Chapter 17
Social Network Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes and discusses the specificities of membership commitment to online social networks. While delineating these specificities, we introduce the concept of social network citizenship (SNC) to define the characteristics of committed network members. A conceptual model involving commencement, creation, change, and commitment is developed in order to establish the antecedents of this new concept. In addition, the implications for marketing practice are discussed to reveal how companies can acquire social network citizens to retain their social media marketing strategies successful.

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking platforms have become indispensable for our lives today. They facilitate us to socialize, exchange knowledge, share experiences, find commercial or professional opportunities, and have fun. The 20 sites with the highest traffic (Alexa Top 500 Global Sites) are either social networking sites or search engines. Among these, Facebook has the second highest ranking after google.com and it has created a different "internet" of its own with more than 30% of the Internet users all over the world as Facebook members. These online environments are the most apposite tools to meet the needs of the emerging crowd of post-modern consumers (Simmons, 2008), who want to preserve their individualism while interconnecting with others. The need to belong to a group has led the eccentricity seeking modern consumers into forming and enrolling in these social networks (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 1999; Cova and Cova, 2002).

The "linking value" (Cova and Cova, 2002) between individuals exposed through social networks have created business opportunities for firms which want to leverage this interactive consumption of information and word-of-mouth (WOM) in such platforms. One can even talk about

a paradigm shift in new business models encouraging the use of social media as a new strategic instrument to establish online social networks and capture post-modern consumers. In addition to building or using these platforms, it is crucial for firms to understand how to retain their network members within this emerging media. Consumers may have memberships in multiple social networks simultaneously (Garton et al., 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002). Garton et al. (1997) argue that people switch between their social networks for the sake of information sharing, supporting each other, commercial exchanges, socialization, and a sense of belonging. Therefore, building up committed members in a specific network has become a major challenge.

Developing commitment for such platforms is vital but not easy. First of all, there are many online social networks for different purposes, so people have a lot of options to choose from. Secondly, different people have different goals for being online and grabbing the attention of a crowd with different expectations necessitates a strong infrastructure and valuable content. Finally, rather than providing just a platform for socialization and content, an addictive social network has to entice its members more profoundly to become a part of their routine and be successful. This chapter aims to explain the factors that are important to construct such an adhesive social network by discussing different stages that it needs to undergo to attract and sustain devoted members, whom we entitle as *social network citizens*.

BACKGROUND

A social network is a group of individuals or entities that are connected through various factors such as common topics of interest, similar demographics, friendships, purposes of knowledge or commercial exchange, online self-presence, and a sense of belonging. These phenomena have been studied under different names such as virtual communities (Rheingold, 1993), virtual communities of consumption (Kozinets, 1999), online communities, electronic tribes (Cova, 1997; Kozinets, 1999; Cova, 2002; Adam and Smith, 2010), etc. Therefore, literature on these themes as well as extensive studies on computer-mediated communication, social ties, WOM, and social media all provide different perspectives to derive a model for understanding social networks and the issue of commitment.

The switch from one-to-many to many-to-many communication models through online platforms (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) is probably the most influential development in the commencement of online social networking structures. In addition, the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), which introduces consumer adoption of technology through perceived usefulness and perceived ease-of-use, along with WebQual (Lociacono, 2007), which delineates the important factors that make people loyal to websites, provide clues that explain online media effectiveness. Apart from these technology-related antecedents, the need for individuals to belong to communities and build relationships has spurred them to assemble and participate in such mechanisms. Bagozzi and Dholakia (2002) describe this motivation as the "desire for social action" triggered by attitude, emotions, and subjective norms of participants, which in turn create group norms, social identity, and group intentions.

In terms of loyalty, commitment or re-use intentions of social networks, there have been a few studies focusing on theoretical models and their empirical tests. Preece (2001) has discussed the success factors for online communities through the concepts of sociability and usability. The sociability aspect was described by purpose, policy, and people items which were the main ingredients to build an online community; whereas usability which included dialogue and social support, information design, navigation and access, pointed at the abilities and characteristics of an online platform to provide means to the people

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