



Crowdsourcing and brand control

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Abstract Crowdsourcing is the deliberate use of crowds to solve problems, create new products, and improve consumer experiences. When used by brands, crowdsourcing engages consumers by asking them to be part of a deliberate call to action. Crowdsourcing provides interesting and dynamic marketing opportunities for brands, given the consumer engagement it entails. This conceptual study examines the literature on crowdsourcing and brand community, and makes a series of propositions regarding this rich marketing arena. Herein, we discuss managerial implications of the relationship between crowdsourcing and brand community dynamics and propose a typology for brands to better assess customer bases and market realities.

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1. Crowdsourcing: Gaining traction

A phenomenon relatively new to management and marketing, crowdsourcing is gaining increased attention in both the practitioner and academic communities (Boudreau & Lakhani, 2013; Hossain & Kauranen, 2015; PotatoPro, 2015). Although the concept of sourcing ideas and feedback from the public has been around for centuries (DesignCrowd, 2016), the term crowdsourcing has only existed for a decade. Introduced by Howe (2006, p. 1), *crowdsourcing* is defined as “the act of a company or institution taking a function once performed

by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call.” The strategic applications of crowdsourcing in recent years have been broad and varied, including idea generation, microtasking, open-source software, public participation, citizen science, citizen journalism, and wikis (Hossain & Kauranen, 2015).

There are many recent examples of firms employing crowdsourcing to generate user feedback and create marketing concepts. One such example is Frito-Lay's Do Us a Flavor campaign, designed to crowdsource new potato chip flavor ideas from customers. A number of top vote-getting concepts were put into trial production by Lay's for public testing and feedback. Launching the campaign as a contest with a \$1 million prize for the creator of the

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winning flavor, Lay's has accumulated feedback via its online platform from over 14 million individual customers since 2013 (PotatoPro, 2015). By crowdsourcing product development, Lay's concurrently engaged customers in a normally secretive process and gathered critical market research at a fraction of the traditional cost. And by choosing the winning potato chip flavor based on public votes, Lay's not only gathered market data beyond what was generated through the original crowdsourcing project, but also essentially guaranteed a successful product launch.

Crowdsourcing can be a powerful tool for brands because of its ability to empower brand communities. Allowing brand communities to make decisions that influence image and product offerings in a controlled and planned way can have powerfully positive effects, as did the Do Us a Flavor campaign. Crowdsourcing is a fount of mutual benefit for firms and consumers: Users receive benefits in the form of economic reward, social recognition, self-esteem, and/or the development of a skill, and the crowdsourcing firm benefits from the advantage of what the user has brought to the table in terms of the activity initially proposed (Estellés-Arolas & González-Ladron-de-Guevara, 2012). And yet, by definition, the firm's ability to control crowdsourcing activities is limited. Once a crowdsourcing campaign has been released to the public, the firm has little ability to rein it back in should the project take a negative turn. This reality is magnified by information sharing on social media and online platforms, where even a small number of negative contributions can drastically alter the conversation about a brand. Consider the 2012 McDonald's Twitter hashtag campaign, #McDStories, designed to share information about the restaurant chain's suppliers and to allow customers to share their own McDonald's stories publically. Unfortunately, the hashtag was hijacked quickly via tongue-in-cheek messages about disease, food poisoning, weight gain, injuries, and questionable supply chains (Lubin, 2012). Having no control over the public domain of Twitter, all McDonald's brand managers could hope for was a quick end to the trending topic.

Rising interest in crowdsourcing among practitioners and academicians alike suggests a growing belief that crowdsourcing can be used as a strategic tool to extend and expand brand value. Crowdsourcing can strengthen or cultivate a brand community. The ability of a firm to engage consumers in activities previously reserved for the firm's internal marketing team has contributed to crowdsourcing's popularity among consumers; thus, its growing popularity in the business community. In this article, we elaborate on

the motivations of consumers who engage in crowdsourcing and, subsequently, the most effective means of employing crowdsourcing strategies vis-à-vis the strength of a firm's brand community and openness to ceding control of brand communications. This article's objective is to highlight the best conditions for firms to be successful when engaging in crowdsourcing activities.

We begin with a brief overview of the extant knowledge and theories about crowdsourcing, brand communities, and consumer involvement, with a particular focus on the role of social media. We present a theoretical model to highlight and offer managerial insights for four different possible conditions under which crowdsourcing may be utilized, factoring both brand community strength and the firm's desired degree of brand control. Finally, this model is extended to consider the creative abilities of crowds within brand communities.

2. Crowdsourcing and the crowd

Historically, a crowd has been described as a self-organized group of people who come together for a common purpose (Prpić, Shukla, Kietzmann, & McCarthy, 2015). This common purpose is often focused around a specific goal or event, after which the group disperses (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). Crowds act as change agents that can be perceived as either positive or negative (Prpić et al., 2015). Often, the unifying purpose of the crowd determines the valence of that crowd's meaning. For example, group activities such as competing, creating a video collectively, organizing rallies, or petitioning or boycotting organizations would be seen as positive crowd manifestations (Kozinets et al., 2008; Prpić et al., 2015). Conversely, mobs and riots are crowds that can be seen in a negative light (Prpić et al., 2015). As crowdsourcing has gained traction in business, the power, influence, and impact of the crowd has been seen as a positive force for corporations (Kozinets et al., 2008; Prpić et al., 2015). The purpose of crowdsourcing is to harness the collective knowledge, value, and creativity of a group of people.

As stated, crowdsourcing was originally defined as "taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call" (Howe, 2006, p. 1). The idea behind the original definition of crowdsourcing was that organizations could learn a great deal from non-professionals and consumers in order to improve products and offerings. Ideally, the collective knowledge of the group

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