



Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement



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ABSTRACT

The growing power of bloggers to influence their connected network has emerged as a new communication venue for brands. This study elaborates upon the role of bloggers in brand communication, and reveals how brands can engage with bloggers, currently considered as online opinion leaders, from the perspective of the two-step flow theory. Following clarification of the aims of the study, we report on in-depth interviews with 17 brand and digital agency representatives, selected because they regard communication with bloggers as an important strategy in increasing the influence of their brands among online communities. This exploratory study reflects current blogger communication implementations, and concludes with a discussion of seven major issues arising from the literature review and interviews (definition of bloggers, blogger selection criteria, digital integration, power of bloggers, long-term relationship building with bloggers, measurement, and budgetary issues in blogger communication). These areas represent relatively unexplored areas of blogger engagement from both an academic and managerial perspective. Based on the findings of the interviews, we propose a model which traces the influencer role of bloggers from the two-step flow theory perspective. This model is named as the brand communication through digital influencers model.

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1. Introduction

Companies considering the Internet as a strategic communication tool have also recognized the power of influential members of this platform, i.e. bloggers, who frequently share their brand experiences on a regular basis. These digital influencers have an effect on the members of particular communities gathered around similar interests. According to the two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), certain people recognized as *opinion leaders* interpret media information they receive and then pass it to others, thus increasing its influence. In other words, mass media messages may not always affect the public directly; as the two-step flow theory states, opinion leaders mediate the transmission of information. Bloggers can be considered as digital influencers, similar to the offline opinion leaders considered in two-step flow theory. These influencers can mediate messages and affect communities in the digital environment, where messages can be disseminated rapidly and easily with a potentially viral effect. Consequently, it is essential for brands to

engage with bloggers, online influencers, in order to attain authentic and trustworthy presence among online communities.

Social media, including the blogosphere, is still being explored in both the academic literature, and in terms of its practical implications. The purpose of this exploratory study is to reveal how brands can engage with bloggers, now considered as the online opinion leaders due to their knowledge, expertise and concealed influential power. To this aim, the present study combines a literature review based on research into two-step flow theory, and also into the power of bloggers, enriched with in-depth interviews with the brand and agency representatives responsible for implementing blogger communication programs. The results are expected to shed light on how brands can strengthen relationships with customers through support of these digital influencers. To address the influential role of bloggers and peer-interaction, and elaborate the traditional two-step flow of communication, this study proposes a new model, the *brand communication through digital influencers model*.

2. Theoretical background

Recent advances in communication technologies make the Internet important not only for individuals, who have gained the opportunity to share their opinions and emotions, but also for brand

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managers seeking to interact and engage with online communities. The ease of creating, publishing and sharing content with those with similar interests has had a definite effect on the nature of message dissemination. This effect requires reinterpretation of related theories of information flow and influence. According to the two-step flow communication theory developed by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), rather than having a general and direct effect, messages disseminated by mass media are filtered by opinion leaders, who decode messages and mediate the transmission of information through many group interactions. The theory claims that interpersonal communication is more powerful in affecting attitudes of individuals compared to mass media (Weimann, 1994).

The main focus of the two-step flow of communication is *opinion leaders* who act as intermediaries in the web of social interactions. As McQuail and Windahl (1993, p. 63) point out, communication involves individuals: “Those who are active in receiving and passing on ideas from the media, and those who mainly rely on other personal contacts as their guides”. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955, p. 3) define opinion leaders as “the individuals who were likely to influence other persons in their immediate environment”. Opinion leaders are characterized as the individuals, with a wide set of personal connections, who play a key influential role (Weimann, 1994) and who are considered as both source and guide (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) indicate that the significance of opinion leaders relies not on formal power or prestige, but instead on their ability to serve “as the connective communication tissue that alert their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices” (329).

Katz (1957) defines the dimensions of opinion leaders based on three common characteristics and behaviors: “personification of certain values (who one is); competence (what one knows); and strategic social location (whom one knows)” (73). The first dimension relates to the traits and values of opinion leaders. Competence expresses opinion leaders’ level of expertise on certain subjects, and finally, social location concerns the size of their network, and particularly, the number who value their leadership in the particular area of expertise.

Until the last decade, the majority of related studies deemed face-to-face contact and personal interaction dominated by physical proximity as a necessity for the presence of opinion leadership. However, with the current technological developments, face-to-face communication is no longer the sole determinant of the personal interaction; instead online communities inextricably connected through the Internet, rather than in geographical space (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006). In addition to conventional forms of opinion leadership, therefore the existence of online opinion leaders, identified as bloggers in this study, is increasingly acknowledged.

2.1. The digital influencers of two-step flow theory: bloggers

It is possible to observe in current bloggers that stated characteristics of traditional opinion leaders, such as openness to messages, and taking the role of discussant, and influential and valued among social contacts. Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith (2011, p. 23) highlight the importance of bloggers as “potentially powerful makers and breakers of brands, political candidates, and news stories”. They also have the ability to provide current and advanced information to consumers (Hsu & Tsou, 2011). As Nisbet and Kotcher (2009, p. 341) state, bloggers “are more digitally embedded than other Internet users”. Similarly, Lyons and Henderson (2005, p. 319) indicate that bloggers possess “higher levels of enduring involvement, innovativeness, exploratory behavior, self-perceived knowledge, and more expertise with the product category”.

Bloggers’ innovativeness can be explained in terms of the diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 1962) which proposes that

an innovation is diffused through certain communication channels among different individuals over time. The adopters of an innovation are categorized into four groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards by Rogers (1962). According to the diffusion of innovation model (Rogers, 2003), opinion leaders are the early adopters of an innovation in products or services, and are influential in spreading the negative or positive ideas among other adopters. Tomaszeski (2006) suggests that opinion leaders are more information savvy and more aware of the latest developments, and thus more willing to consume media content. Not surprisingly, the emergence of new digital technologies has affected the model of early adopters of diffusion of innovation, and led to the emergence of digital influencers who can disseminate messages in on-line environments. Keeping pace with innovations and following technologies is not only a personal characteristic but a necessity for bloggers, from two dimensions: Firstly, it is important to interact with external environments (i.e. other social software) such as Flickr, YouTube, LinkedIn to ensure integration of the blog with these platforms and utilize their developments (Kim, 2008). Consequently, following these innovative communication tools (Kavanaugh et al., 2006) facilitate connecting, interacting and spreading the message to the larger body gathered around shared interests. Secondly, bloggers’ openness to sharing innovations and latest developments is essential for keeping followers interested and entertained, and thus for increasing bloggers’ status (Gruhl, Guha, Liben-Nowell, & Tomkins, 2004). From the marketing communications perspective, as an early adopter, a blogger, can take on a key role in providing opportunities particularly for launching new products or introducing an existing product to a new market, making bloggers the new force in the two-step flow of communication, as applied to digital opinion leaders.

Social media provides a sharing platform with its tools, such as social networks, forums, e-mails, and blogosphere. The shared views, experiences and opinions of online users are electronic type of word-of-mouths (eWOMs) (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Filieri & McLeay, 2014) which are more trusted compared to other corporate messages, since these messages directly communicate what are perceived to be consumers’ own experiences (Wu & Wang, 2011). Digital influencers have wider reach via Facebook, Twitter, and blogs among their online social contacts, compared to traditional face-to-face opinion leaders (Lyons & Henderson, 2005), while social media have also facilitated access to the opinion leaders themselves. In addition, the convenience, wide availability, and minimal cost of social media have simplified the process of contact. One of the most effective tools for extending the influence of opinion leaders are *blogs*, which offer greater levels of social interaction and conversational content (Kavanaugh et al., 2006).

2.2. Leveraging blogger engagement for brands

In today’s highly competitive business environment, in which consumer loyalty is essential in relationship-building (Kumar, Kee, & Charles, 2010), the concept of engagement becomes of great of interest. Rappaport (2007, p. 138) identifies two key aspects: “the high relevance of brands to consumers, and the development of an emotional connection between consumers and brands”. Scholars conceptualize consumer engagement through various notions, such as cognitive and affective commitment (Mollen & Wilson, 2010), participation and connection (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012), interactions (Stringer, 2006), broadened relationship (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011), co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and involvement. All these scholars agree that consumer engagement generates behavioral and/or attitudinal results. Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 925), who examine the notion of engagement from the point of online consumer experience, argue that engagement necessitates interactivity, that “is an

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