

Inbound Innovation in Content Marketing: Brand Stories in Social Media

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Abstract: The generation of social media platforms has amplified the content marketing spectrum to encompass a greater variety of innovative strategies. Nonetheless, branding strategies must emphasize how they can stand out in a sea of competing platforms and similar products. This paper discusses the major ideas and difficulties surrounding content marketing and the capacity of social media to influence brand perception. Through social media, brands can establish deeper emotional connections with consumers and convey the core values of the brand. Furthermore, social media has added the aspect of more user interactions and engagement with consumers. Because of that, innovation is constant, and its purpose is to stay on track with the changes in the market and consumer demand. This paper proposes the following suggestions: enterprises need to grasp the spirit of open innovation and good management models, providing target groups with a good shopping experience and practical value.

1 INTRODUCTION

Being creative is the essence of all marketing subfields, including content marketing. Some-how keeping up a brand's intrinsic creativity while introducing innovations and how to chase prey on social media or the web already raises important questions that need to be addressed in content marketing. Today, in a data-driven world, content marketing has turned into a vital strategy for brands wanting to reach their target audiences and establish fairly durable connections with them. The emergence of multimedia platforms has shifted the paradigm of content marketing by social networks given that they provide a chance to gain an unprecedented level of depth in consumer relationships. Social media advertising gives brands the ability to communicate through the art of storytelling by infusing emotional resonance, imparting brand values, as well as influencing the perceptions of consumers. Nike is a globally renowned brand with social media as one of its tools for creating essence as well as showcasing brand values and building loyalty through interaction and emotional engagement with consumers. Teaching

the challenges and best opportunities of social media also makes it possible to develop the methods and strategies with which to succeed in these areas of marketing. Thus, nowadays, brands face not only the new requirements from the new generation of reformers (where innovation and technology development are the main drivers), but they also have to deal with the opportunities and challenges presented to them. Consequently, digitalization and the spread of social media also make consumers more informed through these sources, which in turn brings the necessity of telling brand stories on social media to connect with modern consumers. Spreading brand stories in social media in itself serves to build as well as strengthen public perception about the brand. An exhilarating story can make the industry remember the brand as well as its particular competitive position. Taking this into consideration, transforming communication methods and integrating diverse communication channels and forms within the content marketing context can help brands to better narrate stories, spread culture, and promote the very development of brands on social media, which is the foundation of enterprise development.

2 KEY POINTS AND DIFFICULTIES OF CONTENT MARKETING

With the advent of the digital era, people's sources of information have become increasingly diverse, and the personalized characteristics of consumer behavior have gradually become prominent. How to utilize social media to disseminate brand connotations and effectively tell brand stories are important considerations in brand content marketing.

2.1 Definition and Characteristics of Content Marketing

Unlike traditional marketing, which focuses on product promotion and sales, content marketing involves creating, publishing, and sharing valuable brand content to attract, retain, and convert target audiences into loyal customers and brand advocates. It emphasizes audience-centeredness, providing valuable information and services to establish trust and emotional connections between the brand and its audience. The characteristics of content marketing are as follows:

Firstly, content marketing possesses strong value-driven characteristics. The core of content marketing lies in providing valuable content, which is not merely about the features and functions of products, but more about solving consumers' problems and meeting their needs and interests. Valuable content can help enterprises establish trust, making consumers more willing to interact with the brand.

Secondly, content marketing precisely grasps the audience orientation. Content marketing centers around the audience or potential audience, deeply understanding their needs, interests, and consumer behavior habits, and customizing content that aligns with their preferences to achieve precise and widely-covered marketing. Content marketing strategies should be customer-centric, considering the 3C--customer role, customer journey, and customer touchpoints, thereby providing customers with more personalized content and services, enhancing customer loyalty to the brand, and promoting the long-term development of the brand (Lu & Krowinska, 2024).

Thirdly, the forms of content marketing are diverse. Content marketing encompasses various forms, including but not limited to articles, videos, images, audio, social media posts, etc., with a focus on dissemination through online media to adapt to the media usage habits of audiences in the digital era.

Fourth, data analysis and optimization. Consumption of content leaves digital traces - data that users consciously or unconsciously leave behind (or "give") (Krowinska, et al., 2024). Brands can analyze data trends and optimize subsequent marketing directions through content audits - marketers should set clear goals, extract data from audit results, and select key data as indicators to measure and evaluate content performance. Based on the above data, a required data analysis report can be generated to provide justification and benchmarks for later optimization analysis.

2.2 Key Points and Difficulties of Content Marketing

2.2.1 Originality and Innovation of Content Narration

In content marketing, the originality and innovation of content narratives are crucial for attracting audience attention. Content creation has become a core component of almost all industries capable of utilizing digital marketing. Generally speaking, content narration focuses on three perspectives: brand attributes, inspiration, and self-identity (Zhou et al., 2021). Telling a unique story that is exclusive to the brand itself is the fundamental foundation of content narration. If the emotions conveyed and resonances expressed in brand stories and experiences can evoke strong resonance and positive emotional feedback from the majority of the audience, then it is a successful content narration. It is worth noting that brand narrative content cannot use mass templates--borrowing and plagiarism, as most consumers can hardly tolerate the appropriation of brand culture.

In this digital era of information explosion, people can access countless pieces of information in a short period, and innovation is a crucial means to attract audience attention. New expressions, themes, and perspectives can all inspire brands to create unique and attractive marketing works.

2.2.2 Focusing on Audience Needs and Interest Points

Marketing concepts are often generated by combining two or more ideas into a "novel/original output" (Terho, 2022). These ideas must be imaginative, new to the world, refined, personally relevant to the target audience, and marketing-focused (Titus, 2018). In the digital era, with an explosion of information, standing out amidst the vast amount of content has become a major challenge for content marketing. The

proliferation of digital content-sharing services enables users to independently decide what content, time, and platform to watch, posing a challenge to marketers and forcing them to create more personalized content to meet diverse needs.

Furthermore, as the digital marketing landscape continues to evolve and new platforms emerge, each with unique features and distinct audiences, a piece of marketing content that performs well on one social media platform may not fare as well on another. This underscores the necessity for marketers to tailor their content to different digital channels.

2.2.3 Balancing the Relationship Between Content and Commercial Promotion

The essence of content marketing lies in providing valuable content, rather than mere commercial promotion. However, in practical operations, brands often face the challenge of balancing the relationship between content and commercial promotion. On one hand, brands need to ensure the independence and artistic quality of marketing content, avoiding excessive commercialization and content stereotyping. On the other hand, brands need to maximize the display of the actual value of their products and attract sufficient purchasing power, while also reflecting the brand's storytelling. This balancing skill requires brands to possess profound market insight, innovative content creativity, and precise audience targeting ability, to stand out in fierce market competition.

2.2.4 Evaluation and Quantification of Content Marketing Effectiveness

The evaluation and quantification of the effectiveness of content marketing is another major challenge. Due to the often lagging and indirect nature of content marketing's effects, it is difficult to measure directly through indicators such as sales data. Therefore, enterprises need to establish a scientific evaluation system that comprehensively utilizes indicators such as web-site traffic, social media engagement, brand awareness, and user satisfaction to evaluate the effectiveness of content marketing and adjust optimization strategies accordingly.

3 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING BRAND CONNOTATION

In the digital era, social media has evolved to be one of the main tools for brands in communication and

shaping. Nowadays, brands no longer limit themselves to traditional advertising methods but find a direct interaction platform with their consumers through social media, which helps build and disseminate brand image and value. Along with conventional channels, social media allows brands to highlight their essence. And not only that, it brings out the emotional attachment and engagement between brands and consumers.

3.1 Building Brand Stories and Emotional Connections

The central concept behind brand storytelling is that a brand can touch consumers' emotional needs deeply and create its compelling uniqueness. On social media, brands can tell their stories via diverse formats like images, videos, and texts, which can be shared by users. Such a kind of interactivity and participation makes storytelling all the more promising as well as attractive. Nike is a brand that tells rich tales of the human experience in connection with the brand. As an example, Nike weaved the personal journeys of athletes (e.g., Klein) in line with the brand values of "courage" and "transcending limits" to reach a worldwide discourse around "Just Do It" and "Dream Crazy" campaigns (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Social media allows Nike to narrate the stories to consumers through advertisements but also use platforms like Instagram and Twitter to have dialogues with consumers. While echoes of User Generated Content (UGC) and stories from consumers involved in the collaborative process strengthen the brand linkage, the brand enhances the emotional connection. The use of hashtags like #JustDoIt and #NikeRunning on Instagram allows consumers to post their sports adventures and their testimonies of progress without borders. This instills strong emotional bonds globally.

Retailers use this technique not just for promotion but for brands to have a well-established image mingled with daily consumer lives and to feel the imperishable part of it. Through sport, Nike exemplifies how even ordinary people can achieve extraordinary feats and develop a strong emotional connection with the brand that leads to greater confidence and loyalty.

3.2 Shaping Brand Image and Value Recognition

The influence of social media is major in the editing of brand image. Undoubtedly, social media takes the

form of a window for brands to let consumers peek through at the way they want them to perceive themselves. What is more, it also gives consumers a lead space to convey their thoughts about the brand. With the bi-directional information flow on social media, brands build consistency in their image through timely content updates and customer feedback, thus enhancing brand value recognition, among other things (Wood, 2000).

This maintenance of a brand image depends on the visual craftsmanship (e.g., logos, product design, and so on) together with a brand's essential values and spirit. Thus, Apple's social media presence is in harmony with its brand image, being minimalist, inventive, and high-end, which leads to a clear target for its brands. This brand positioning is the result of a wide-spread network of social platforms, which is characterized not by a straightforward advertising promotion but by an engaging communication process that is mutually developed by consumers and brands (Zhang & Kim, 2017).

When devising their strategies for branding social value identity, some social media brands turn their attention to consumer communication opportunities. Consumers do not only receive brand identity. They are also directly involved in the conversation and become thinkers through talking, liking, sharing, and other means to express their identification and support (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016). This participatory spirit transforms merchandise into a kind of "different than life" state and gives a genuine feeling of belonging, which fuses consumers and brands.

Take, for example, Starbucks. It regularly presents topics like sustainability, social responsibility, and public welfare projects on its account, which further confirms the brand's image of ecological responsibility (Kotler & Keller, 2016). These shared values make them feel as if they are not only supporting a coffee brand. Still, different from other brands, this one has responsibility and impact orientation. Thus, the category of what the company limits to social media is not only product awareness but also consumer confidence in the brand's worth.

3.3 Enhancing Interaction and User Engagement

Unlike any other digital marketing platform, social media stands out with its interactivity. Consumers directly connect with brands through two-way conversations. Modern social media has fundamentally changed the outlook of brands from being one-sided subjects of information transmission

to active participants in the conversation with the consumer. These types of interactions not only provide valuable insight for brands to identify and predict customer needs in real-time but also allow continual adaptation of their marketing strategies, which lowers the risk of losing ground in competition (Wood, 2000).

Brands raise interest in UGC and make the interaction not only about mere communication between consumers and brands but also about UGC transmission and exchange. On several social media platforms, users are encouraged to share their experiences, write reviews, and post photos of the products they use and/or consume; these are ways through which stronger user engagement is created (Zhang & Kim, 2017). Through the incorporation of events or challenges into the social media pages, Nike gets people to post their athletic videos and feats to establish a collaborative partnership with customers. This participation feeling creates a close bond between the brand and its market, wherein the consumer views themselves as a team member planning the brand story.

Furthermore, social media communities provide instant feedback that inspires brands to keep their target audiences up-to-date. Such feedback is important for adapting branding campaigns and content creation, which increases the chances of brand communication being successful (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Observing Z-cut campaigns on social media channels, a brand can gather in-depth information to identify consumer preferences and the corresponding advertisements, thus making strategies for upcoming promotions.

Social media acts as a laboratory for analyzing attitudes and behaviors. Various analytics arise as brands swiftly gather extensive consumer information. By unknown methods, brands adeptly understand how different strategies function. Consequently, they can more accurately tailor their brand strategies and become successful competitors.

4 SUGGESTIONS FOR BRANDS TO EFFECTIVELY TELL THEIR BRAND STORIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Nowadays, more and more brands have joined the ranks of those who disseminate their own culture on social media. Social media has brought convenience to the dissemination of brand culture, but at the same time, how to truly disseminate the brand's own culture

has become a question that every brand will ponder over. Brands need to think about how they can compare and stand out among numerous platforms and similar products in related industries.

4.1 Deepening the Connection Between the Brand and Consumers

4.1.1 Be Targeted

In the current era of high traffic, an increasing number of social media platforms are emerging, each with distinct communication methods and target audiences. Therefore, if a brand wishes to maximize its promotional impact, it should post targeted marketing content on various platforms.

Taking Xiaohongshu as an example, it is a social media platform that combines video and image-text formats. By comparing users' preferences and browsing dwell time through big data, Xiaohongshu calculates the most likely similar content that users are interested in and pushes it to them, thus creating a harmonious content ecosystem. It should be noted that creators provide a comment section under each note for other users to exchange views, making browsing notes a social way. Under the influence of social mode, the wording of content marketing becomes softened, enhancing users' desire to purchase products. While conveying brand stories, it can also increase the popularity of the brand at that time. In summary, light social interaction, high quality, and strong ornamental notes are likely to stand out in Xiaohongshu and become excellent content marketing (Liu, 2024).

Therefore, brands must be clear about the consumption level of their products within the current product chain, and then use different methods to attract users at that level. Taking Xiaohongshu as an example, only when users click on the notes posted by the brand can they potentially purchase the company's products. In short, brands should focus on analyzing the target audiences and groups of different platforms, as well as the information presentation characteristics of the platforms. By combining the characteristics of the brand, they can design and present corresponding content to target groups.

4.1.2 Maintain Originality

With the rapid development of the internet era, the speed of information transmission is getting faster and faster. Homogenized information transmission cannot serve as a marketing tool for a company striving for growth, and such an approach can also

limit the company's development space within the industry. Therefore, it is particularly important to find ways for a brand to stand out among the mainstream. This requires not only the right timing but also the brand's belief in adhering to its original aspirations and continuously innovating and evolving.

For brands, the most crucial task is to capture the attention of the general consumer audience and stimulate their purchasing desire, thereby increasing the likelihood of them purchasing products. However, when browsing social media, consumers do not want to be disturbed by various similar brand cultures and advertising messages. Most of the time, the general public pursues niche interests. This psychological characteristic makes them want to see something novel and distinctive, including the brands they may encounter. If the marketing content of this brand is loved by the target audience and unique within the same industry, they may recommend the brand to their acquaintances. By combining audience preferences and striving for innovation and uniqueness, the dissemination of brand culture will become faster and more convenient, and the company's reputation will also increase accordingly.

4.2 Diversification of Communication Forms

4.2.1 Infotainment

With the continuous development of the economy, people's desire for entertainment has become increasingly strong. Entertainment has gradually become a significant part of today's society. Moreover, entertainment is not limited to the entertainment industry. Almost any field can be seamlessly integrated with entertainment, which makes people more willing to explore new things, including those they may not ordinarily be inclined to engage with (Wu, 2005).

The characteristic of entertainment-oriented advertising lies in its strong entertainment color and function while disseminating advertising information. Therefore, to spread brand culture, making the information that the brand wants to convey as entertaining as possible is undoubtedly a more likely way for the audience to accept the brand culture.

4.2.2 Conduct UGC Activities

UGC is an internet term that has emerged in recent years, referring to User Generated Content. Before

UGC became popular among most brands, companies typically relied on their operational accounts to publish content related to their products. Most people who do not actively follow brand promotions on social media, would simply scroll past, and carefully designed cultural promotions may not have much effect. The emergence of UGC has solved most of these troubles for brands. Unlike promoting one's own company's account, there is no need to worry about platform restrictions on the account's activity leading to a lack of viewers. Each blogger introduces products in different ways; some use reason, some use emotion, and some combine the two by using emotional language. Emotional language is the ability to fuse user language and product language perceptually, touching the inner feelings of the target audience (Chen, 2024). Plus, bloggers have a fixed fan base who will watch the content posted by the bloggers. In summary, content marketing through the UGC model is a low-risk, high-return marketing method for brands.

5 CONCLUSION

In summary, the focus of content marketing lies in creating valuable brand content to attract and convert target audiences. The challenges include ensuring the originality and innovation of content narration, making brand content stand out in an era of information explosion; focusing on audience needs and interests to achieve personalized and unique marketing; closely linking content with commercial promotion to avoid excessive commercialization affecting the promotion of brand connotation; and evaluating and quantifying the effectiveness of content marketing to establish a scientific evaluation system. These challenges require brands to possess profound insight and innovation capabilities. Through social media, brands can establish deeper emotional connections with consumers, convey the core values of the brand, and shape a unique brand image. In addition, the interactivity and user engagement of social media further enhance the two-way communication between brands and consumers, helping brands maintain vitality in the market and increase consumer loyalty. In this era, brands need to continuously innovate in promotional marketing methods to cater to public demand and market changes. Under the continuous competition and interaction of products within the same category, the enterprises behind them will also become more vigorous. In this era, enterprises need to grasp the spirit of open innovation and good management

models, providing target groups with a good shopping experience and practical value.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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