

Brand network communities: Leveraging brand relationships within the supply-chain

Matthew A. Hawkins¹

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Abstract Forming and managing a brand community is now a common marketing strategy for brands looking to increase consumer commitment and financial performance. Despite the advantages of having a strong brand community, brand community management is traditionally directed toward the consumer or end-user. The purpose of this paper is to argue brand communities can and should be formed within a brand's entire network or supply-chain. Brand network community marketing is a user-centric marketing perspective. It purposefully encourages and supports the formation of brand communities with brand users regardless of their location within the supply-chain. In order to develop a brand community within a brand's network, four activities to focus on are offered. The article concludes by discussing the implications of this work and offering avenues for future research.

Keywords Brand community · Brand network community · Supply-chain · Marketing strategy · Branding

Introduction

Forming and managing a brand community is now a common marketing strategy for brands looking to increase consumer commitment and financial performance (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). A brand

community is a group of brand users who share an affinity for a brand and form social relations among each other due to this affinity. Managers are embracing brand communities because they provide a wide range of benefits, such as assisting in brand promotion (Marzocchi et al. 2013) and product development (von Hippel 2005). Despite the advantages of having a strong brand community, brand community management is traditionally directed toward the consumer or end-user.

The purpose of this paper is to argue brand communities can and should be formed within a brand's entire network or supply-chain. Drawing from extant research on brand communities, managerial suggestions on managing brand communities within a brand network are offered. Brand network community (BNC) marketing goes beyond recognizing and addressing network members' or stakeholders' needs to purposefully encouraging the formation of a community within the supply-chain who share an affinity with the brand. For example, Google supports social relationships among their app suppliers by encouraging the formation of Google Developer Groups, while Avon holds multiple conferences a year to facilitate social link formation and improve brand commitment among their distributors. These companies recognize that user communities provide them with opportunities to extract knowledge from their network members while strengthening their network members' relationship with the brand, thereby improving brand performance.

It is argued that the growth of consumer culture theory (CCT, Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007) has come at the expense of understanding the culture around other brand network actors, such as suppliers, distributors, financial advisors, and retailers. Perhaps, financial advisers view brand ownership as a resource to project social status (Hong et al. 2004) despite the stock's relative poor financial performance. Developing a corpus comparable to consumer

✉ Matthew A. Hawkins
matthew.hawkins@icn-artem.com;
<http://www.icn-artem.com/en/professeur/hawkins-matthew-a>

¹ ICN Business School, CEREFIGE, University of Lorraine, 86 rue du Sergent Blandan, 54003 Nancy, France



culture theory, in areas such as financial advisor culture theory, retailer culture theory, and supplier culture theory can greatly expand our understanding of consumption and how firms provide value. Considering the entire brand network, there are more brand interactions by non-end-users than end-users offering a host of rich, untapped contexts to advance consumption focused theories as well as marketing strategies.

The next section introduces brand communities and then develops the BNC marketing strategy. The article concludes by discussing the implications of this work and offering avenues for future research.

Brand community

Schouten and McAlexander's (1995) work on subcultures of consumption laid the foundation for the development of the brand community marketing strategy. Their work recognized that consumers who share similar consumption habits often develop similar understandings and a shared ethos. This is due in part from engaging in similar consumption experiences and thus experiencing similar events. When consumers with shared consumption interests interact, social relationships are likely to form further supporting the development of similar understandings or world views (Goulding et al. 2013; Lave and Wenger 1991). Building on the subculture of consumption literature, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) discovered that a specific brand may serve as the focal point between group members. Accordingly, brand communities are collections of brand users who share an affinity for a brand. Additionally, as community members, they "exhibit three traditional markers of community: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility" (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 412). This is different than subculture members who focus efforts on engaging in and accruing capital within the subculture's status system (Canniford 2011; Thomas et al. 2013). The importance placed on the brand by brand community members attracts marketers for a few reasons.

Strong brand communities improve financial performance through multiple avenues. For instance, being a community member can forestall consumer abandonment and provide a safeguard against service failures (Voorhees et al. 2009). This is because the community member feels as if they are in a relationship with the brand (Algesheimer et al. 2005) which they want to continue and are more willing to forgive the brand for a mistake. Brand community members tend to have higher repurchasing rates than non-members because they use the product more frequently and are good targets for upselling (McAlexander et al. 2002; Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder 2011). Community members are also known to promote the brand

more than non-community members, both through positive word-of-mouth and by wearing clothes displaying the brand's logo (Marzocchi et al. 2013; Schau et al. 2009). Accordingly, marketers have been particularly interested in developing and supporting brand communities.

Since brand community members strongly identify with the brand, they are more likely to engage in helpful behaviors (Ahearne et al. 2005; Mael and Ashforth 1992). Thus, they can be called upon to assist in brand message promotion (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Muñiz and Schau 2005) and help with innovation and product development (Schau et al. 2009; von Hippel 2005). Lego is one notable brand that has found success in leveraging their brand community to develop new products (Hatch and Schultz 2010; Antorini et al. 2012). Overall, forming a strong brand community benefits a brand in terms of consumer retention and profit maximization (Algesheimer et al. 2005).

However, developing brand communities has traditionally been seen as a consumer-centric branding strategy (McAlexander et al. 2002; Schau et al. 2009). One reason for this is the brand community concept grew out of subcultures of consumption research which is seen as an early research stream within the consumption culture theory literature (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Accordingly, the consumer tends to take a center role within this research. Two, Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) seminal article introduced brand communities by discussing how three different brands facilitate social interaction among consumers. Thus, developing brand communities has traditionally been seen as a branding strategy for consumers as its early conceptualization grew out of consumer focused research.

Restricting brand communities to consumers is preventing brands from fully taking advantage of positive community outcomes, such as high brand identification and promotion rates as well as members' willingness to contribute to product development and message distribution. Moreover, organizations are being urged to be open and transparent with their network members (Payne et al. 2009; Pitt et al. 2006) and to extract and exploit knowledge residing within and across their network or supply-chain (Orlikowski 2002; Wenger 2000). Accordingly, brands should consider forming brand communities with brand users within their network and not just with consumers.

Brand network community marketing

Brand network community (BNC) marketing is a user-centric marketing perspective. It purposefully encourages and supports the formation of brand communities with brand users regardless of their location within the supply-chain. In essence, BNC marketing asserts that all brand users have the potential to develop an affinity with the



brand and social relations with like-minded brand users. For example, retailers of a specific brand could form a community based on their similar brand usage experiences despite the fact they are not brand end-users.

As an example, Avon, a cosmetics company with a direct-selling distribution strategy, focuses considerable efforts on building up a sense of community among their independent distributors. They hold contests and multiple events throughout the year to bring their distributors together. Similar to Jeep Jamborees (McAlexander et al. 2002), these events are more than brand advertising events rather they provide opportunities for brand users to develop social relationships and share a common experience. Just like Harley Davidson rallies, event attendance can become community rituals in themselves, further strengthening the communal bonds among brand users. Accordingly, brand users within the supply-chain can be targeted to form brand communities.

BNC development

Community development is promoted by sharing and holding similar understandings and world views generated through enacting similar practices and engaging in social interaction (Brown and Duguid 1998, 2001; Brown et al. 2005). Then, recognizing some type of positive value can be derived from being in relations with like-minded individuals a social bond can form, exhibiting the three community characteristics (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Wenger 2000; Wenger and Snyder 2000). Thus, in developing a brand community it is important that members feel a sense of belonging and that being a member is meaningful (Thomas et al. 2013). This section offers managerial suggestions to grow and manage brand communities within a brand's network.

Interaction and events

Social interaction presents opportunities for interpersonal bonds to form. Through repeated interaction, individuals not only share stories about their common interests but they also create stories (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Moreover, once individuals group together around a shared interest, they often undertake efforts to preserve, protect, and promote the shared interest (Ewing et al. 2013; Muñiz and Schau 2007). Brands can organize events or gatherings to bring together brand users to facilitate social interaction and the formation of social relationships (McAlexander et al. 2002; Wenger 2000).

Google organizes numerous events, from conferences and tech talks to hackathons that bring their developers together in hopes of strengthening relationships among

developers and with the Google brand.¹ Similarly, Android users can meet fellow developers and engineers at the AnDevCon annual conference.² Through these events app suppliers begin to develop a sense of belonging with other app suppliers for their respective brands. Accordingly, Google and Android appear to be taking the necessary steps to form brand communities within their brand network.

Projects and rituals

Communities need a sense of purpose, something to focus their efforts on (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 2000). Projects can provide purpose to community members. For instance, Leigh et al. (2006) show that restoring MG cars provides a shared project across individuals. This project then provides the motivation to engage in social interaction with others, to share knowledge, and to demonstrate accomplishments to others who value their work (Orr 1996). These projects can become ritualistic and repeated at regular intervals. Again, ritual enactment provides a task for individuals to engage in and demonstrate commonality between them (O'Sullivan et al. 2011). They can improve their ritual performance, they can share knowledge on how to enact the ritual, and they have relations with others who care about and are interested in the ritual. Accordingly, brands are encouraged to provide projects and develop rituals for network members to facilitate community formation (Schau et al. 2009).

Network members that produce outcomes, such as app developers can be encouraged to focus on improving the outcome. This can result in improved quality and integration of the outcome into the supply-chain. Firms implementing TQM and just-in-time procedures may find improved supply-chain efficiency by developing a brand community with suppliers, for instance. Rituals can also be developed and promoted within the supply-chain to provide a shared experience and a project to focus on. For example, product launches are becoming more frequent, especially in the fashion industry where designers are launching multiple collections throughout the year. Treating product launches as a ritualistic opportunity to engage with a brand can help create a project for supply-chain members. Even invoicing or quarterly meetings can be viewed as shared rituals with supply-chain members. Accordingly, brands should look for opportunities to seed rituals to focus network members' efforts as a way to facilitate the formation of a brand community within the brand network.

¹ To learn more, visit <https://developers.google.com/groups/>.

² To learn more, visit <http://www.andevcon.com/>.



Leadership and hierarchy

Groups based on shared interests and a common project produce social structures. In fact, as a group becomes established positioning oneself within the community can serve as a project in itself. Members can focus their efforts on acquiring and demonstrating knowledge within a specific domain of the group (Schau et al. 2009). For example, MG car owners can focus on learning the brand's history or they can focus on mechanical aspects of the car, such as how to rebuild the engine (Leigh et al. 2006). Community membership also provides opportunities for members to demonstrate leadership skills by organizing events themselves (Thomas et al. 2013). One of Thomas et al. (2013) informants enjoyed running so much that they began organize running events for others, for instance. Accordingly, communities with a social hierarchy offer members opportunities to deeply engage in the community and accrual social capital, thereby strengthening their bonds to the brand.

Schau et al. (2009) found that communities that allow for distinctions between community members can increase brand use value. For example, recognizing certain brand experiences as milestones can provide distinctions between members and motivate deeper engagement. Brands can recognize suppliers who provide a certain number of defect free units over a specified period of time as well as recognize retailers who sell a certain number of units over the same time period. Brands can also recognize manufactures for reaching a high number of accident free work days. These types of programs introduce heterogeneity within social relationship offering positive, brand supporting projects for network members to engage in thereby making community membership meaningful (Thomas et al. 2013).

History and stories

A shared history helps to provide individuals with a shared understanding and sense of belonging and group stability (Bechky 2003). A shared history also indicates prior social interactions and offers potential sources of community knowledge that members can use to differentiate themselves from others (Leigh et al. 2006; O'Sullivan et al. 2011). Community history is communicated through storytelling (Orr 1996). Stories take many forms, from spoken to written and sung to drawn or performed. The act of storytelling is one mechanism in which individuals differentiate themselves, accrual social capital, and position themselves within the community's hierarchy.

Brands can use their brand story to spur community development, but overtime the brand community's history should take precedent. This is because brand identification precedes community identification (Algesheimer et al.

2005) but stories should transition to being based on shared experiences otherwise individuals may only develop an affinity with the brand and not social relationships among other brand users. Muñiz and Schau (2005, p. 739) offer five types of stories found with the Apple Newton brand community: "(1) tales of persecution, (2) tales of faith being rewarded, (3) survival tales, (4) tales of miraculous recovery, and (5) tales of resurrection." Their work, in particular, suggests that brands can leverage down times by framing them as a result of persecution or negative behavior by others. Then, recovery periods or times of success can be framed as a survival tale, for instance. These types of stories may be effective for brand communities composed of financial backers and investors. This is because changes in financial standing can be particularly emotional or stressful for them, potentially priming them for a type of religious conversion.

Implications and contributions

This work argues that brand community marketing should become brand-user-centric and not solely consumer-centric. What was once thought of as a consumer-brand-consumer phenomenon (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001) can be expanded to a user-brand-user phenomenon. Brand community membership provides numerous benefits to both brands and members. Community members have high repurchasing rates and promote the brand to others. They are also good targets for upselling and introducing new products. For the consumer, community membership provides a sense of belonging and a social sphere to engage in social capital games and achieve recognition for accomplishments.

In order to develop a brand community within a brand's network, four areas of focus were offered. One, brands should encourage social interaction among network members; perhaps organizing events to encourage interaction. Two, brands should provide projects and rituals for network members to increase the meaningfulness of organizing. Three, brands should support the formation of a social structure within the community and ensure leadership opportunities are present. Four, brands should promote the community's history through storytelling.

One implication from this work is the recognition that additional work is needed to investigating and theorizing on the social patterns and rituals exhibited throughout the supply-chain or brand network. Perhaps consumer culture theory work can be opened up to include all network members, such as suppliers and retailers. Cultural studies investigate the socio-historical and cultural meanings of objects and behaviors across contexts and marketplaces (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007). As an example, in



terms of a supplier culture, Uzzi (1996) discovered that social relationships among suppliers and buyers impact purchase timing along with asset co-investing. Buyers appear to participate in a unique form of gift-giving, where buyers gift suppliers an early purchase order to provide work to the supplier during down times. Understanding rituals within supply-chain interactions can improve coordination and firm performance as well as provide theoretical contributions to gift-giving theory, for instance. Accordingly, consumption culture theorists are encouraged to investigate supply-chain contexts.

Future work can also build on Schau et al. (2009) in two ways. One, their study identified a set of practices that provide value to brand community members. Replicating their study with non-end-user brand community members can shed additional light on brand value and community dynamics. For example, it was suggested that brands can develop a type of contest around the number of accident free days of its suppliers. Suppliers can then be given awards or symbolic badges based on the number of days. However, Schau et al. (2009) along with Wenger (2000) suggest that communities need to grow and recruit members. This practice deserves further consideration as a brand network community may want to grow within brand network member firms rather than evangelizing and recruiting new firms into a brand's network. This is because these new community members may become sources of competition. Accordingly, understanding how to balance growth versus encouraging competition within a brand network community is one way future work can build on prior work.

Two, Schau et al. (2009) join a growing call for additional research on seeding practices in both consumer and organizational research (i.e., Feldman and Worline 2011). Brand network community management offers a fruitful context to explore seeding practices. Perhaps coupling the desired practice to a social hierarchy game can motivate brand network members to implement the new practice. For instance, a new invoicing procedure can be communicated through a story that references a past change that was faithfully adapted and led to a reward, such as increased financial performance. In this way, the community's history is drawn upon to encourage adoption. Or perhaps, through implementing a cultural study and gaining a better understanding of a BNC's social hierarchy new practices can be presented or modified to limit disturbances to the existing social status games being played within the community. This can then limit resistance to the change.

Overall, the brand network community marketing philosophy extends brand community marketing and, to some extent, relationship marketing into the brand's network communications. It shifts conceptualizing brand relationships as existing across brand users not just end-users or consumers. The work offers four broad areas in which

brand managers can focus their attention on to encourage the formation of brand communities within their network. Accordingly, cultural researchers are encouraged to dive into the supply-chain to deepen our understandings of brand value, test theoretical understandings, and offer additional brand network community marketing strategies.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Matthew A. Hawkins is an assistant professor of marketing at ICN Business School and member of the CEREFIGE research center. His research focuses on brand meaning and how to insert products into consumers' activity processes. His research has been presented at numerous international conferences, including AMA, CCTC, and AIB. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, *Management Decision*, and *Journal of Organizational Change Management*.



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