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SOCIAL MEDIA: PARTICIPATING CUSTOMERS



Bridging Media Platforms and Engaging Customers



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Introduction

Social media usage has skyrocketed over the past decade, especially with the advancement and rapid adoption of mobile technology. Furthermore, customer demands have also evolved dramatically, and customers today demand a higher level of engagement, personalization and customization when using online services (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). More importantly, it is increasingly vital for businesses to meet these changing customer demands, and to better engage customers through social media platforms. It is also important for businesses to understand consumer motivations behind social media sharing and content creation (Shao, 2008; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Antikainen, Makipaa & Ahonen, 2010), in order for them to increase engagement and participation, which leads to increased brand loyalty and ultimately a better firm performance (Hallowell, 1996; Holland & Baker, 2001; Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman & Bezawada, 2013).

For the purpose of this paper, we aim to investigate how Albert Heijn, a Dutch supermarket chain, uses their media platforms to engage with customers. In particular, there will be a focus on how Albert Heijn can better encourage user participation on these platforms by analyzing customer motivations for sharing and creating content. Albert Heijn was chosen because although they have many successful established media channels in place and a large customer base, they are not fully utilizing the various opportunities available to engage with customers and encourage user participation. The recommendations of our project could be applied to other companies who have similar media channels in place. Even other offline retailers who are striving to implement social media can benefit from this report.

To do so, we will first explore the recent developments of social media usage and accessibility amongst the Dutch public, after which we will highlight several consumer motivations for creating user-generated content. Secondly, a content analysis will be conducted of Albert Heijn's magazine (Allerhande) and various online media platforms, including their website and social media accounts to gain a better understanding of how they currently engage their customers. By connecting the current trends within the social media usage, accessibility and user generated content with the current state of Albert Heijn's customer engagement, we will subsequently propose a few recommendations for Albert Heijn to increase customer engagement and encourage participation. With all this in mind, our research question is formulated as follows;

In what ways can AH use their media platforms to engage their customers more effectively and stimulate user generated content?

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25th July 2014

Increased Access

Recent statistics have shown that amongst European countries, the Netherlands show one of the strongest usages of social media, with 65% of the population regularly engaging with different platforms (Oosterveer, 2013). There is a clear dominance of Facebook amongst the social media platforms with more than 7,6 million unique monthly users (Oosterveer, 2013). In addition, Holland has seen a consecutive rise of mobile data usage over the past few years, where 44% of the population now owns a smartphone and 16% owns a tablet (Oosterveer, 2013). In comparison to other European, and even on a global scale, the Netherlands score above average (CBS, 2013).

The uses of mobile devices range from taking pictures, to browsing the internet, to streaming videos. Research has shown that 64% of all smartphone users in the Netherlands use their devices to take pictures on a regular basis (Oosterveer, 2012). As much as 50% of social media users share their content through Facebook, making this platform by far the most popular to share content through (Oosterveer, 2013). With the establishment of an instantaneous connection to social media platforms, come many opportunities for companies to interact with their customers and create a build brand loyalty.

User Involvement

Customers are increasingly becoming active players in the online communication strategies of organizations, which gives them more power than ever before (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). Nowadays, customers expect companies to allow a two-way form of communication and a personal level of engagement when it comes to establishing relationships (Estanyol, 2012). Research indicates that the interactivity between corporations and their audience is very important while building a corporate reputation, as consumers can bypass traditional means of communication through the Internet and become both users and producers of content, shaping the corporate image along the way (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Nielsen, 2006). With the rising numbers related to mobile data usage and the concept of produsage, there seem to be many compelling reasons for companies to start immersing themselves in social media to optimize these channels (Fieseler, Fleck & Meckel, 2009).

An active way for users to interact with companies through social media is the creation of user-generated content (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008). In addition to stimulating dialogues, user-generated content represents deliberate, active behavior in which audiences seek to produce content according to intrinsic motivations that can vary greatly, similar to the value they derive from it (Daugherty et al., 2008). There is also a certain level of eagerness amongst audience members to

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25th July 2014

engage with Facebook fanpages. Here, many parallels can be drawn between Albert Heijn and successful YouTube recipe channels and the way YouTubers engage their audience throughout their various media channels by using compelling pull-tactics. A consistent message is broadcasted where the YouTuber takes an active stance and asks the audience to engage, e.g.; ‘Share your version of the recipe on my Facebook page!’ (Wedmore, 2012).

The social function of user-generated content focuses on seeking out activities that are perceived favorable by others, consumers mostly engage with such activities to feel important and to connect with others (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008). This concept of creating social capital is a strong extrinsic motivation for social media users to create content. Social capital is defined by scholars as “the network ties of goodwill, mutual support, shared language, shared norms, social trust, and a sense of mutual obligation that people can derive value from” (Ellison, 2006, p. 7). In general, social capital is seen as a general positive effect of interaction between the participants within a social network, one that is enhanced by computer-mediated interactions (e.g. through Facebook) (Ellison, 2006).

With the increased usage of social media amongst the Dutch public and an increased accessibility due to the rise of mobile devices, it can be stated that an optimal usage of corporate online media channels has never been more relevant in maintaining a positive corporate reputation. In addition, user-generated content, often driven by extrinsic motivation, such as gaining social capital, has shown to be the main driver of user involvement. However, scholars have stressed the importance of the 90/9/1 percent rule; there is an inequality of input in online communication. It appears that 90% of users only view content while 9% of users edit content, and only 1% actually actively creates new content (Nielsen, 2006). This inequality of input can be countered by providing users with easy access to relevant corporate platforms, thus lowering the thresholds for engagement (Hesmondhalgh, 2010).

25th July 2014

Analysis of Albert Heijn and their Services

Albert Heijn is one of the biggest Dutch supermarket chains in the Netherlands. It carries both A-brand products as well as lower priced products. The personal Bonus-card is one of their unique features. It can be acquired for free and is used to get a discount on products. The customer data leads to personalized advertisement based on customer's previous shopping behavior. The supermarket chain currently has a market share of 33,7% (Teamnijhuis, 2013). In order to get a clear overview of the available media platforms currently has, a content analysis of their channels was conducted.

Albert Heijn is active on different media platforms; Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube. In addition, their monthly magazine, 'Allerhande', is circulated with 2,3 million copies every month. The many recipes featured in Allerhande are all available on their website, where they are accompanied by how-to videos. Albert Heijn's website contains many other elements; discount offers, hundreds of other recipes, promotion, all their products and a webshop. In addition, an Albert Heijn mobile app (Appie) is available for free. It allows customers to search for recipes, create a shopping list, and it is able to show the most efficient route in the store when buying the products. Furthermore, using Appie or the website, customers can save their favorite recipes and create their very own cookbook.

The supermarket chain is very active on Twitter and has 15,184 followers (@albertheijn, 2014). Their Twitter account is mainly focused on webcare. Their webcare team aims to answer all customers' questions or complaints every Monday until Saturday between 8am and 10pm. Albert Heijn does not use the channel to deliver any content or promotions. They reply at an average of about 30 to 50 tweets per day during the weekdays, and judging from the user reactions seem to be doing well in managing customers' questions and complaints.

Albert Heijn is also active on Facebook where they have 211,744 likes (Albert Heijn, 2014), linking a lot of the information provided from their website. Unlike their Twitter account, Albert Heijn uses Facebook mainly to deliver content. They mostly post Bonus offers, new products, challenges, recipes, and advertisement videos. They have also updated their Facebook timeline all the way back to their establishment in 1887. This helps to build a stronger narrative for the readers through the act of storytelling, giving readers a sense of connection to the brand.

Their Facebook page generates a large amount of activity from users who comment, share, and like Albert Heijn's posts. For example, one of their most recent posts of an advertisement from YouTube on January 5th 2014 has garnered 1605 likes, 634 shares, and 162 comments, as of January 13th 2014 (Fig. 1). Occasionally, Albert Heijn tries to engage their audience by asking them questions, such as "Which one of these dishes is your favorite?" (Fig. 2), however this is not done regularly. Users can

25th July 2014

also post or upload a photo onto the Facebook page, and most users use this function to submit general comments, suggestions and complaints. As a result, the 'Post by Others' section is used largely as a webcare channel like Twitter. Content distribution is not linked between Albert Heijn's Facebook and Twitter account. Also, the Facebook page's focus on community allows for greater interaction both among fan-page members, and between users and the brand itself, ultimately helping to foster a greater sense of community among users and brand loyalty towards Albert Heijn.

From a user perspective, besides using the Facebook page as a channel for complaints, users also act as producers by sharing, liking, and commenting on posts. Although Albert Heijn does not actively participate in the ensuing conversations, customers are able to engage with each other around the brand, and consciously or not, help to promote Albert Heijn to their own social circle hence increasing brand awareness and loyalty.



Figure 1. Albert Heijn Facebook post: Delivering valuable and excluding content.



Figure 2. Albert Heijn engages audience with questions: "Which one of these dishes is your favorite?"

25th July 2014

Lastly, Albert Heijn also has a YouTube Channel (albertheijn). Through their YouTube channel they post all their television commercials and videos that are not broadcasted on television. These often include information videos and the so-called Albert Heijn stories such as interviews with customers. However, the content of the videos do not invite users to engage since they broadcast one-way information; they do not proactively ask customers to engage or invite them to take part in contests. Moreover, they do not comment on or reply to comments on their own videos, except for the occasional comment used to promote a product. Thus, the communication method employed on their YouTube channel is largely push-centric and does not invite two-way communication with their audience. Users are able to participate with the content by liking, sharing, and commenting on videos. Similarly to Facebook, users act as prosumers and take part in increasing the brand awareness of Albert Heijn to their social circle via social media.

Albert Heijn has made an extensive use of the available online media platforms to engage their customers in different ways based on the functionality of each different platform. Furthermore, Albert Heijn does well in using a human voice to interact with customers, and even make sure to sign off each Tweet with a name to make it more personal. However, what is crucial to note is that Albert Heijn does not effectively leverage on the inter-connectedness of social networks, and currently uses their website and social media channels as separate entities altogether. In addition, although Albert Heijn does a good job with delivering valuable content to their users, there is room to explore different approaches to further encourage user participation.

Recommendations; Improving Customer Engagement

Connecting Platforms

Based on the ever rising numbers related to mobile internet access and social media usage, we would first of all advise Albert Heijn to focus on mobile phones and tablets as their main tool to establish a bridge between Albert Heijn's different media platforms and their consumers. There is a large pool of user-generated content to tap into, since the majority of the Dutch population now owns a mobile device. In addition, the ease with which content can be used to create and share content immensely lowers the threshold for people to interact with companies and become prosumers, which is the first step to achieving a higher level of engagement according to the body of literature (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Because of the dominance of Facebook as a sharing platform, we would advise Albert Heijn to center their strategy on their Facebook page as their main platform for interaction and keep Twitter as

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25th July 2014

their main webcare channel. Also, considering the scope of this report, focusing on one platform seems the most feasible option since adaptations happen very gradually within corporations.

Connecting Albert Heijn's various media platforms is crucial to achieving a low threshold for interaction. A direct connection between Albert Heijn's widely distributed magazine Allerhande and their app (Appie) can be created by implementing QR codes within the Allerhande. Consequently, by scanning the codes with Appie, users are led directly to the right recipe (often accompanied with a how-to video) within Appie. Furthermore, by implementing a Facebook sharing option within Appie, users will be able to directly share content with friends. In this way, users are encouraged to participate and share content for Albert Heijn, while at the same time improves the user experience with the brand.

In addition, these connections can be utilized to further motivate consumer interaction. As much as 64% of all smartphone users in the Netherlands use their device to take pictures on a regular basis, which accumulates to an enormous amount of potential user-generated data. By implementing a photo sharing and upload feature with Facebook within Appie, users will be able to directly upload pictures of their dishes through Appie to their own Facebook profile, share with friends, or even Albert Heijn's own page. This will contribute to lowering the threshold for consumer engagement, resulting in an instant gateway for direct interaction and content sharing. Albert Heijn can then feature outstanding user-submitted content on their main Facebook page, thus creating social capital for consumers and provides more incentive for users to submit their content.

Motivating Users

The established interconnection between media channels can further be used to nourish the interaction with consumers and creation of content. Popular YouTubers take an active stance to engage their audience by using pull-strategies; these are applicable to Albert Heijn as well, since the main goal of these strategies is to get people involved. Users are prompted to engage with the recipes by asking them to upload photos of their dish to their Facebook pages. Since the creation of social capital has been noted as a strong extrinsic motivation for users to create content (Daugherty, Eastin & Bright, 2008), this can be emphasized by posting outstanding content on the corporate Facebook page, while crediting the user.

Furthermore, it is advised to add more proactive elements within Albert Heijn's Facebook page. By incorporating questions into their status updates concerning recipes, ingredients or products, users are encouraged to discuss and exchange information with one another, thus creating vibrant dialogues. In addition, to take this concept one step further, another incentive for engaging in dialogues would be the

25th July 2014

possibility for consumers to share their own recipes on Albert Heijn's website. This can be stimulated through their YouTube and recipe videos, and encouraged through their Facebook posts.

Albert Heijn can further develop their pull-strategies by orchestrating periodical competitions through their Facebook page, and provide their consumers with tangible incentives to participate and share their content. This strategy also offers new opportunities to set up sponsorships between Albert Heijn and various brands. An example is shown below (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Creating competitions using certain brand products for collaboration.

Contests such as these should be promoted across different platforms. Afterwards, users can democratically decide (Like) their favorite submission and engage in a conversation surrounding the submissions. By featuring winning dishes on Albert Heijn's Facebook page (and perhaps publish it in Allerhande), consumers can strive for their 15 minutes of fame and further increase their social capital.

25th July 2014

Conclusion

Consumers nowadays are increasingly adapted to using mobile devices and social media channels. This shift in accessibility and usage creates new opportunities for companies. Two-way communication platforms are essential in maintaining a positive relationship with consumers and enhancing brand reputations nowadays (Estanyol, 2012; Fieseler et al., 2009). Therefore it is certainly interesting for Albert Heijn to look into the opportunities given to them by their many successful media platforms, to further motivate their consumers to engage or even become prosumers. This can be done by extending the features and content on their already existing online and offline media platforms as highlighted in our analysis.

For future consideration, it is advised to look into even more possibilities to interconnect Albert Heijn's multi-platform communication model. The Bonus card with its vast network of consumer data, was not included in the analysis due to the limited scope of this report. It is advised to look into the many possibilities such detailed customer data could provide Albert Heijn. An example would be to use the Bonus card customer data to link previous purchases with weekly discount items and recommend recipes for consumers.

It has been stated by scholars through the 90/9/1 rule that the majority of participants does not actually create content (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Nielsen, 2006). However, by providing an easy access to relevant platforms, thus lowering the threshold, the probability of participants becoming prosumers will be increased. Furthermore, a proactive nature of corporate messages will further motivate participants to engage and contribute to dialogues and generate user-generated content.

25th July 2014

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25th July 2014

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