

Chapter 5.14

Media Richness in Online Consumer Interactions: An Exploratory Study of Consumer–Opinion Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

Consumer-opinion Web sites provide people with unparalleled opportunities to articulate their opinions on products and services, read those of others, or interact with other consumers. The success of such Web sites is limited by three challenges: the quality of contributions, users' motivation to participate, and readers' trust in the writer's competence. Drawing on the concept of media richness, this article investigates how such Web sites could provide richer and more useful exchanges to both consumers and companies. The results suggest that consumer-opinion Web sites can provide richer exchanges when they separate the tasks of information exchange and social interaction and support them with appropriate levels of richness.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer-opinion Web sites enable consumers to voice their opinions on products, services, and companies, read those of others, or interact with other consumers. Thanks to the proliferation of consumer-opinion Web sites and the persistency of the textual records consumers produce, companies and consumers alike can harvest the Web for opinions about particular products and services (Tapscott & Ticoll, 2003). To consumers, these Web sites are sources of pre-purchase or post-purchase product information. To companies, meanwhile, consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions on the Web render an important feedback function, helping them to gather marketing intelligence from the experiences people report about products and services. The goal of this article is to identify strategies that render the information disseminated on consumer-opinion Web sites

more valuable to both consumers and companies. It first explores the nature of consumer-opinion Web sites and then draws on media richness theory to explore the communicative richness of a sample of consumer-opinion Web sites.

THE NATURE OF C2C INTERACTIONS

Consumers interacting on the Web can be viewed from three different conceptual angles. First, consumer interactions—both off-line and on-line—fall into the realm of word-of-mouth communication. Second, interactions on the Web can be looked at from the perspective of virtual communities and, third, the traces consumers leave on the Web constitute knowledge bases companies can harvest to gather marketing intelligence.

C2C Interactions as Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is defined as non-commercial, oral, communication between two or more consumers (Arndt, 1967). WOM is used particularly when buyers perceive the risk associated with a purchase as high (Haywood, 1989). Its non-commercial nature makes it more influential on consumers' purchasing decisions than advertisements (Day, 1971). In general, WOM among consumers incorporates three different activities. First, consumers seek information for immediate use aimed at risk reduction. Second, they obtain and store information for future usage, and, third, they share it in order to influence other people's decisions (Lampert & Rosenberg, 1975). With the advent of the Internet in private households, WOM communication is no longer an oral activity. It has moved to the Web, where consumer-opinion Web sites facilitate WOM communication. In WOM communication, source credibility is an essential requirement for the persuasiveness of a message. It depends on the receiver's perception of the

sender's trustworthiness and expertise (Kiecker & Cowles, 2001). Accordingly, consumers have been found to turn to personal contacts for reassurance and to people they know only loosely for their expertise (Duhan, Johnson, Wilcox, & Harrell, 1997).

On the Web, source credibility is more critical than off-line due to the visual anonymity of participants in computer-mediated interactions. The Web's visual anonymity even enables companies to praise their own products or badmouth those of competitors on consumer-opinion Web sites. However, in online consumer interactions, people's lack of trust in other people's expertise is moderated by their product involvement and product knowledge (Xue & Phelps, 2004). Thus, people who are knowledgeable in a particular product group are in a better position to judge whether a product review is credible and valuable to them. Still, trust in the information provided by others has been found to be a major challenge for opinion platforms on the Web (Hansen, Rezabakhsh, & Bornemann, 2005; Rezabakhsh, Bornemann, Hansen, & Schrader, 2006) and thus also for consumer-opinion Web sites. Therefore consumer-opinion Web sites need to enable participants to learn more about each other rather than rely on people's self-proclaimed expertise, as the development of trust takes time and requires self-disclosure on the part of both interactants (Weber & Carter, 1998).

C2C Sites as Virtual Communities

Interaction in virtual communities satisfies people's information needs as well as their needs for social interaction, either in chat rooms with co-present users or on bulletin boards with temporally disjointed users (Mann & Stewart, 2000; Stafford & Stafford, 2001). Similarly, previous research on consumer-opinion Web sites indicates that consumers visit these sites to gather product information before or after a purchase or to interact with other consumers. Their desire

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