

Old Communication, New Fashioned Way: Branding Life Style products to Target Market through Social Networking Sites

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Abstract: Among the most effective marketing tools used by most companies nowadays to market their products is social media. Due to the increase in social media users, and the success that several brands have had at turning it into a powerful marketing tool, it has become important for marketers and companies to know exactly how to go about marketing their products on social media. The content and methods used by marketers nowadays to reach the target market through social media is changing, the provision of basic information about the product no longer serves to generate interest that can be converted to revenue.

I. Introduction

Social media has rapidly gained widespread popularity in the modern day to become one of the most common ways of communicating and sharing information. E-marketer (2013) estimates that one in every four people worldwide use social media platforms for communicating and sharing. A total of 1.73 billion people used social media in 2013, and the number is expected to grow to 2.55 billion by 2017. Social networking sites have proven to be especially effective in reaching and connecting billions of people worldwide, with currently more than one billion people in the world using social networking sites on a daily basis. Sites such as Facebook, twitter, Google and Instagram make billions of dollars every year in advertising revenue, and have become some of the largest companies in the world using the most sophisticated technologies. The growing popularity of social media in the world has changed the marketing function in business and introduced new ways of reaching the target market and creating a brand image. This paper analyzes how social networking sites can be used to market lifestyle brands to specific target markets.

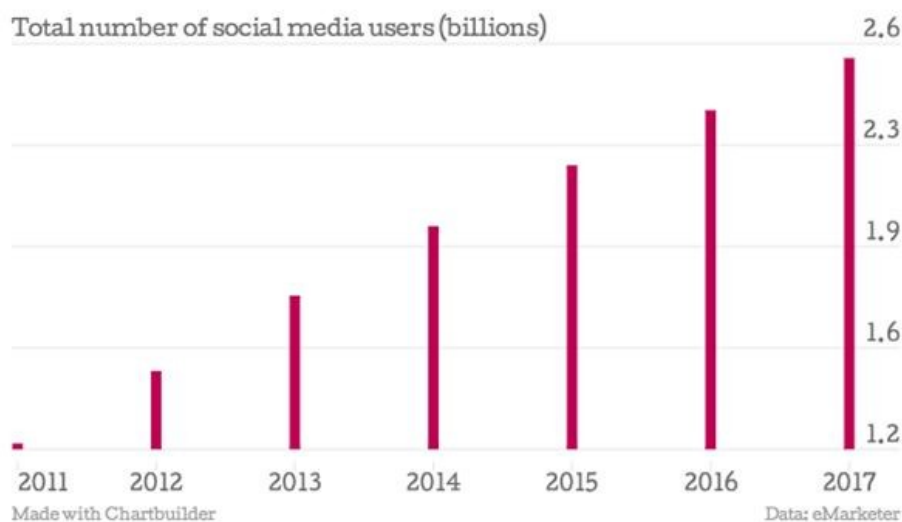


Figure 1: Social media sites are increasingly becoming popular, as shown above the number of users has been steadily growing over the years and is expected to increase even further in the coming years. [Source: E-Marketer]

Lifestyle Products and Social Media

Lifestyle products are products that complement particular opinions and interests in a certain target market (Michman, Mazze, & Greco, 2003). Different people have different tastes and preferences depending on their background and other demographic factors that apply to them, lifestyle products serve to personify and manifest these tastes and preferences. The market performance of lifestyle products depends primarily on its brand recognition and presence in the market (Saviolo & Marazza, 2013). The most successful lifestyle products

are those that are able to create the strongest brands that stand out and are therefore more likely to appeal to a potential buyer. Before the advent of social media, branding was mainly achieved through product differentiation and the thorough marketing through every possible channel that could reach the target market. Paid advertising was the only way to provide information regarding a product to the target market and a lot of effort went into this.

With the advent of social media however, marketing and product branding has changed totally, and very effective campaigns can be run through social media sites at no cost at all to a company (Zarella, 2010). The large audience and the fact that viewers can easily share information posted by companies only has made social media marketing an important function in all major companies. According to a survey, social media marketing increased by 35% in 2013, and is expected to increase further in 2014 due to the growth in the use of mobile devices (Omar, 2014). All major companies now days maintain a page on most social networks that is aimed at the target market for sharing important information and generating interest about the product. Overtime, this has evolved to become an important marketing function that is handled by a team of experts and not just a single person in a bid to create a desired impression and consequently improve the brand image of the advertising company.

There are numerous companies that have used social media to market their brands. The most used social media site is Facebook. Samsung Incorporation for instance, holds the highest number of fans in Facebook. Samsung, uses social media to roll out new products to the market and inform their customers on the specifics details of the new products in the market. They also run competitions aimed at rewarding loyalty and testing the knowledge that customers have on their products. One of the most critical use of the social media by Samsung is to offer customer care services. Fans across the world are able to access information about products through Fan Pages that belong to their specific countries. A perfect illustration is the creation of the Galaxy 11, which is a team of best human footballers who are tasked with competing with the aliens and saving the world from alien invasion. While the campaign dubbed Winner Takes Earth has been trending as a football endeavor for a while, the themes passed across creates an impression of Samsung's attempt to save the world and thus successfully achieving their marketing strategies. Consumers would buy Samsung products with the hope that the match against the aliens could be shown through those gadgets.

Other multi-national corporations have engaged consumers in social media campaigns which include Coca Cola "a billion reasons to believe in Africa" and KLM Dutch Airlines "Social Care" among others. Companies stretch from the electronic innovators to service providers, food and manufacturing industries as well as the banking and insurance sectors. Certainly, the reasons why companies opt for social media marketing is because of the huge following that social media commands (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). It therefore makes it easy to cheaply and rapidly disseminate information to billions of people around the world.

Using Social Media to Create Brand Loyalty and Attract New Customers

Social media is no doubt an effective marketing tool that can be used to create a strong brand impression that can attract new customers and improve the loyalty of the existing customer base. The main question however is how can it be harnessed and used effectively and efficiently to create brand awareness? It is not unusual to hear stories of social media fails by companies that worsened their reputation in the market despite their best intentions. Omar (2014) noted that social media marketing has evolved and companies can no longer simply rely on the engaging content to get the attention of the market. Social media marketing is becoming increasingly complex and requires a lot of creativity and innovativeness in order to attract a large fan base and consequently gain from this (Evans, 2013).

The marketing of lifestyle products is essentially based on the premise that a brand needs to be associated with a person's image in order for that person to prefer that product over others (Schorr, 2014). In order to achieve this, companies try to identify the exact fit of the product in a customer's life and design the product to exactly fit in. A buyer of the product is then persuaded to think that purchasing the product will make them be seen in a particular way and they may buy the product in the end.

Companies such as Lenovo, Apple and Huawei electronics have collectively managed to increase their smartphones sales by nearly 43% in 2013 (Oleaga, 2014). One of the factors attributed to this up surge is venturing into the social media which has increased awareness of the products by the consumers. Samsung, which enjoys the highest social media following recorded an increase of 31% in its smartphone sales in 2013 compared to 2012, with LG and Huawei recording an increase of 4.3% within the same period (Oleaga, 2014). The following figure gives a summary of statistics of the sales between 2012 and 2013 for the aforementioned companies.

Table 1

Worldwide Smartphone Sales to End Users by Vendor in 2013 (Thousands of Units)

Company	2013 Units	2013 Market Share (%)	2012 Units	2012 Market Share (%)
Samsung	299,794.9	31.0	205,767.1	30.3
Apple	150,785.9	15.6	130,133.2	19.1
Huawei	46,609.4	4.8	27,168.7	4.0
LG Electronics	46,431.8	4.8	25,814.1	3.8
Lenovo	43,904.5	4.5	21,698.5	3.2
Others	380,249.3	39.3	269,526.6	39.6
Total	967,775.8	100.0	680,108.2	100.0

Source: Gartner (February 2014)

Figure 2: Table showing an increase in sales of products from various companies between 2012 and 2013. (Source, Gartner)

Social media is more effective in marketing such brands than most other marketing channels. Through social media pages, a company can be able to create an image of the product to the public by using interactive and creative posts that focus more on the lifestyle of people that use that product (Bodnar & Cohen, 2013). A person who is following the company’s page is then more likely to develop the desired image of the product and see why it can be able to fit in their own lifestyles. Since social networking sites allow people to share and retweet material, the information will reach a wider audience than just those people following the company. Furthermore people are more likely to give more trust to information that is shared by their friends as it would seem that they have already tried the product and found it to function as intended. Social media hence provides companies with a platform on which they can create an image of their product as perceived by the final consumer.

Information posted by companies about their brands should be presented in a way that is easily to attract the attention. Details about the product should be explained by relating them to the actual life of the users, this makes it easier for the users to relate with the product and identify the exact ways with which it can improve their lives (Anderson, 2010). Large companies such as Apple and Microsoft have successfully employed this technique. On their pages, customers are provided with options to interact with the company and provide information about how the product is changing their lives, the information received is visible to all visitors to these pages, and hence other customers may find a suitable reason to try the product from here. This is more effective than running adverts on mainstream media such as newspapers and televisions as customers get information about the product directly from other customers and are therefore more likely to believe them.

Unlike other forms of marketing, marketing on social media enables a company to reach the particular target market that they are interested in. This makes it easier to create the brand image and provide more detailed information to the target market. On social media, it is usually a customer or potential customer who follows the companies, this means that only those people interested in the particular product and similar products are on the page. The majority of the people who visit a particular company’s page are people who have at least some basic information regarding the product and are looking for more information regarding the product (Gillin & Schwartzman, 2011). A company can therefore be able to provide information regarding its products that it may not be able to provide on advertisements in mainstream media. This information is also visible to other page visitors and may serve to attract new buyers.

Another feature of social networking sites is that make them appropriate for use as marketing are their photo and video sharing platforms. Omar (2014) agrees that photos and videos are more compelling in convincing customers to buy a company’s product than plain text. Photos posted of the product in actual use are more believable than a story, which gets even better when high resolution and quality videos of the product are posted. Nancy Jenkins, the general manager of Swimwearboutique.com successfully employed the use of online video in social networking sites to attract more customers. Her company did not previously use videos in online marketing, and it was selected for trial in a bid to attract more customers, as a result, 70% of the online

customers said the videos played a great deal in influencing their buying decisions, and 90% said the influence on the buying decision was good and they were not disappointed after the purchase.

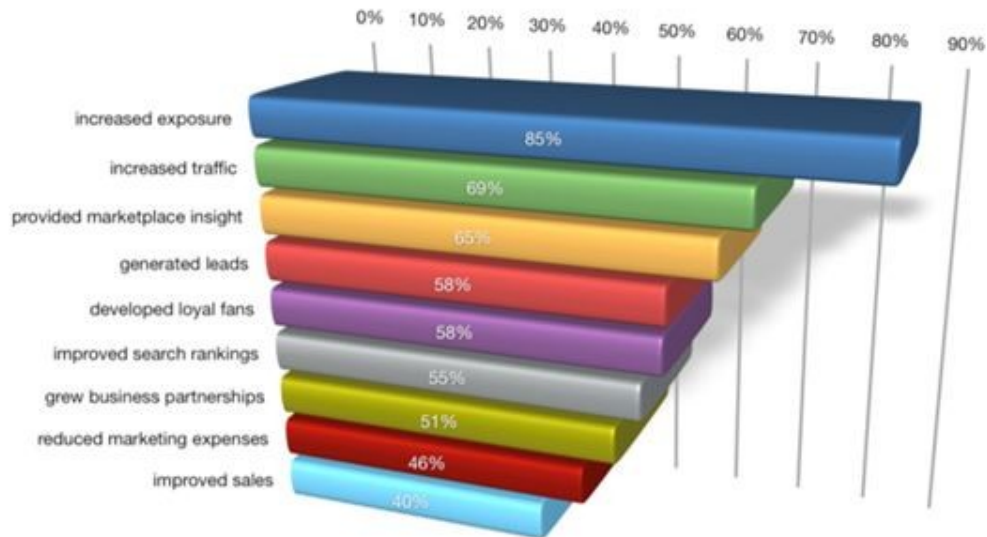


Figure 3: A graph showing the percentage of marketers that have recorded improved performance due to social media marketing. [Source: Google Images]

This means that a company using social networks to market its products should ensure it provides detailed and high quality images and videos of their products, this enables a customer to visualize how the product would work for them, i.e. if they are clothes, how would they look in them, or if it's a car, will it meet their requirements? On social networks, posts with pictures and videos get more attention than those without, hence when a company posts the pictures and videos of its products online, a discussion of its features and performance by the public may ensue, which will serve to provide even more detailed information to the public that could influence a buying decision.

A key feature of lifestyle products that give them their appeal and generate the brand loyalty associated with them is the ability to discern their quality. Users can easily identify quality products from those of low quality in a single trial. For a customer to therefore develop brand loyalty to a particular product, its quality no doubt needs to meet their expectations and its performance should be nothing less. Social networking can be used to give an impression of the quality of a product. This can be achieved through the association of a particular product with complementary products that are of good repute and have a strong brand image (Odden, 2013). In order to do this, information can be provided on a company's page about how their product can be used in conjunction with the other products and link to a description of the other product provided to enable a viewer get information on both products. This is ideal for complementary products such as engine oil and vehicle model, BP Shell used this method to advertise their engine oil and other products in conjunction with Ferrari. Social networks therefore provide companies with an opportunity to associate their brands with other powerful complementary brands, which gives a potential buyer who has used the complementary product a good idea of the quality of the product.

Successful marketing of lifestyle products involves the establishment of long lasting customer relationships. This means companies use ways that are more likely to encourage the customer to make a repeat purchase and become loyal to the brand. Social networks make this possible and easier than the point of sale marketing strategies that are normally used. One way that this is achieved is through direct communication with the customers. Social networking sites provide a forum through which information can be exchanged freely and conveniently with present and potential customers regarding the product. This comes in handy in situations where the product is a bit complicated and accurate information is required before and after purchase (Sterne, 2010). Information that could be provided includes: the price of the product, this enables a customer to compare the product with others; the functionality of the product, i.e. how and where the product works; after sales services, if any. A potential customer is therefore able to receive accurate information about the product in time for making a purchase decision. Another way that social networking sites can aid in the establishment of long lasting customer relationships is by providing a platform through which a company can conduct competitions and draws after which selected winners are awarded free products (Funk, 2013). This has been widely used by Samsung and Apple to market their new products to the market. In Social media, this generates interest in the product among the users and consequently they seek more information concerning the product. This aids in

creating brand recognition and creating a reputation for the product as one of high value. Social networking sites can be instrumental in the development of long lasting customer relationships if properly utilized.

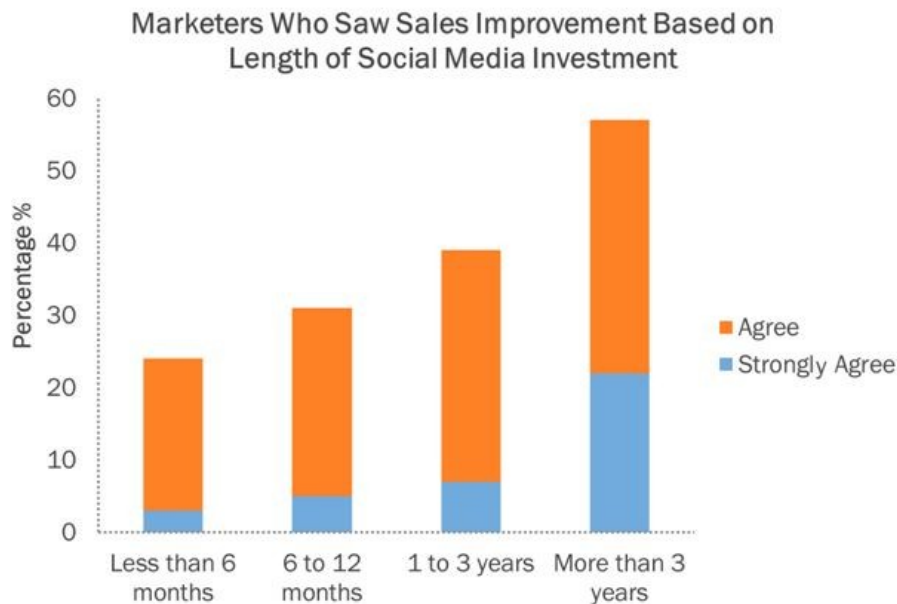


Figure 4: A graph showing marketers who agree that social media marketing is effective. The longer its used as a marketing tool the better the performance of a company. Hence social media marketing is instrumental in creating long term customer relationships. [Source: Google Images]

Sometimes there is a lot of competition between lifestyle brands in the market, most of the times actually, and failure to change the product in response to the changing needs of the market leads to the loss of market share rather quickly. A good example of this is the long standing market rivalry between Samsung and Apple in the mobile telephone market, that has seen both companies change places as the market leaders and trade accusations regarding copyright issues several times. This all points to one thing that is, it is important to understand the activities of your competitors and be able to determine how their activities will impact on the market. The tracking of competitors' activities is easier using social media, although not all the required information will be provided regarding their activities, one can be able to find out the major move they are making and see the response on the market (Scott, 2012). This can be a basis on which a company can change their own products to suit the needs of the market by either correcting on the mistakes made by the competitors or by establishing an even superior brand. Social networks also do provide a platform through which a company can receive product reviews from the market. This can be done by experts in the field who have used their products, by sharing their experiences online. Should this product reviews be good, they are more likely to be believed by customers than the companies' direct advertisements.

Social networks are also more effective in communicating important information about a company's product as the message can be personalized and designed in a way that is more likely to generate interest about the product. Mass messages are not very effective when communicating to the market (Drell, 2012). Social networks provide a platform on which companies can get personal with their customers. It is common now days to see a live chat option in all companies' websites; this is also done on social media. Through the different social networks, a company can respond directly to customer queries on their page, and provide clearer feedback than can be received elsewhere. Customers can also be honored on a company's social pages and awarded for loyalty; this is even more effective and contributes a great deal to customer loyalty. Social pages can also be optimized for search options to enable customers be able to get redirected to a company's website when they search for keywords.

II. Conclusion

Social media is among the greatest inventions of the 21st Century. Communication has been revolutionized through social networks and their usage has increased at a tremendous pace to create multibillion dollar corporations. Product marketing has also been changed greatly as a result. Companies are able to advertise directly to the target market without incurring any cost through their social pages. Through their social pages, companies can present information regarding their products in a creative way that generates interest in

the market and facilitates branding. In this way, social networks act as a powerful platform that can be used to create a brand image and position a product in the market.

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