

Influencers and Their Barriers to Technology

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ABSTRACT

Modern Day Marco Polos, young influencers in emerging markets who have more access to technology than their peers, often act as the gateway to new websites and technology in their respective countries. However, as they influence their peers through account gifting, they are often met with barriers such as language.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.m MISCELLANEOUS

General Terms

Design, Languages

Keywords

Emerging markets, International, Ethnography

1. INTRODUCTION

In emerging markets, technology customers are generally introduced to new websites and products by influencers, younger people who have more access to high-tech products. We dubbed these influencers, “Modern Day Marco Polos,” due to their propensity to explore and navigate new and foreign technologies. However, as these Marco Polos introduce their family and friends to new products through account gifting, they confront many barriers, one of which is language.

2. BACKGROUND

In May of 2007, five ethnographic researchers from Yahoo! began an investigation of issues and problems faced by customers in the emerging markets of Brazil, India and Vietnam. The initial study was conducted first in the United States to build a comparison model. The research team looked at usage patterns associated with different communications technologies, paying special attention to how e-mail, IM and social networks are utilized. The team collected information through a process of in-home observation, interviews, surveys of users' homes, and diaries where people documented their weekly communication habits.

2.1 Methodology and Analysis

Thirteen participants were interviewed in each country in the context of their computer use. Locations included internet cafés, schools, homes, and offices. An observational methodology called “Day in the Life” was employed for three of each of the thirteen interviews per country. The “Day in the Life” observations consisted of 8-hour time periods spent with each participant. This allowed the research team to immerse themselves in the participants' lifestyle, experiencing their daily routines and interactions with their environments. Before all the interviews were conducted in the countries, a week-long diary

was completed by each of the participants documenting their daily routines and communication and community-related activities. The main goals of the study were to provide an integrated analysis of international communications and community trends likely to emerge within the next two years, identify boundaries, gaps, and overlaps among existing products, and reveal similarities and differences among the countries studied.

3. MODERN DAY MARCO POLO

A key finding of this study is that migrants act as modern-day Marco Polos, bringing back advanced communications technology to their inner circle of friends and family from ventures out of the country for work or education [1]. Like the ancient explorer returning from the Silk Road, a family in Vietnam was introduced to voice over IP (VOIP) by their daughter who had returned from college in the United States. She then linked her mother based in Vietnam with her aunt in the United States using free telephony software. Though these families are separated by oceans, they are using voice-over-internet services, IM and e-mail, all of which are cheap or free, to stay close and connected. This family is one of a growing number in Vietnam that is seeking out inexpensive ways to connect to the more than 3 million Vietnamese living abroad.

3.1 Account Gifting

Similarly, Yahoo! is winning new customers in India through account gifting. India's Internet audience is young; nearly 60% is under the age of thirty. The study revealed that many new accounts are being created for peers, parents and older siblings. The first time a product like Yahoo! Mail is used, it is typically at the guidance of a younger sibling or cousin who has given the gift of a username and password.

For example, a father in Bangalore, uses his younger daughter, one of our participants, as an e-mail proxy, communicating to his older daughter in college several hundred miles away through the finger tips and computer savvy of his youngest daughter. The youngest daughter created the account and often takes dictation from her father when composing letters for him. She became computer savvy through an influencer in her local Internet café who shows her where and what to click in order to send an e-mail. Although she is the influencer at home in the Internet café, she is the follower to another more-experienced patron. In her case, she has both an influencer in person and paper. Often, she uses Yahoo! Mail while reading step-by-step instructions in PC magazines.

All the participants interviewed in this study were transplants to Bangalore. As far as living environment, family members did not have any personal space, so hence, there was no secrecy between family and close friends. In a sense, they shared a collective identity as well as belonging, and this boundary of privacy is rarely crossed by strangers

Also, in India, those who have internet access at home and are subsequently more technologically savvy, become key influencers to their friends and family. In Indian society, there is great pressure to succeed in education. Those who knew more about technology can use it to their advantage, such as doing educational research or searching for jobs online, which is the top online activity conducted in India [2]. Influencers are treated with great respect for their knowledge and guidance.

In Brazil, Orkut, a popular social network, is the most popular website in the country [3]. Contrasting the social stigma in America where only young people are perceived to use popular social networks, Orkut is part of society in Brazil, as it is not only used by teenagers, but parents, relatives, and even taxi drivers as well. One reason for the ubiquity of Orkut is most likely due to the power of influencers and the practice of account gifting. One of our participants, an 18-year-old student, was not only technologically-savvy in terms of adopting new websites and exploring advanced features of computer applications, she was also a strong “gifter.” She not only used Orkut herself but created accounts for her mother, sister, and brother. She taught them how to upload pictures and leave scraps for each other, and in this way, was their gateway to Orkut.

Cultural context may be a big reason why account gifting is more predominant in developing regions. In Brazil and Asia, because most young adults live with their parents and sometimes even close to extended relatives, they perceive less boundaries to privacy compared to Generation M in America. Many participants often shared bedrooms with siblings, and one computer was shared by an entire family.

3.2 Language as a Barrier for Influencers

Language is a key issue for international users, especially for those in developing countries where English is less spoken by most users. Since new Internet users do not necessarily have firsthand knowledge of the products they are using, issues of language and the physical location of elements on the page are greatly magnified. Ultimately, they prove to be great barriers to long-term adoption.

As these US-based products reinvent themselves to compete with domestic competitors, they create problems for their new customers in these emerging markets. Because international users do not understand the English labels for buttons and call to actions, they tend to memorize the location of an element on the screen. For example, they may not know the English words for “Compose Email,” but they know they need to click on the button in the top left corner of the screen. Thus, when the application is redesigned and the button is moved from the left corner to the center of the screen, the application is rendered unusable. The follower must go back to their influencer, so they can relearn the product. This bottleneck often means that the product is not used for months at a time, which can be perceived by the US-based company as churn, and the account as a consequence.

4. CONCLUSION

Successful products need to celebrate and empower their Marco Polos in emerging countries, and to do so, companies cannot overlook the fact that many other factors, such as language differences, can affect the adoption of new products and websites.

A glimpse into the future of communication tools reveals that a successful product must cater to key constituents: the influencer and the follower. To win the influencer, products can continue to

innovate and push the technology envelope. Our research also reminds us that communication about our product happens on three levels: customer-to-customer (i.e. Influencer to Follower), media-to-customer (i.e. corporate communication, PR), and product-to-customer (i.e. tutorials and inline help). A successful product needs maintain each of these three levels of communication.

From a corporate communications standpoint, as time necessitates change, the public relations team needs to announce new features to invigorate the influencers, but also reintroduce the follower to existing features and functionalities. This could take the form of a cheat sheets on how to perform the most basic features written in the local language but demonstrating usage on the English version of the product.

Recommendations for dealing with these issues involve designing for a country while keeping these factors in mind. Some heuristics to think about are:

- **Distance is a factor:** As new features are introduced, we must remember to take into consideration the great distances that often separate our customers. This research suggests there is a great need for communication coordination. Before starting a voice-over-internet-phone call, families often set-up appointments to meet online coordinated through IM or email. Future tools need to embrace this behavior and allow for reminders via SMS or email that help continue technology-enabled family reunions.
- **Have training wheels for followers:** Our best evangelists care enough to give our products as gifts and take the time to explain the most basic features to their followers. In a sense, we need to build training wheels for our products, so one can test drive it easily while still getting a sense of what it can do. Some ways of doing this are creating dedicated help pages that succinct and brief, explain how to use your product in one page that can be printed easily, list both the product brand name and URL clearly on the page, and allow the language and font size to be changed easily if a support section has been localized.
- **Leadership tools for the influencers:** Account gifting should be focused on for influencers. Give tools to influencers such as pre-made contacts lists or starter toolkits (i.e. tips, how-tos) for their peers, so that they can become our best sales people. Offer translation tools so that the influencer can make our sites and applications more accessible to their network.
- **Language versus icons:** Remember the US version of your product will be used around the world even if you try to localize it to a specific region. There is a tough balance between text labels and icons. When possible, use icons to convey functionality instead of text. Sometimes complex actions cannot be summed up in an icon, but often complex actions cannot be easily translated.

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