Social Branding: Online Presence as an Identity Expression

Arthur Henrique de Oliveira Silva
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Abstract

Brands have been attentive, willing and quick to occupy the digital interaction spaces that appear each day. However, when a brand's behavior is not aligned to the way it is perceived by society it might result confusing, incoherent and seriously fragile identity. It relies on branding to warrant coherency among all the brand discursive acts, which includes its offline presence and its active and passive online presence in order to validate the brand identity and to mark its territory in the concurred space of advertisement communication.

Keywords: *Brands; Social Media; Values; Linearity.*

Introduction

Web 2.0 caused a rupture at social communication model built by mass media through the history. Since the large-scale printing allowed by Gutenberg Press that made the Bible a top seller book since Century XV, going through the Golden Age of Hollywood Cinema until the spread of radio and TV penetration at homes during the 20th century social communication has always obeyed the condition to represent only the view of the few ones with access to communication publishers. The State represented by its political class, the wealthy owners of radio, television or printed media publishers and the leaders of big religious institutions always imposed their thoughts over an indistinct mass named as vassals, electors, followers or consumers whose disagreement impact would always be much smaller than issuers message impact. According Castells (2007, p.8-9) internet brought the same possibilities to create and share content for users at both sides of web while switching issuer and receptor roles and resulting for the first time in History in a communication flow from many to many, a flow that takes Castells to name the actual communication moment as Galaxy of Internet. Due to this symmetrical and bilateral flow brands need to watch over their identities preservation and this is what this paper is dedicated to, an analysis about how brands can make their identities solid and stronger through social medias.

1. Brands and Consumer Relationship through Internet

Silva and Zanbon et al. (2012, p.222-234) while referring to consumer relationship with brands on internet as e-relationship mention some factors they consider the new rules of economy: material and size lose their importance and reference meanwhile service, information and relations grow stronger; new technologies bring a sensation of smaller distances and time acceleration; clients are potential resellers and shall not be misused, but transformed in brand's promoters due to the good attendance and "win-win" relationship; company must comprehend accessibility as being available anytime and anywhere, bringing online and offline together. Regarding to digital tools the authors (2012, p.220) affirm:

This moment is crucial for organizations, not only because they need to learn how to deal with new technological market tools, but also because if they do not learn it quickly they might lose a significant market share to their competitors. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the more sensible an organization and its leaders be concerning to this technological tools comprehension and usage, especially when it comes to know what their clients agree with what shall be communicated an how it should be done, the bigger chances to obtain success into this world economy context where knowledge, resources and know-how willing are ultimate.

A survey released at 2013 by Nielsen Company[1], world leader at marketing research, brings a deeper view about online consumer behavior, what are its preferences concerning to information sources and the reasons for interacting with brands at internet:

[1]Social Media Users. Source: NM Incite.

- 63% of consumers affirm that when they researched about a brand on internet they discovered something new about it;
- 1 in 4 internet users criticized brands on internet to punish them for bad service;
- 58% of social media users are willing to protect other users from having the same bad experiences they had with a brand;
- 2 in 3 interviewed people affirm they have already been influenced by some promotion from family or friends through internet.

Therefore, after social media rise brands faced a double possibility, now their speech might be refuted and nullified by unpleased consumers or strengthened and spread by satisfied customers. It is the traditional Word of mouth marketing increased by the "many to many" flow already mentioned here. Duo to the internet and its social media platforms, now consumers are able to invalidate brand speeches. For the first time, these semiotics entities that occupy all possible spaces are being forced to review their universe described by Semprini (2010, p.51) as "*too little oriented to self-critical and often kept in a triumphant key of self-congratulation speeches"*.

2. Emulation And The Consumer Decision Process

The purchase decision process includes emulation, what means the consumer recognizing its own personality or pieces of it in consumed products and services. Karsaklian (2004, p.46) indicates a relation between self-concept, what means the perception consumer has about himself and the choice of products that reflects this perception and she mentions Belk when proposes that "the objects we stick with represent a real extension of ourselves" (BELK apud KARSAKLIAN, 2004, p. 46). According to this author, products related to pleasure and sensorial dimension are easier to suffer some influence than functional or technical products, and for these products related to sensorial or aesthetic universe the marketing actions will lead the consumer to acquire an image more than just a product (KARSAKLIAN, 2004, p.72).

Personal identification and aesthetic influence over sensorial sphere these both processes happen while products or services are chosen, the same is comprehensible regarding to interpersonal relations, a characteristic named by Castells (2007, p.109) as web individualism:

The fact is that individuals create their online and offline webs over their own interests, values, projects and affinities. Due to Internet communication flexibility and power online social interaction performs an increasingly role at social organization as a whole. When online web establish their practices they might create virtual communities, different from the physical ones, but not necessarily less intense or less effectives regarding to creation of bounds and mobilization.

Castells (2007, p. 110) affirms that once internet makes easier to find people per age, gender, country region, sexuality, or any other filters the result is the increasingly associations of people sharing same thoughts or complementary opinions. Choosing contacts is no longer restricted by geographical proximity or time availability now that internet also allows a synchronous communication. Therefore, it is possible to adopt more subjective criteria over your contacts choice, subjective criteria like artistic patterns, professional interest, beliefs, political views or even sexual preferences. This availability to associate to people who share your opinions and interest causes of Castells (2007, p.110) names specialized communities:

In other cases, these online webs become specialized communities forms, what means sociability constructed around specific interests. Once people can easily belong to several webs the individuals might develop their own sociability portfolios investing different moments in several webs with small barriers and low cost opportunities. As result, on one side there is an extreme flexibility on sociability expression as far as people build and rebuild their social interaction ways. Otherwise, the low cost of commitment might bring some fragility to social support.

Therefore, it ts comprehensible that consumers will build relationship with brands as online engagement only if they recognize values they acept, if they are able to identify themselves at the worldviewadvertised by brands who approch them. The brand and consumer relationship becomes closer to physical people relationship where there are deep comprehension of each other and a based clear conscience based in memories about why they do keep a relationship.Silva and Zanbon et al.(2012, p.256) affirm about it:

To conquer the client goes far beyond information, it demands values identification, reliability and trust. All these factors are interdependent regarding to feelings and emotions that feed interpersonal relations.

This precondition remains when the choice is to follow or not follow a brand on social medias once this public demonstration of communities you join and brands you follow is also a personality displaying as Castells (2007, p.11) affirms about Internet representativeness:

Internet elasticity makes it particularly likely to enhance the contradictory tendencies of our world. Not a utopia neither dystopia, internet is a description of ourselves through a specific communication code that we must comprehend in order to change our reality.

Therefore, a brand must assure its clients recognize their own values and life expectations in its speech because these consumers will only have a digital relationship as social engagement that strengthens brand as semiotic entity if and when they recognize at this brand a genuine representation of their own worldview and their own values.

3. ***Brand Project And Its Contractual Dimension***

Concurrence multiplication in almost all economy sectors have already being causing some damage at products centered communication forcing brands to develop deeper, broader and more complex speeches that could reflect their target public values and lifestyle. Accordingto Semprini (2010, p.109), it was like "*consumers were asking to be stimulated, required and seduced by brands instead of simply informed*".

Semprini (2010, p.20) explains that the postmodern brand consists in a meaning management project, initially applied to consumption but applicable to all social speeches around society. To become a meaning management project implies, the obvious it is, a brand must be coherent in all its manifestations. According to Semprini (2010, p.155) a brand is a three levels project: values level, the unchangeable essence intrinsic in all brands acts; speech level, which is composed by scenarios and environments where the brand decide to perform, the level were where languages and creative resources can me modified as long they do not contradict brands values; manifestations level, very diversified and composed by all the brand exposure actions from their commercialized products, going through mass media and coming till small communication actions like sponsorships, green marketing and visual identity at institutional stationery that attest and endorse brand identity. Only through these manifestations consumers are able to build through the time its own opinion about the brand. The author insists (SEMPRINI, 2010, p.97-98):

Exactly in these discursive acts the true brand's nature remains, that one slowly a progressively consolidated through the time due to a coherent and relevant accumulation of actions and choices. These resources visibility is sometimes minimum due to its lasting and diffuse character. A communication campaign often repeated during a scheduled time and with terrific impact resources inevitably has more visibility, but it can also disappear with nothing left if it does not articulate coherently with the fundamental discursive manifestations of a brand. .

Through the time and its actions a brand provides to its consumers a perception regarding to what might or not be relevant to its performance universe and an expectative regarding to its intrinsic promises of value. This relationship built through the time is named by Semprini (2010, p.113) as brand contractual dimension. The author explains this concept as the brand true differentiation of a brand as a meaning project, it is obtained due to the linearity regarding on perceived mission, vision and values that must be recognizable in all speeches and manifestations the brand might decide to include in its communication and commercialization history. A brand project shall not be used a posteriori to justify finance or industrial strategies. In a postmodern context the exchange value is anchored in ability to create meaning, therefore, brand project creates value, not the inverse sequence. (SEMPRINI, 2010, p.147). Therefore, even though a brand explores several territories and relationship tools with its consumers, all of these things must be aligned to the values defined by the brand and which its consumers identify themselves with. Communication proposals that contradict an already built history are dangerous. Adding thoughts to this line Karsalkian mentions the branding consultor Jaime Troiano:

A brand does not withstand adventures that violate its personality. It lets consumer confused and disoriented. Therefore, brands must evolve without losing what is essential in their values and basic characteristics. (TROIANO apud KARSAKLIAN, 2004, p.199).

The brand specialist Martin LISTRON (2010, p. 56) affirms brands must be "smashable", what means, recognizable at each one of its isolated characteristics. According to Lindstron, a strong brand will be reminded through its colors, shapes, verbal expressions, etc., even though these factors might be presented apart from the conjoint.

Even though creating such a parameter for a brand require the patience and consistence opposed to the market instability and changeability when a brand is liable to inconstancies it becomes just one more piece of information in an overcrowded information space. Social media as interaction platforms between brands and their clients also perform this role of continuous identity building. According to Reccuero (2009, p. 26) "there is a constant process of identity building and expression by people oncyberspace". The author explains that sociability in social media is based on perspectives built during people interaction and she exemplifies Orkut profileswhere passions, preferences and disapproval were exposed by simply joining communities.Reccuero (2009, p.30) affirms that orkut profiles, fotologs, weblogs, etc. are"*tips about a*

"Me" that might be noted by the others. They are plural constructions of one individual representing the multiple variations of its identity."

According to the journalist Ana Brambilla[2]for properly using social medias as identity construction and maintenance strategy it is necessary to consider that even though the internet user behavior is expressed through numbers of likes, tweets, shares and feeling quotes human behavior is essentially subjective and a company that does not establish a communication strategy with a clear personality will not have a sustainable condition:

An approach focused only on numerical results of online actions is an empty approach, values are in the center of relationships, rarely people will decide to build or to keep relationships that offend their views and positions, even though at social medias. Liking a fan page is a simple and mechanic act that does not make an internet user seriously engaged to your brand. Engagement happens when he decides to dedicate time to interact with your brand and searches its content by his own will and it is not something achievable when focusing only on numerical results.

The journalist reinforces that social media main goal was always connecting people among each other, not people and brands. Brands are intruders, therefore, in order to consolidate their values perception they must adopt the dialogic reality of social media allowing their followers to recognize brand values through to line left by their posts.

Social media is for those whom want a relationship with their publics and brand construction will happen through this relationship, not with company talking about itself, but through brand and followers experiences instead. Followers will have the chance to get the values expressed through the organizations behaviorat their social media strategies.

This approach described above by Brambilla matches the brand project concept described by Semprini, in which due to brand manifestations the consumer runs the way back into the speeches level and reaches the values at the center of institutions he is dealing with.

Brambilla's view matches Semprini once again when she concludes that

What brands need to do in order to build and coherently maintain their images is focusing on the value they want to see perceived by society, because its published content sooner or later will reach their consumers and generate a perception of value. Therefore, companies can establish a communication that demonstrates their values once, although it may take a little longer than traditional media, this content, will reach the intended people and will help brands values perception.

4 Dove Case Study

Millward Brown, world leader for brand researches released at the end of 2013 a survey[3]analyzing the 10 Best Facebook Brand Fan pages. Instead of adopting quantitative criteria as number of followers or likes and shares, Millward Brown considered qualitative subjective like general opinion about the page, its recommendation, the attention its content receives from followers and possibilities of fans looking for brand content instead of seeing it only when it comes on their timelines. According to this survey it is necessary for a brand to have clear objectives and a consistent plan for its Fan page.

[2]Journalist, Doctorate in Social Medias and New Journalistic Formats by Austral University, Argentina. Master in Digital Communication by Rio Grande do Sul Federal University (UFRS), creator of the e-books series and blog How To Understand Social Medias and curator of Social Media Week de 2013 in São Paulo. Social Media Editor experiences in Brazilian publishers like Globo, Abril and Terra. Interview exclusively granted for this paper in April 7th, 2014.

[3]Top 10 Fan pages Brasil. Fan Index. O fãalém do like

The posted content shall obey some regularity and must include true news, and specifically for Brazilian consumer there must be prizes or special promotions once for Millward Brown the factors for a better fan page are variety, sense of community, interaction and useful information. The fan page considered as top performer in 2013 was Dove, personal care brand belonging to Unilever that under the tune“Dove Real Beauty”keeps a global speech of support to women self-esteem and valorization of each characteristic like body shape, hair style, skin color and etc. Below some examples extracted from Brazilian Dove accounts at Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

Facebook

Post	Likes	Coments
With my friends I always feel younger	358	13
Who told you curly hair is a bad thing? To me it is my best quality!	640	79
At the beach with my girls I don’t care about my body. I feel pretty!	213	15
Have you ever imagined if people were all like each other?My beauty is unique and it makes me proud!	180	3
Have your nails done at home and it doesn’t look as you expected.Who has never lived it?	1.295	294
At each demonstration of care I show my daughter the importance of feeling confident.	374	19
Being with my friends remind me having fun is important to my wellbeing.	379	19

Quantities till now 19/01/2014[4]

Twitter: Dove_Brasil

[4]Available at https://www.facebook.com/DoveBr

- Sunscreen is not only for days at the beach. Its daily use avoids cancer and premature ageing.
- Did you exaggerate on perfume and now you're hurry? Tip: use cotton with some alcohol on the skin.
- Does your hair get voluminous during the day? If it bothers you use a strong fixation mousse before leaving home.
- Will you get a sun tan today? So moisturize your skin to avoid stains and to warrant a uniformly tan.[5]

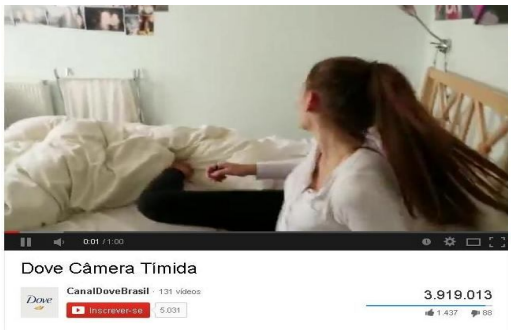
Youtube– Canal DoveBrasil

The Cannes awarded Dove movie "Real Beauty Portraits" reports the experience lived by women when they compare a portrait done by a portraitist who did not see them while they described themselves and a portrait done according to other women description about each other. Each woman could see the two portrait versions and discover that the imperfections they considered huge was not even noted by other women whom considered her prettier than she could see herself.

Views	Likes	Unlikes
5.495.293	6.535	242

Quantities till now 19/01/2014[6]

[5]Available at https://twitter.com/DoveBR
[6]Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABups4euCW4



The Dove movie "Shy Camera" confronts scenes of adult women too shy to be filmed or photographed and images of girls comfortably facing the cameras and brings the question: "When did you stop considering yourself beautiful?"

Views	Likes	Unlikes
3.919.013	1.437	88

Quantities till now 19/01/2014[7]

Analyzing Dove posts on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube is understandable this brand maintains a sense of coherence in its published content. The exposed content on Dove social media represents the values of recognition, respect and motivation to the specificities of each kind of female beauty and also a funny comprehension of women world.

Conclusion

Through an online content management with cohesion, coherency and linearity, faithful to the brand desired positioning it is possible to benefit the recognition of brand mission, vision and values through its posts on social medias, taking advantage of its message endorsement by its followers because if they recognize truthfulness at brands speech they will confirm, validate and authenticate brand's identity.

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[7]Available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCFBDiHlgrU