



# Employee brand engagement on social media: Managing optimism and commonality

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## KEYWORDS

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Social media analytics;  
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**Abstract** This article considers how employees engage with B2B firms on social media, a topic that is largely overlooked in the extant brand engagement literature. Using the results from a large-scale study of employee brand engagement on social media, two key drivers of employee brand engagement are identified using the content analysis tool DICTION—namely, optimism and commonality. Employees of top-ranked and -rated firms express higher levels of optimism and commonality in their reviews of their employers on social media than do their counterparts in bottom-ranked and -rated firms. This permits the construction of a  $2 \times 2$  matrix that allows managers to diagnose strategies for increasing or improving employee brand engagement. This creates four different kinds of employee brand engagement situations, and offers human resources and marketing managers different strategies in each case. We demonstrate how practitioners and scholars can shed new light on the way stakeholders engage with brands.

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## 1. Increasing a brand's value

In the recent marketing literature, there has been a significant amount of attention dedicated to the concept of *brand engagement*, the process of how emotional or rational attachments are formed between

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customers or other stakeholders and brands (e.g., Baldus, Voorhees, & Calantone, 2015; Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Brodie, Ilić, Jurić, & Hollebeek, 2013; de Villiers, 2015; Graffigna & Gambetti, 2015; Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Brand engagement is an important concept in the marketing literature as it is strongly connected to brand equity or, put simply, the value of the brand. As articulated by Keller (2012), brand equity is often driven by a consumer's association with a brand's features and attributes and the ultimate engagement with the brand.

Brand engagement itself has also changed significantly in the recent past largely due to the advent of social media. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre (2011, p. 241) described social media as mobile and web-based technologies that “create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content.” Some of the best-known social media include the social networking platform Facebook, the micro-blogging website Twitter, and the video-sharing website YouTube, but also comprise more specialized social media platforms. These include the travel and hospitality platform TripAdvisor, the picture-sharing platform Instagram, and the ephemeral content-sharing platform Snapchat. Social media platforms with a more professional slant include the peer-to-peer platform LinkedIn, and the job description and evaluation site Glassdoor.com. Users can interact and share personal information with not only other users on these social media in a variety of ways, but also with the brands with which they choose to engage (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

After reviewing the extant research and managerial literature with regard to brand engagement on social media, two trends emerge. First, customers—rather than other stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, and investors—are overwhelmingly the focus. Second, the brand engagement literature has concentrated consumers—or the customers of business-to-consumer (B2C) firms—rather than the industrial and organizational customers of business-to-business (B2B) firms or their stakeholders. Scholars have just started to explore both customer (CE) and employee engagement (EE) and how they affect firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016) in both B2C and B2B firms. In this article, we recognize the importance of employees as stakeholders who engage with their employer brands on social media. When employees are positively engaged with their employee brands on social media and this engagement is well managed, there are many benefits to an organization's customers, its employees, and to the organization itself.

When employees are negatively engaged with their employee brands on social media, or when this engagement is poorly managed, the consequences can be severe for the organization's customers, its employees, and indeed for all other stakeholders.

The objective of this article is to help managers understand employee brand engagement on social media in order to maximize the returns of positive brand engagement and to minimize its potential risks and negative outcomes. We start by providing a framework for those who manage employee brand engagement on social media to use in diagnosing its nature, taking steps to enhance and maintain engagement when it is positive and to mitigate and take corrective action when it is negative. Based on the results of a large study of employee brand engagement on social media, we identify two key dimensions of engagement—optimism and commonality—that we use to construct a simple but powerful  $2 \times 2$  matrix that facilitates the diagnosis and identification of actions. We explain the tool's purpose, as well as identify its limitations. We conclude the article by speculating on how brand engagement by employees on social media might evolve in the future.

## 2. Brand engagement by employees

Firms have long sought to engage target customers with their brands; these efforts have ranged from simple promotions to more complex strategies such as the exploitation of brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Schau, Muñoz, & Arnould, 2009). The advent of social media has furthered customer engagement with brands in many ways. Some of this has been intentional, driven by the strategies of organizations in the form of online communities on social media platforms such as fan pages on Facebook and YouTube channels (see Paschen, Pitt, Kietzmann, Dabirian, & Farshid, 2017 for a number of examples). In other cases, customers rather than firms have driven much of the customer engagement with brands. They post videos, share content and offer both positive and negative commentary on the brands they both love and hate (see, for example, Muñoz & Schau, 2005). Conversations about brands happen all the time, online and offline, without the explicit permission—or even awareness—of those in charge of managing the brands (Dabirian, Kietzmann, & Diba, 2017). For brand managers, this poses significant challenges.

Passikoff (2013) expressed this problem of defining and managing brand engagement: awareness of a brand does not equate to engagement with that

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