the branded content reach popularity and spreads virally.

Online social communities are identified as one of the key new media phenomena (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010) with research implications for the successful management of customer interactions. Specifically, how can communities be used for brand management and how can a brand acquire virtual consumer friends are some of the research questions that arise. Based on this rationale, the analysis of the characteristics that makes branded content popular as well as the study of those factors that are conditioning consumer interaction become a matter of interest for firms, in order to address their marketing efforts in social media in the correct direction.

Accordingly, this work contributes to extend the knowledge on those characteristics that make branded content popular by identifying how richness and time frame of content publication influence customers' interaction. Moreover, Agresta and Bough (2011) state that there is no simple formula that guides on how to publish in social media due to diversity of brands' goals and sectorial characteristics. Consequently, we focus our analysis on the Spanish travel agencies sector by carrying out an empirical study of the posts published by five Spanish travel agencies on their Facebook fan pages and the users' interaction with them.

We find that the inclusions of images and videos raise the impact of the post in terms of likes. Likewise, images and publication time are significantly influencing the number of comments, whereas the use of links decreases this metric. These results draw implications applicable for companies' social media marketing activities which are interesting for academics as well as for practitioners.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the sample and the methodological approach. Empirical results are offered in Section 4. The discussion of the results and their managerial implications together with the limitations of this study and potential research avenues are displayed in Section 5. The paper ends with the main conclusions summarized in Section 6.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Drivers for brand post popularity

According to Singh, Jain, and Kankanhalli (2011) there are no theoretical frameworks available yet that could be used to analyze why and how users contribute to social media. Yet, giving a simple formula that guides on how to publish in social media is not possible due to the particular circumstances of each brand and because of the very distinct set of goals and possibilities every business has (Agresta & Bough, 2011).

In this study we categorize content attributes of SNS according to a simple classification: whether they are qualitative, based on semantic analysis (soft criterion), or whether they are hints that are proved in a quantitative and empirical way (hard criterion).

The soft criterion considers the semantics and the interpretation of the message behind a post. Both Scott (2007) and Sterne (2010) argue that before publishing in SNS businesses should adopt a consumer's perspective and publish only those posts that really provide value-added information for the reader. The works of Heymann-Reder (2011) and Hettler (2010) corroborate this statement. In their respective studies they found that those posts revealing funny things of the working environment, news affecting the business or information that may report direct economic benefits to the reader are more prone to capture user's attention. These findings indicate that post category has a significant effect over the user interaction and, as such, should be used for planning of the communications strategy (aDigital, 2011; Pletikosa Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2011).

The main problem of the soft criterion is the difficulty in capturing and processing relevant data for analysis. On the one hand, soft criterion requires a careful content analysis of texts, images or videos. On the other hand, this analysis can be stigmatized as subjective, as it may be difficult to properly discriminate between those publications that contribute to enhance the brand, from those that are damaging it. This leads to a very meticulous analysis which, if made manually, is very tedious and time-consuming.

Elements of SNS that can be quantified without the need of a subjective interpretation process can be considered under the hard criterion. By this approach, it is possible to compute the frequency and timing a phenomenon takes place. Likewise, it allows assessing the richness of the content associated to a post, by simply looking at the content type that complements the text (i.e. a picture, a video or a link to another website). These quantitative factors are also characteristics of the published content, but are more easily to capture and process than the former ones. Thus, given the resource constraints in the collection and processing of data, for the purpose of this study, we have only focused on those characteristics of posts that respond to the hard criterion. Accordingly, we aim to identify those structural features of posts that act as drivers for brand post popularity. The next section presents the theoretical framework used and the hypotheses that will be tested.

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