The structure of online marketing communication channels

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Abstract

Online marketing communications are moving toward interactions between individual recipients and consumers rather than being directed from a marketing organization to masses of consumers. It is now possible for an individual to be just as efficient in broadcasting information, both positive and negative, about an organization as it is for a large corporation to promote itself. The social networking that allows the quick and easy dissemination of information and mis-information is in part a product of changes in online communication channels, but these communication channels are in part enabled by such social networking. From a marketing perspective, we are at a pioneering stage in understanding how these work. This article suggests an infrastructure that could be useful in studying how online communication channels are emerging and how they might evolve in the future. The elements of this infrastructure are core/technological, competitive/commercial, political/regulatory, and social.

Keywords: online marketing, integrated marketing communications (IMC), word of mouth promotion (WOM), viral marketing, social networking, diffusion of innovations

Introduction

With the emergence of new communication channels via the Internet, we have seen an emergence of new ways that marketing promotions can be launched and new ways that marketing attacks can be initiated. As a U.S. presidential candidate, Barack Obama began using "viral marketing" techniques early in his campaign for the 2008 elections through extensive use of Internet social networking (Tumulty, 2007). Obama's Democratic party opponent, Hilary Clinton, was the victim of a damaging *chain email* campaign, in which she is falsely identified as having an involvement with the defense of Black Panther members accused of tortuous murders (Snopes, 2005).

There is little scholarly literature or guidance on this topic in part because it is so new. Our current concepts and models in the marketing discipline were formulated around promotional media, modes of service delivery, ethical considerations, and such that were common before the Internet existed. Our thoughts on integrated marketing communications (IMC) and corporate reputation management are based on tactics such as traditional press releases to paper news media, whether that be to promote a new product or to react to a negative event such as an oil spill. Traditional marketing models aren't especially helpful in formulating corporate communication strategies in an era when a competitor or a single disgruntled customer can post negative comments on websites that become indexed on search engines, or when a competing politician reaches a younger demographic of campaign donors via non-traditional online media.

Of interest in this article is the observation of emerging issues in marketing communications, in light of an integrative model of diffusion. Our hope is that this model can help us in the future to better understand how emerging communication channels are enabled and manipulated. Scholarly inquiry into new online marketing tactics has perhaps been inhibited because diffusion models in marketing are concerned with how consumers adopt new kinds of physical products, and these models don't lend themselves very well to understanding how people adopt new methods of communication and how marketers can adapt to those new methods of communication.

Emerging Issues

Integrated Marketing Communications

The concept of integrated marketing communications, or IMC, is relatively new. The general idea – albeit with a lack of any standard definition – is that there are a wide array of methods, media, and channels for communicating with those outside of an organization, and that an organization needs to coordinate and centralize these activities over the long term in order to be effective. By the mid-1990s, IMC was being described as an emerging concept and field, but one with a lack of any generally accepted definition or process (cf., Beard, 1996; Hutton, 1996; Phelps and Johnson, 1996; Schultz and Kitchen, 1997). Schultz and Kitchen noted that prior to an unpublished 1991 study, there was little discussion or description of what has now come to be called IMC, and the term was considered to be a mere buzzword by many (Beard, 1996). Importantly, the Schultz and Kitchen (1997) survey of advertising practitioners found no widespread agreement on defining what constitutes IMC. Although IMC is a term that is now common in marketing management textbooks, it is a concept that still lacks a commonly

accepted theoretical framework (Kim, Han, and Schultz, 2004).

The problem that we have been having in understanding IMC as a process appears to result from a limited mind-set that both marketing academicians and marketing practitioners have placed upon themselves (cf., Hartley and Pickton, 1999). In devising marketing strategies, marketers tend to think compartmentally about functions that an organization can control, known as the "marketing mix": product design, pricing, distribution of the product, and promotion of the product and organization. The "promotion" element of that marketing mix is further compartmentalized into the "promotion mix" elements of advertising (e.g., a newspaper ad), publicity (e.g., a press release), personal selling (e.g., interactive communication between two humans), and sales promotion (e.g., a short term purchase incentive such as a cents-off coupon).

Lacking this compartmentalized way of thinking, some non-marketing people and organizations have been able to quickly adapt to newly evolving promotion tactics that do not fit neatly into these distinctly separated categories and processes. A group of Austrian monks obtained a recording contract with Universal Music to sing Gregorian chants as a result of a YouTube clip (BBC News, 2008). Unsigned bands - struggling musicians without a recording contract and often without an agent - have been using the social networking website MySpace to profile themselves, leading MySpace to start a new service that promises to allow these artists to sell music downloads, concert tickets, and merchandise through their profile pages (Veiga, 2008). College student chapters associated with the U.S. presidential campaign of Barack Obama were trained by Facebook co-creator Chris Hughes to use the social networking website for outreach (Hefling, 2008). Online video clips and profiles on social networking websites and social media have enabled a form of marketing that doesn't fit neatly into the more compartmentalized methods of promotion via an advertising agency or personal selling efforts of an agent.

Social Networking

The emergence and popularity of *social networking* websites and *social media* has made it just as easy for an individual to communicate in real time with thousands of total strangers as with a single close friend. Social networking websites have also been a great equalizer, making it just as easy for an individual to build or break a marketing brand as for a large corporation -- as well as making it easy for a large corporation to mimic a sincere "grassroots" individual who lacks corporate motives. A social networking website is defined here as "one that allows internet users the ability to add user-generated content such as: comments, feedback, ratings, or their own dedicated pages" (iProspect, 2007, p. 3). Websites such as epinions.com, for example, allow product users to post ratings, comments, opinions, and full reviews about products. Wikipedia.com makes it possible for anyone to edit information about an organization or person, enabling a view that is not necessarily the official whitewashed company version.

Importantly, social networking websites have made it easy for anyone to *spoof* a person or organization with a fake profile and fake messages with the objective of causing harm to the other party. Roncalli High School Dean of Students Tim Puntarelli sued Facebook, alleging that someone else had set up a fake profile of him and was posting "pictures and messages inappropriate for a dean of students to send to a student" (Associated Press, 2008). Facebook refused to provide the identity of the person who created the fake profile without a court order (Catholic News Agency, 2008). After the assassination of Pakistani former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, news reporters were eager to obtain information and quotes from family members. Some news agencies printed quotes about Islam from what they presumed to be her

son's Facebook profile. Had the profile not been quickly discovered to be fake, the inflammatory quotes could have had serious political implications (Maderazo, 2008).

Social networking websites also allow anonymous attacks on the character of named persons or organizations. When an attorney working for Cisco, a computer networking business, anonymously posted comments on a blog about a patent attorney, a civil lawsuit alleging libel and slander was filed. The patent attorney had been on the opposing side of a patent lawsuit. The Cisco attorney allegedly accused the patent attorney, another attorney, and a federal clerk of conspiring to alter a document, and he claims to having made the blog post with the knowledge and approval of his supervisor. He ultimately admitted his true identity after someone traced his Internet address and threatened to expose him (LaRowe, 2008).

The damage to the reputation of the recipient of such an attack can be long lasting if such posts are indexed and never deleted, yet the risk and the financial and reputation cost to the anonymous party making them is nearly nil. The results of such attacks could also be long lasting even if removed. Two students in a Quebec school deliberately provoked a teacher, secretly video taped the result of the teacher's encounter with one of them, and then posted the video on YouTube to embarrass the teacher. The young students were temporarily suspended and the video was removed YouTube. The teacher with 32 years of experience, however, was so embarrassed that he didn't immediately return work (CBC, 2006).

Diffusion Through Communication Channels

The adoption of new methods of communication – MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Epinions, personal blogs and websites, online message boards, and such – have enabled marketers to reach new markets in ways that are very different from traditional advertising channels. These sorts of communication channels have also enabled competitors and detractors to launch attacks that simply aren't possible through traditional marketing channels. For example, political candidates can start blogs or websites to express positive personal opinions of themselves or negative opinions of others, and these positive and negative statements now become part of the indexing on search engines. The ability to quickly reach deeply into a target audience wasn't possible before these Web based applications; the ability to reach a target audience at any speed without the substantial cost of advertising or without the media gatekeepers who could pass or block publicity attempts has only been possible since these Web based applications have been available.

Interest in this article is in suggesting the components that enable newer forms of online communication. In order to do this, we need to look at the concept of *diffusion of innovations*. Everett Rogers, perhaps the most well-known person associated with this concept, defines the diffusion process as an innovation which is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system (Rogers, 1976). Rogers was originally looking at issues such as how rumors spread in rural settings, and this most certainly seems to be a reasonable approach to understanding the spread of information or misinformation via newer technologies such as chain email, blogs, or social networking websites.

The present authors propose, however, that we have to expand a bit on Rogers' diffusion idea by adding additional infrastructures to the more singular notion of a social communication channel. To understand how marketing communications happen on the Internet, we have to expand on the idea of a social communication network by looking at factors that enable that social network to exist in the first place. In adapting Rogers' idea to the diffusion of new

products, Gatignon and Robertson (1985) proposed that in addition to Rogers' basic elements of communication channels, time, and a social system, we need to also consider the role of marketing and competitive actions.

That is, in order for spaces such as Facebook, Epinions, or personal blogs to exist, there has to be some sort of commercial role for these. Without some sort of financial incentive, nobody would offer hosting services for personal websites at prices that individual hobbyists are willing to bear. Without some sort of commercial and/or competitive incentive, nobody would have enough motivation to run an extensive social networking system of the sort that is required to maintain applications such as Facebook or MySpace.

Additionally, there absolutely must be the technological infrastructure on which such new social systems ride. Before the Internet, servers, networking protocols, Web browsers, user-friendly blogging applications, and such, the communication channels that are discussed herein were not available. Gaining greater exposure to online communication channels can require little more than acquiring physical resources. One common way to thwart a marketing competitor's ability to communicate is to block or damage those physical resources, as in a denial of service attack.

The remainder of the article focuses on the infrastructures that would appear to enable the diffusion of online communication channels. The hope is that we can gain a better understanding of how to manage an organization's integrated marketing communications (IMC) by understanding what can be enabled by these basic infrastructures rather than by sorting through every month's new online marketing tactic or by thumbing through a marketing management textbook that is based on traditional media and traditional ways of thinking.

Infrastructures That Enable (or Inhibit) Online Communication Channels

Core / Technological Infrastructure

Marketing attacks aimed at online communications are typically discussed with a focus on the core/technological infrastructure. Core/technological infrastructure refers to the interconnected computers, servers, routers, switches, and cables that make the Internet work. Exploits of an online networking system are often made with the intention of gaining access to internal information through system probes and scans, root and account compromise, packet sniffing, and malicious programs (NIAC, 2004). Exploits can also be made, however, with the intention to disrupt or harm an organization's marketing efforts. For example, when the Colorado Rockies baseball team launched online-only sales of World Series tickets, it immediately received an attack of 8.5 million "hits," forcing it to halt sales efforts within the first two hours with few tickets sold (Sports Illustrated, 2007).

While the technological infrastructure of a marketing communication channel can be deliberately disrupted, many other kinds of marketing promotions and attacks on marketing campaigns that involve social systems are possible. In order to understand this, one needs to consider that the diffusion of, or acceptance of, the communication channels that can be used relies on more than just the core infrastructure of hardware and cables.

Competitive / Commercial Infrastructure

The presence of a core/technological infrastructure is not sufficient for a technology to diffuse; a commercial/competitive sort of infrastructure must also exist (cf., Frambach, 1993; Gatignon & Robertson, 1985; Robertson & Gatignon, 1986). Access to cyberspace resources

and services relies in large part on the existence of a competitive/commercial infrastructure. Core resources obviously have to be available, but competitors also must have some motivation to attempt to compete for a limited pool of resources (e.g., domain names, the bid prices of pay-per-click keywords) or to disrupt access to core resources (e.g., denial of service attacks on servers; click fraud which depletes a budget intended for funding legitimate advertising clickthroughs).

This competitive element creates demand and creates "scarce resources" that cause the continued existence of communication channels. When Ron Gonzalas began running for mayor of San Jose, CA, he found that the domain name Gonzalas2002.com had already been registered to someone who had similarly registered future dates with the names of mayoral candidates in other large US cities as well as the names of US senators. Someone else registered San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown's name on multiple domains as a way to drive traffic to content that was unfavorable to the mayor (Learmonth, 1999). Part of the value of a domain name bearing the name of a person or organization is that it is either an easy first guess or is easy to remember for people who want to find that entity; domain names have become a limited resource that is valuable for communications associated with a particular person or organization.

Given what has been learned about anticipated uses for scarce resources in the domain name squatting examples above, the current rapid diffusion of social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn should have marketers building a presence on these places before a competitor (which could be any detractor) consumes them. If a political figure fails to maintain a profile on MySpace, for example, then someone else will squat that space as a spoof of the political figure, holding control over what information or mis-information is posted. Even still, a person or organization risks being spoofed on additional profiles posted by others and risks being mocked or mis-quoted on others' profiles (cf., Keen, 2006).

Political / Regulatory Infrastructure

Without some sort of universal regulation, vulnerabilities to attack on individuals and organizations will exist: the lack of regulation could cause adoption by "legitimate" users to be sluggish while encouraging negative forces to pioneer new uses. A US teen committed suicide in 2006 after allegedly receiving messages from a MySpace user she thought was a 16-year-old boy. The fake profile and messages were apparently created, however, by a former friend's mother. The problem in this case is that there is a lack of legislation that deals with the creation of fake profiles and with the damage that this can cause; prosecutors had difficulty in finding an existing statute that could be used to pursue a criminal case (Glover and Huffstutter, 2008). An engineer in Morocco was sentenced to three years in jail after creating a fake profile of the king's brother on Facebook. Activists are using the case to highlight their beliefs of "deteriorating freedom of expression" in Morocco; no matter the actions of the person in this case, additional fake profiles of the prince have since been set up from overseas where the Moroccan courts have no jurisdiction (MacFarquhar, 2008).

Globally, we are still at a pioneering stage with regard to such issues. A political/regulatory infrastructure is necessary to provide control over the usage of scarce resources and to ensure the maintenance of a fair playing field for all competitors on the other infrastructures. The core/technological infrastructures of the Internet and of the World Wide Web are still relatively young, so industry self-regulation and government regulation is still lacking. Additionally, the Internet easily crosses country boundaries, so regulation on a worldwide level provides new challenges; regulation on a worldwide level, however, would

seem to be implementable (cf., Grove et al., 2000).

<u>Social Infrastructure</u>
　　　　None of the above infrastructures matter unless people use the product, concept, or idea. The Internet was limited to government and educational institutions until the above infrastructures enabled household users to start using it, but it still saw limited use until commercial businesses and household consumers started to use it. From a marketer's perspective, the Internet and the World Wide Web were not especially useful until consumers started using the WWW as a means of communication. Initial promotional communication was through exposure via traditional advertising – seeing a company website, seeing brand names and product information via banner advertising, and such.
　　　　The WWW has enabled many new forms of communication through social networking in recent years. This has enabled marketers to make practical use of "viral marketing," "buzz marketing," "guerilla marketing," and other forms of "word of mouth" marketing that rely on social networking. The concept of *viral marketing* was apparently added as a term of art to the vocabulary of marketers by former Harvard Business School professor Jeffrey Rayport in a 1996 article. According to Rayport (2007), the general idea of viral marketing is to "let the behaviors of the target community carry the message."
　　　　Marketers have long used "word of mouth" (WOM) promotion campaigns. The idea is to get people to pass information about a product to other people. For example, Sony Ericsson Mobile Communications is said to have taken WOM to the extreme of "guerilla marketing" by paying actors to be "fake tourists" who ask unsuspecting people passing by to take a picture with a newly launched camera phone and to engage these folks in a conversation (Commercial Alert, 2005). Similarly, Sony promoted its Play Station Portable via what appeared to be graffiti, paying building owners to use space for the campaign, while Nokia used sidewalk chalk drawings to promote a cell phone targeted to gamers (Musgrove, 2005). The idea in these kinds of WOM campaigns is to reach segments of consumers who distrust paid advertising by creating the illusion that the message comes from someone who is like the message recipient.
　　　　By the time Professor Rayport discussed the concept of viral marketing in 1996, the Web had by now made it possible to use WOM in a way that could penetrate a nation or the entire world in hours rather than years. The "fake tourist" example was as slow as a personal selling campaign, whereby a single "fake tourist" could socially interact with only one person or small group of people at a time. The graffiti campaign, while affecting larger groups at a time, was restricted geographically to people who passed by particular buildings in a way that is no different from purchasing billboard space. Diffusing a promotion through these communication channels could take years to reach a nation; the same techniques might take only days or even hours to reach the same number of people through newer online channels.

Concluding Remarks

　　　　Integrated Marketing Communications is an idea that would appear to be useful to marketers, but we haven't yet figured out just what all it should encompass and just what is the process that leads to IMC. This is now further complicated by the recent moves away from static promotions that are directed from an organization toward a group toward tactics that rely on a message being communicated among members of a target audience in an online social network. This article has proposed that as this is being sorted out, focus needs to be on more than just any

particular online social network and on more than just particular evolving social media or online tactics.

Although new social media have become available in recent years, the continuance of these media in current forms and the diffusion of these into common use by an entire society is not guaranteed. In many instances of applications that have been evolving, we are still at a pioneering stage such that there are many negative or ethically-questionable uses being made. The present article has proposed that the evolution of social media and communication channels for marketing uses depends on a set of underlying infrastructures: a core/technological infrastructure, a competitive/commercial infrastructure, a political/regulatory infrastructure, and a social infrastructure. These act to enable or inhibit the diffusion of any new social media or marketing tactics. In order for a marketer to understand how these media or tactics might change, evolve, or become useful, concern for changes in these infrastructures is more important than simply looking at the media or tactics themselves.

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