Unleashing Corporate Communications: Social Media And Conversations With Customers

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Recommended Citation
http://aisel.aisnet.org/ukais2014/51

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Abstract

This paper reports on a small-scale study that explores the impact of social media adoption and use on corporate communications and brand image. The research is carried out in two phases; analysis of brand communications via social media; and a small-scale survey with social media managers. We draw upon Habermas’ theory of communicative action (the ideal speech situation and discourse ethics) in our analysis. The paper concludes that while some companies and public organisations are beginning to understand the importance of ‘real’ conversations with customers, only a small number have adopted the “human brand” approach. We identify limitations of this study and areas for further work.

Keywords: Corporate Communications, Social Media, Digital Marketing, Brand Management, Twitter, Human Brand.

1.0 Introduction

At the turn of the century when online shopping was a new phenomenon consumer groups believed that this new channel or ‘newconomy’ (Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009) would even out the power balance and level the playing field, redistributing power between businesses and customers (Moynagh and Worsley, 2006: Fournier and Avery
For many years this remained a myth (McLean, 2008). Websites were used as virtual static shop windows to deliver the corporate line. The only way to communicate with the company was via the ‘contact us’ menu and an email address. The response to an email was invariably from a corporate script delivering the business line and rarely addressing the individual's specific question or concern. The playing field did not level; the power balance did not change.

As review sites and forums began to evolve customers started to gain some notion of power in sharing their views with other customers. However this was often separated from the 'official' company website and could easily be ignored or dismissed as 'a disgruntled customer'. Customers muttered amongst themselves, but large companies took little notice and no action (Bailey, 2005). As new communication platforms developed and businesses became social businesses and began to adopt social media such as blogs and Facebook into their corporate communications strategy the relationship began to change (Argenti, 2011). While this new platform of engagement with customers went some way towards changing the company–customer discourse, communication remained scripted, promotion centric and stopped short at “real” interaction with customers (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Fournier and Avery (2011) make the observation that ‘early attempts to crash the social media party were largely ignored and rebuffed. When marketers jury-rigged their television advertising and posted ads to YouTube and Facebook consumers largely ignored them’.

There have been power shifts away from the marketing machines of corporations as social media has enabled customers, communities, competitors to comment, to like, to share and to upload. Communications about products, brands and services now happens without the permission of the companies in question (Keitzmann et al, 2011). The only certainty is that corporations need to respond and to manage that channel and evidence from the media indicates that there is a proliferation of new job roles in the management of social media for organisations (Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Fournier and Avery 2011). An on-going debate in the media ‘that social media managers should be under 25 years of age is currently (and very aptly) being played out across social media (Clay, 2012). However, one thing most companies agreed on is that they need someone managing their social media communications and in an engaging manner. In recent months there have been notable cases of companies...
engaging with customers in amusing 'real' and unscripted conversations via Twitter such as Waterstones bookshop (@WstonesOxfordSt). This brand has amassed an impressive 63,000 followers on Twitter through the use of regular, amusing, and intelligent tweets that have an immediacy of the now which, if the tweets were authorized from above, would loose that sense of a ‘tête-à-tête’.

‘WaterstonesOxfordSt @WstonesOxfordSt Feb 4
Londoners. We've put together a small selection of books to help you through the HELL that is the tube strike - http://www.waterstones.com/blog/2014/02/tube-strike-reads/ …’

Through the company Twitter account the brand takes on a character and style of communication previously unknown from large conglomerates. For the first time there is a suggestion that corporate scripts are beginning to be discarded.

2.0 Aims of the Study

This study aims to explore the impact of social media on the corporate communications landscape. For the first time it appears that organisations are beginning to go ‘off script’ and have real conversations with customers reminiscent of the marketplaces of the past (Levine et al., 2002). Through analysis of corporate communications via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube we critically analyse the evolution of business to customer interactions. Further, we explore the profiles of social media managers and how much control or freedom they have to communicate with customers via social media. We seek to extend understanding of how new channels of engagement shift the relationship between businesses and customers. We make a contribution to this field in exploring how power and responsibility for corporate communications is becoming more devolved and unscripted. Drawing upon Foucault’s power theory and Habermas’ theory of communicative action (ideal speech situation and discourse ethics) we explore the power dynamic of marketing communications inside and outside the Twenty First Century Corporations. The structure of this short paper is as follows; firstly a review of the literature that surrounds this phenomenon is presented looking both at markets as conversations and social media brand management. As this is a scoping study for a larger project we propose a study design and methodology that has been developed and applied in the
data collection and analysis phase of the study, the appropriateness of the methodology is given. Finally the findings of this study are presented and discussed with future research activities proposed.

3.0 Literature Review

3.1 Markets as Conversations
With the development of the Internet it was recognised that “the new information media (such as the World Wide Web) present many opportunities as a vast forum for direct sales and advertising” (Kozinets, 1999). However, it soon became apparent that consumers did not welcome continuous and invasive direct marketing messages or “Spam”, and the gulf between what customers wanted and what companies provided increased. Corporate, scripted marketing messages are not enough to convince the customer of the value of online marketing. They merely perpetuate the myth of personalisation and enforce the boundaries and power relations between customers and companies. Kozinets (1999) describes this as a “cultural battle” with companies seeking opportunities to use the WWW to sell to “consumers”, and customers “uniting online” to exert social power and find ways of adopting new technologies in meaningful ways. Customers began to build communities, join customer forums and set up product review sites. They began communicating with each other, sharing experiences, amplifying the effects of word of mouth (WOM) marketing. A poor customer experience could now be immediately shared with others far and wide.

It is generally agreed that “technology has its most profound effect when it alters the ways in which people come together and communicate” (Kollock and Smith, 1999), and that those who hold the power dominate the communication channels (Habermas, 1984; Zuboff, 1998). However, at the turn of the century, and with communications technology developing, it was acknowledged that although ‘learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about "listening to customers’. They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf” (Levine et al 2002).
Over the years, consumer research has attempted to shake off the negative associations of the words ‘consumer’ and ‘consumption’, shifting the focus to a new informed and ‘savvy’ consumer interacting with, rather than consuming, products and building up knowledge from their experiences. Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) and Woodruffe (2001) challenge the traditional approach to consumer research, arguing that consumption is not something that people “do to” products, but “an interactive phenomena” (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986) “which involves the experiences accumulating in consumers as they interact with products” (Woodruffe, 2001). Further, Slevin suggests that the Internet “empowers people to make things happen rather than have things happen to them.” (Slevin, 2000). The combination of ‘new’ consumerism, ‘new’ knowledge, and the facilities offered by the Internet suggests the potential for consumers to “effect some new action” or empower themselves. In this paper we argue that such empowerment has remained elusive until recent adoption of social media channels and the new phenomena of the “human brand” having “real” unscripted conversations with customers (Malone and Fiske, 2013).

3.2 Brand Communities and Social Media

It is acknowledged widely that social media has emerged as a game changer for commerce and repositions the customer back at the centre of the organisation, however more importantly it has provided the tools to engage and encourage customers to connect with the brand (Smith and Ze Zook, 2011; Aral et al, 2013). Unexpectedly, this radical overhaul of marketing in organisations shifts the once distinct set of marketing activities into a central strategic role in a rapidly changing marketplace and forces marketers into the boardroom (Smith and Ze Zook, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009). Social media has presented organisations with the unique opportunity of directly connecting them to the end consumer, influencing consumer perceptions and behaviour (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Fournier and Avery 2011). Other benefits that make social media so attractive to organisations are the capacity of increased level of efficiency compared to traditional communications channels, the ability to gather intelligence on digital footfall and ultimately its immense popularity, indicted by Facebook recently claiming its 800 millionth member (Laroche et al 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein 2009). Further analytical details
that organisations are now being presented with are the brand communities (i.e. fan pages, or Twitter profiles) that have emerged via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. A gauge for the significance of these brand communities is Coca-Cola’s global 80 million plus Facebook fans to Oreo’s (the biscuit) 35 million fans (Socialbakers, 2014). Twitter brand communities (not profiles) are dominated by Starbucks with almost 6 million followers and Coca-Cola having 2,335,168 million followers (Socialbakers, 2014). Interestingly it was a ‘fan’ that initiated the first Coca-Cola Facebook fan page, gaining the first 14 million fans, but the issue of brand control was challenged when Facebook introduced a policy change regarding the ownership and management of fan/brand pages. Coca-Cola had little choice but to co-own and manage the page with the founding ‘fan’ or take the page down along with a huge fan base, and so they reluctantly agreed the shared ownership of the page (Fournier and Avery, 2011). There are complex and tenuous relationships between corporations and these brand communities; are they are managed by external stakeholders or in-house employees? What happens as these communities are constructed and cultivated into a popular brand community? Who owns the brand and what happens when the brand community owner goes off corporate script? In 2010 (Fournier and Avery, 2011) MacDonald’s was forced to respond to McRib sandwich Facebook fan community’s antics with a PR press release announcing, ‘There is no connection between MacDonald’s and any of it’s McRib lovers’, removing McDonalds from any legal responsibility but equally damaging to the brand loyalty. Goh et al (2013) argue that though there is a prevalence of research conducted upon consumers and marketers, minimum attention has been focussed upon the simultaneous engagement of consumers and marketers on social media and there is a lack of understanding as to whether and how modes of interpersonal communications matter. This study aims to contribute to this identified gap of research in what is an increasingly complex ‘fuzzy’ space of brands conversing directly with consumers. Given the observed power shift we suggest that it is the consumers who are doing most of the talking.

4.0 Study Design & Methodology

The study was conducted in phases. Phase one focussed upon an analysis of corporate Twitter feeds and interactions with customers via their social media presence
concentrating primarily their Twitter accounts and YouTube channels, including an analysis of conversations and comments on these sites. This paper presents our preliminary analysis of five corporate brand cases that included McVities Jaffa Cakes, Tesco Mobile and Yorkshire Tea’s interaction; SmartCar; Bodyform; Waterstones Manchester; and Surrey Police. As part of our research design we adopted an ethnography in virtual worlds approach that was informed by Boellstorff et al (2012) who argue that this method is studied through a variety of modalities so there is no single measure as collected data is diverse and varied, ranging from field-notes, interviews, participant observation, virtual domains and virtual artefacts. This phase of research was emergent and exploratory as the social media domain is vast, multi-layered and cavernous so an (virtual) ethnographic approach facilitated what was an open-ended inquiry for this study (Hine, 2006). We have, like other academics before us, (Lotan et al, 2011) included social media platforms as part of our research design, in an attempt to extract any evidence of the selected corporate brands going off script. We acknowledge the on-going debate (boyd and Crawford, 2012) with regards to the relevance (Twitter is not representative of all people) and ethical considerations (just because data is in the public domain does not mean the author has given informed consent) of this mode of acquiring data. However, the cases included in this study are from large corporate’s multi-channel marketing activities so are deliberately pushed into the public domain.

In phase two we carried out a small-scale survey of social media managers. Respondents were in-house and agency social media managers from a range of sectors including well known high street retailers. The survey was carried out online, using snowball sampling as those within the industry passed the link to colleagues (usually via Twitter). A deliberate short lifespan for the survey was decided upon, to reflect the effervescent nature of the social media conversations that we were attempting to capture. A reflection offered in conducting this phase was, the survey tool proved ineffectual for targeting the data desired to gain deep insight into those individuals who are brand managers. The reality was that many of the surveys were answered by social media managers who where not necessarily those who held the virtual conversations. Further the brand Twitter account needs to have a large volume of followers to ensure a healthy exchange and lively conversation takes place. Several respondents agreed to take part in follow up interviews and we anticipate that
conversations with these respondents will allow us to gain a much deeper insight into the evolving phenomena of the human band communication.

5.0 Analysis

5.1 Survey Analysis
As indicated above, the response rate was relatively low although participants indicated that they would be prepared to undertake follow up interviews. Given this, the survey responses will be used to develop interview themes for future research. The online survey collected qualitative and quantitative data. Free text responses offered an insight into the role and responsibilities of social media managers and echoed the concept of the human brand; characters with words to say and complex stories to tell. Initial analysis shows that participants were mainly under 30 years old and had worked for their organisations for less than two years. The majority of participants claimed to have sole responsibility for the company’s Facebook, YouTube and Twitter accounts. Although respondents reported that large campaigns were signed off at strategic level, there was evidence of consultation with peers, rather than managers, on day-to-day communications where content may be less “corporate”, for proof reading or to “gauge opinion”.

5.2 Social Media Content Analysis

There are many examples which could be drawn upon; the recent @TescoMobile, @YorkshireTea and @RealJaffaCakes three way twitter conversation involving customers attracted much publicity. Even public bodies such as police forces are beginning to engage in unscripted, humorous, “real” conversations (see Fig 1.), and even brand-to-brand conversations (e.g. Jaffa Cakes and Surrey Police, Fig 1) are not uncommon.
Further examples include the @Johnlewisshare and @johnlewisbear tweets, the John Lewis #findfaith campaign pre Christmas (is Faith real or a publicity campaign construct?), and the twitter conversation between Smart Car and a tweeter who noted "saw a bird had crapped on a Smart Car. Totalled it". This sparked off an 'off script' conversation with @smartcarusa doing the calculations as to how many and what size of bird would be needed to really “total” the Smart Car (see Figure 2). Having real,
entertaining conversations with customers. Not delivering a corporate script; a very effective strategy for brand building and PR.

A very interesting “off script” conversation that went viral was sparked off by the challenge to Bodyform from Richard Neill via Facebook (see Fig. 3).
Hi, as a man I must ask why you have lied to us for all these years. As a child I watched your advertisements with interest as to how at this wonderful time of the month that the female gets to enjoy so many things, I felt a little jealous. I mean bike riding, rollercoasters, dancing, parachuting, why couldn't I get to enjoy this time of joy and ‘blue water’ and wings!! Dam my penis!! Then I got a girlfriend, was so happy and couldn't wait for this joyous adventurous time of the month to happen ....you lied!! There was no joy, no extreme sports, no blue water spilling over wings and no rocking soundtrack oh no no no. Instead I had to fight against every male urge I had to resist screaming woooooooooo bodyform for youuuuuuu as my lady changed from the loving, gentle, normal skin coloured lady to the little girl from the exorcist with added venom and extra 360 degree head spin. Thanks for setting me up for a fall bodyform, you crafty bugger.

Figure 3. Facebook post that inspired Bodyform’s YouTube viral campaign.

Bodyform marketing executives thought fast and worked hard with their marketing agency over a weekend to respond in a timely, engaging and entertaining way. They created a response (to Richard) via Youtube (Bodyform, 2012) that went viral, attracting 2.3 million views, breaking the tacit advertisers code that the “reality” of periods is not made explicit and questioning myths of “femininity”. They spoke what has been “the unspeakable” through traditional marketing channels, enabled and facilitated by social media. SCA, the company that owns the Bodyform brand, reflected that they will:

“be looking very closely at how they engage with social media platforms in future — having managed to pull off the trick of making people laugh and talk publicly about a subject that’s, if not exactly a taboo, then at very least drenched in lashings of sanitised, unreal blue liquid.” (Lomas, 2012)

The examples above have generally all had positive consequences for the company. However, there are cases where the use of social media has had a negative impact. One high profile case was the HMV redundancies announcement and subsequent blow by blow account on Twitter (see Fig 4.) with the implication that the Marketing Director had lost control of corporate communications and didn’t know how to close down the twitter account to prevent further tweets is significant. The company completely lost control. This wasn’t just an ‘off script’ conversation, but a take over by disgruntled employees.
The next section introduces the theoretical framework adopted here, namely Habermas’ theory of communicative action and discourse ethics. A growing number of researchers have used a critical social theoretical lens to examine complex issues within the discipline of Information Systems and especially focusing on the usage, behaviours and power relations associated with collaborative working systems, enterprise systems and email (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Lee, 1994; Lyytinen and Klein, 1985; Cukier et al, 2003; Waring and Wainwright, 2002). These studies have provided an important theoretical contribution in different IS application contexts whilst focusing mostly on an interpretation of Habermas’ core work relating to a substantive theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1984; 1987). In most cases this has been simplified into frameworks utilizing the constructs of ‘validity claims’. An interpretation by Cukier (2003) based on the work of Forester (1983) uses a framework that comprises: truth (the propositional content is true or accurate); sincerity (the speaker is honest and means what (s)he says); clarity (what is said is intelligible and comprehensible) and legitimacy (what the speaker says is right or morally appropriate with regard to existing norms or values). Judgements on the degree that speech acts or utterances meet these validity claims lead to a pragmatic utopian situation for communication termed by Habermas as an ‘ideal speech
situation’. Following criticism of the concept of the ideal speech situation, Habermas (1983) developed the concept into that of the “new moral system” or “discourse ethics” which is more obviously relevant here. The closer to the ideal where all parties in the discourse (whether individuals, groups, organizations, spheres of society or public bodies) can communicate fairly, justly and without fear of prejudice or domination leads to a system that may be considered to be more rational and based on a reflection of norms, values and beliefs which are representative of the participants concerned (corporate communications departments and customers in the case of this study). According to Habermas, distortions of these validity claims can lead to disorder, mistrust and a collapse of the legitimacy of a group, organisational or political system. For the ideal speech situation of an “ethical discourse” to occur the following rules of engagement are necessary:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
2c. Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rules of Engagement for Ethical Discourse</strong></th>
<th><strong>Applied to Corporate Communications Via Social Media</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.</td>
<td>Whoever has access to an SM account (the competence to speak and act) can take part. Commercial organisations, public bodies, celebrities, members of the public, employees, engaging in conversation in previously unknown ways (Sussex Police, HMV employee).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.</td>
<td>Richard’s challenge to Bodyform. Centuries of metaphor to avoid direct reference to “real” bodily functions is challenged and torn away in Richard’s FB assertion and Bodyform’s Youtube response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.</td>
<td>Discourse analysis of Jaffa Cakes – are they really cakes or biscuits pretending to be cakes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2c. Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.</td>
<td>During the John Lewis #findfaith appeal Faith’s parents characters / parenting skills were questioned by tweets – “they seem too strict” “perhaps they should be checked out”.</td>
</tr>
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<td>3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)</td>
<td>Employees with responsibility for social media accounts can express their own attitudes, needs and desires via the brand identity without need for approval. Customer can express attitudes, needs and desires to companies in a very public forum, quickly at any time of day or night through a channel recognised as reducing inhibition and social regulation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Traditional regulation and control of corporate communications (internal coercion) eroding. Cultural or social norms regulating behaviour (external coercion) beginning to be transgressed (Bodyform case, HMV redundancies tweets, Sussex Police humour over drugs haul).</td>
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**Table 1. Illustration of analysis drawing upon Habermas’ ideal speech situation and ethical discourse**

The key characteristics of human era brands include traits such as being open, honest and even flawed, talking and acting like people, and being exciting and empathetic (Chalah, 2014). There are many aspects of social media communications, which do conform to Habermas’ rules of engagement for “ethical discourse”. However it is important to note that customers are not all engaging with social media. Although everyone is, in theory, “allowed” to take part, question any assertion, introduce any assertion and express their attitudes, needs and desires, barriers to digital engagement remain in place (Van Deursen, A. and Van Dijk, 2013). Whilst companies are engaging with customers in a more human and less scripted way via social media, many customers remain “unconnected” and outside of the ethical discourse. The power shift is not ubiquitous. From a different perspective, corporate managers from more traditional backgrounds and less familiar with “new media” can be equally disempowered as in the HMV case considered above.
6.0 Preliminary Conclusions

Interaction with customers in a less scripted way is welcomed and often has a positive effect on brand image. Practitioners are beginning to speak of the “human brand” or of being a “human era brand” (Chahal, 2014). Conversations echo the chat and banter of the marketplaces of the past. On the other hand, employees who control the corporate social media accounts are given more independence and power than corporate communications employees were ever given over traditional marketing communications. Whilst overall campaigns may be defined and agreed at a strategic level (e.g. John Lewis Hare and Bear twitter accounts) day to day fast paced interactions (e.g. tweets) are the responsibility of specific (usually young and lower grade) employees. From a Foucauldian perspective, “Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication” (Foucault, 1980). Social media managers should be highly trusted and loyal employees with conditions and reward packages designed to retain them. Strategies to minimise risk and share responsibility for social media posts should be implemented by companies who could increasingly fall foul of “employing the children” if too much power over the discourse is devolved. Echoing Marx, the workers have begun to appropriate the means of production (Freeden, 2003).

7.0 Further Work

We plan to extend this work through deeper analysis of a greater number of corporate social media accounts. Further, several respondents to our survey agreed to take part in interviews about their role and the company’s strategy for social media adoption. Interviews will be carried out with social media managers from a range of high street retailers and fast moving goods brands in order to explore the emerging strategy of unscripted corporate communications via social media. We anticipate this research will explore and address this phenomenon of brand creation that has been identified as lacking in empirical research by Vries et al (2012) who argue that little is known about the factors regarding brand post popularity, the number of likes, or comments on a brand.
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