

Identifying and Responding to Customer Needs on Facebook Fan Pages

Aikaterini Manthiou, Department of Marketing, Rouen Business School, Mont-Saint-Aignan, France

Lanlung Chiang, College of Management, Yuan Ze University, ChungLi, Taiwan

Liang (Rebecca) Tang, Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management, College of Human Science, Iowa State University, Ames, IA, USA

ABSTRACT

Understanding the needs or expectations customers aim to pursue is the priority of marketing communications. This study employed a theoretical approach to identify and respond to the needs that consumers seek to satisfy on fan pages. The customer needs were evaluated from functional, hedonic, social, and psychological perspectives. A two-step confirmatory factor analysis was applied. All four of the need components make significant contributions to the overall need on fan pages. Businesses in the food service industry are advised to build an emotional bond with consumers, enhance two-way communication, provide useful information and encourage entertainment on their fan pages.

Keywords: Entertainment, Fan Pages, Information Source, Social Identity, Socializing

INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, social network sites have been considered as the next great wave in technology, business, and social life (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Social network sites (SNSs) such as MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook could be effective approaches to make connections with millions of people with similar interests and goals, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. Cortese

(2011) indicated that 62 percent of frequent social networkers trust their peers' opinions when making a major purchase decision, but only 11 percent trust an advertisement. Weber (2009) also argued that SNSs could be a platform for businesses and marketers to break through the clutter and enlist brand advocates for their cause at no cost (Fulgoni, 2011). SNSs are used as a marketing tool for diverse purposes. Many businesses use these sites to gain consumers' feedback about their products and services,

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explore new market segments, and connect both existing and prospective consumers, and inquiry about their competitors (Shih, 2009).

Among a number of SNSs, Facebook is currently the world's most successful SNS. Facebook has over 800 million users and 50% of Facebook's active users check their Facebook accounts on any given day (Cortese, 2011). The business can send hundreds of thousands of visits, build passionate followings around a brand, and bring in sales and consumers on its Facebook fan page (Weber, 2009). An analysis of the top 100 brand Facebook pages indicated that a business can reach an additional 34 potential customers from one fan on its Facebook page (Fulgoni, 2011). These results suggested that Facebook has a significant impact on brand-related communications and serves as an effective tool for customer relationship management (Hanson, 2000).

The food service industry provides experiential products, which can benefit from Facebook compared with manufacturing products. Facebook is essentially a platform for sharing, and sharing experiences is innate to human nature (Ulusu, 2010). The communication that occurs as a consequence of natural engagement is pertinent, meaningful, and permanent (Cortese, 2011). Many restaurant businesses have realized the importance of fan pages and are ready to take advantage of this opportunity. Although many information sources provide the latest techniques and enterprise-building tactics so that businesses can immediately benefit from the fan pages, industry practitioners should keep in mind that the use of techniques or skills on the fan pages is an aid to customer communications (Shih, 2009). Understanding customer needs or expectations is always the priority of marketing activities (Muñiz & Schau, 2005). Especially in light of the innumerable competitors of fan pages and the minimal switching costs for users, it is imperative to understand customer needs so that restaurants can create effective fan pages that spark customers' interests, meet their expectations, and inspire loyalty to both the fan page and the brand. However, to the

authors' knowledge, no previous studies have investigated customer needs on a SNS with fan pages. This study aimed to fill this research gap.

Some previous studies have investigated the application of SNSs in the hospitality and tourism industry. Most of these studies focused on the users' participation and involvement in online communities (e.g. Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Lee, 2007; Qu & Lee, 2011). Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) investigated users' participation in online travel communities and suggested that four fundamental needs drive the extent to which users participate in these virtual communities: (1) functional need; (2) social need; (3) psychological need; (4) hedonic need. Since Facebook can be viewed as an online community, the desires customers seek to satisfy on fan pages can also be explained by these four needs. However, the study of Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) was conducted especially for online travel communities and done before the launch of Facebook (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Therefore some unique features of fan pages were not incorporated into the measures and discussions of the need constructs in Wang and Fesenmaier (2004)'s study. The authors of the present study re-interpreted the four needs as laid out in Wang and Fesenmaier's work and tested the overall need structure with these four needs on a SNS with fan pages.

The purpose of the study is to develop a theoretical foundation to identify and respond to customer needs on fan pages. The results of the present study are of importance for both academics and industry practitioners. The paper contributes to the evolving literature of social media marketing, and provides a theoretical framework for future research investigating customer involvement on SNSs with fan pages. From a practical perspective, this study helps restaurant industry understand and predict customer behavior on fan pages, and provides fan page designers guidance to improve communication effectiveness. The specific objectives of this research are to: (1) re-interpret the need paradigm proposed by Wang and Fesenmaier (2004) on fan pages, and (2) assess

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