The corporate blogs: What can they offer to brands?

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Abstract: The internet, the last and most revolutionary medium that the planet has ever known. A medium that challenged all the other traditional media that humans have used for centuries. A medium that gave to every single human-being the opportunity to be a journalist, to have a voice heard in all the continents and to participate in the brands’ marketing. Among the social media platforms, the corporate blog is one of most influential Internet tools. They do offer to brands a lot of benefits starting from promotion, reputation improvement to the creation of long-lasting brand-consumer relationship. The current paper highlights via an accurate literature review all the advantages of having a corporate blog.

Keywords: Brand promotion, awareness, anthropomorphization, consumer-brand relationship

INTRODUCTION

The weblog or blog or the “last newborn” of viral marketing (Mzoughi et al, 2010), “a technique developed on the Internet and intended to promote the circulation of a message to sites or users in order to increase its visibility and efficiency exponentially” (Bernard and Jallat, 2001), also a form of buzz marketing (Neti, 2011) a social medium (which is a digital media based on Web 2.0 technologies that aim to facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content, collaboration and social interaction) or a CRM medium (Bernoff and Li, 2008; Dwyer, 2007). Blogs then belong, alongside social networks and content sharing and creation platforms, to Web 2.0 Internet tools’ generation (Schmidt, 2007; Wyld, 2008; Fieseler et al, 2010; Shen et al, 2014). It is in fact a newspaper, a logbook or a personal e-notebook whose content is completely public, everyone can post their ideas, opinions, make comments, criticize, enter texts and images, expressing oneself freely and especially converse with others and building a social network (Ng and Matanda, 2009). Blogs have become widely recognized as being simple to create and use and inexpensive compared to traditional publishing spaces (Herring et al, 2007). It is, according to Leu et al (2007), a “fashionable way to share a personal newspaper with other people in the world of the net”.

It is therefore a new form of communication and knowledge sharing (Tricas et al, 2004) that reflects the author’s personality and ideologies despite the large number of images and texts posted by stakeholders or bloggers. According to the BBC News (2005), the weblog is an online website containing reflections, comments enriched with hyperlinks to other web pages (Drezner and Farrell, 2008). Unlike conventional websites, blog content is often displayed in an anti-chronological order (Lu & Hsiao, 2009; Gunter, 2009; Wyld, 2008; Drezner and Farrell, 2008; Yao, 2008; Thelwall and Hasler, 2007; Pacquet, 2007; Herring et al., 2004), archived by category and updated regularly, at least once a day (Lipton, 2002; Pinault, 2004; Herring et al., 2004). It should be noted that whatever the type of blog (personal, brand, event, listening, leader, conversation, collaborative, etc.), it always embodies the characteristics mentioned above.

In sum, a blog is “a projection on the Internet of a centre of interest, expertise, passion, and battle of ideas” and most often attracts “a targeted and qualified audience” (Pinault, 2004). Blogs are indeed cybertechnoress allowing the production of information, their sharing between bloggers as well as the creation of interactions between them. They stand out from the standard web pages for their evolving, regularly updated content that engages readers in each published article.

THE BRAND-BLOG RELATIONSHIP’S CHARACTERISTICS

The rise of blogs, their distinctive characteristics as well as their unexpected successes in the professional field and especially in branding have made a lot of anchors in recent years. In particular, one of the most developed research streams in the field of marketing via blogs is that of studying the impact of this social media on the brand, its value, its image and the relationship it maintains with its fans. All these studies agree that blogs represent an opportunity to be seized by brand managers who would like to get closer to their consumers. Nevertheless, it seems essential before reviewing these studies to note that, despite the importance of the issue at hand, few empirical research has been done to actually measure and use rigorous and valid techniques to describe in depth this blogging-brand relationship (Chua et al 2009; Yao 2008; Walter 2005; Cox et al 2008; Dearstyn 2005).

Despite this scarcity of rigorous research as advocated by Singh et al (2008), the characteristics and successful experiences of several brands have led many researchers in the field of webmarketing to emphasize the importance of the incorporation of blogging in the digital strategy of brands. Guitoo (2007, p1) for example and after an analysis of some successful blogolistic adventures of some major
American brands that have launched themselves in the field and are now acquiring very popular blogs with high interactivity, concludes that “it is now unimaginable, for a business leader who wants to be a bit hip, not to create his own blog”. Sheidt and Wright (2006) add that “the world is undergoing profound changes, redefining marketing and consumer-brand relationships… blogging is essential for the success of the brand today and tomorrow” and Khan (2009) ends up saying that “blogs represent a real opportunity for marketing”.

Joining this wave and in order to encourage brands to engage in the blogosphere, a research conducted by the agency «Vecteur d’image » in France in 2011 on the motives of blogging and the reasons behind the growth in the participation rate in brand blogs, revealed that 51% of bloggers engage in this digital media activity to satisfy «the desire to give and share their opinions on brands, goods and services» (Andrée 2011, p5) This certainly demonstrates the existence of a real correlation between the use of blogs and brands but especially the predisposition of consumers to interact and to be engaged in an effective relationship with the brand as well as “an increase… in the interest of Internet users in the online presence of their brands” (Stenger et Coutant, 2010, p210). In short, there seems to be some consensus in the literature about the need for blogging for brands. In fact, according to several researchers (Duke, 2009; Wyld, 2008; Ng and Matanda, 2008; Zhang and Han, 2007; Du and Wagner, 2006; Lei and Wang, 2005, etc.), blogs help brands promote their goods and services and reach potential buyers.

1. The blogs for the brand promotion:

In this sense and as mentioned above, blogs are assimilated to spaces of free expression, it is here where consumers express themselves without constraints and share their opinions and experiences with the brand, communicate their satisfaction or discomfort. Indeed, according to several researchers (Wu 1999; Reigner 2007; Khan 2009; Simmons 2007; Florès et al 2008; Mzoughi et al 2010…), it is this interactivity, this freedom of expression and this informational and experiential exchange that are usually (and unlike the classic media) received by the respect, listening and response in real time from the author of the blog that condition the improvement of the image and reputation of the brand. The latter can create an image on the net or improve an already existing in the real world if it manages to solicit consumers to participate daily in its blog so to communicate its presence in the blogosphere, to help them mainly to feel free when sharing their experiences (experiences’ enactment) even if it is an expression of dissatisfaction or a statement of unease with a certain aspect related to the brand or its functional and symbolic attributes (Singh et al 2008, Khan 2009).

According to Wyld (2008), blogs improve attitudes towards the brand, promote its products and reach potential buyers who consult these websites to have several details on the characteristics of goods and services in order to reduce the risk of a future purchase. Blogs also provide, according to De Sousa (2007) through criticisms and recommendations a big database on the multiple ways to gradually improve goods and services, especially in crisis’ period.

2. The blogs for the brand image, reputation and awareness improvement:

According to Verma (2010), the image of the brand has always been the result of the strength of public relations. It is in fact created in the mind of the consumer, the result of his perception of its symbolic values, a perception strongly influenced by his emotions and it is thanks to the interactive nature and the warm atmosphere of blogs that this image is likely to be created. According to this author, via spontaneous conversations and horizontal dialogue revolving around the brand and the experiences that bloggers have with on one hand and the engaging, collaborative and highly synergistic blogs’ nature on the other hand, the blog’ content will be able to increase brand awareness by “highlighting and promoting the distinctive and unique features” (Verma, 2010, p70) that it encompasses.

In the same vein, Chua et al (2009) argue that blogs build and manage the brand’s reputation through the consideration of negative reviews and comments and real-time responses to consumer questions and complaints. Blogs then improve the brand’s image and value and also support branding strategies.

3. The blog : a source of brand’s anthropomorphization:

In the same wave of research, Singh et al (2008) on behalf of the “New Media Officer” at General Motors (one of the pioneering brands in adopting a digital strategy) argue that blogs increase brand awareness and also “refresh and update its image”, a refreshed image not through the marketing leaders’ official speech but rather via bloggers’ comments, experiences and brand usage. These authors add that blogs improve the brand’s reputation, allow it to remain relevant in the eyes of its fans and they “humanize” it (p 288). This capacity for brand personification is supported by several researchers such as Smudde (2005), Markers (2005), Hill (2005), Cho (2006), Gardner (2005), Corcoran et al (2006) and Barnes and Mattsson (2008). The latter claim that by participating in a brand blog, consumers describe their experiences with it using a familiar and friendly language presenting it as a friend, a partner and infuse it indirectly and spontaneously with human personality traits.

In a similar vein, Wyld (2008) states that blogs “give a voice to business in the online world and represent a new form of openness to shareholders including employees, consumers and the public” (p459).

4. The blog for brand equity improvement:

Blogs also build a strong brand, very close to its consumers, a brand that improves thanks to them and their constructive suggestions and opinions (Verma 2010, Bernes and Mattsson 2008, Singh et al 2008, Baur 2011; Lim et al 2002, etc.). Blogs that have a high degree of perceived credibility are also empowered to create a positive attitude towards the brand, improve the perception of its attributes, increase attachment and confidence. In other words, blogs are tools that allow an efficient exploitation of all the components of the brand equity as well as a collective construction and a strong promotion of its identity (Eberle 2010). In conclusion, blogs allow brands to remain competitive, strong and young but above all to face fierce competition
and display their expertise and flexibility (Khan 2009; Neti 2011).

5. Blogs: tool for creating and/or maintaining the consumer-brand relationship:

The impact of blogs does not stop at creating an image, increasing the reputation, improving the perception of a given brand, but they have a particularly undeniable and certain effect on the customer-brand relationship. Blogs, being a social media with a high degree of interactivity and perceived credibility, have been able to create a profound transformation in the relationships between brands and their consumers (Debos 2008; Cho 2006). As blogs are essentially spaces for interpersonal and personalized communication (Herring et al 2004), they allow brands to reach their fans in a very intimate and well-targeted way which makes it easier for them to form a certain love relationship with them (Cho 2006).

According to Simmons (2007), repeated visits to blogs allow for a better understanding of consumers, which in turn improves the quality of the relationship with the brand and strengthens its presence in the “top of mind” list of its fans.

An opinion supported by Singh et al (2008, p288) who affirm that the spontaneity and informality prevailing within blogs lead to «candid and uncensored information», which allows brands to collect credible mega databases to better understand their consumers. Such an understanding is crucial for the creation of a long-lasting and personalized relationship with them. According to Boyd (2007, p219), blogs allow participating consumers to “stage their identities” and make themselves visible to others by exposing their real personalities.

Dassen (2011, p2) went further to say that blogs not only make it easier for brands to collect data about consumers and get closer to them, but they “help nurture a meaningful relationship with potential customers” thanks to the spontaneity of bloggers and the perceived strong credibility of their words and opinions that are shared not-for-profit goal. To this, Chua et al (2009) add that blogs create relationships with a high level of loyalty and trust.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays the Internet has introduced our lives, changed our way to see this world and made everything fast and easy to get. It is almost impossible to find someone now who does not have a Facebook account, an Instagram and so on. However this emergence in our lives has not been so quickly, it has taken many years to reach this level and has passed through many phases. This mega use of Internet has intrigued brands too. In fact, at the beginning, brands had developed so static websites for information goal, then they started exposing their products for sale but with the social media, a revolutionary phase has started. A phase characterized by a high level of interactivity and continuous conversations between the brand and its fans on one hand and between the visitors who expose spontaneously their experiences on the other hand.

A lot of researchers have focused on social media and among them corporate blogs, they tried to shed light on what those platforms can give to brands. Varying from promoting the brand, increasing the consumers’ awareness, improving its reputation to creating a long-lasting consumer-brand relationship for exclusively online brands to maintaining and boosting an offline tie. This paper has exposed after a deep and accurate literature review related to blogs the main benefits that brands can get from them if they are well managed. Some studies insisted on blogs’ good and real-time management of comments to warrant their successful use.

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