Counter-brand and alter-brand communities: the impact of Web 2.0 on tribal marketing approaches

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Abstract This paper deals with the phenomenon of tribal marketing, which is increasingly fuelled by the development of online groupings utilising Web 2.0 technologies. After having addressed the key concepts of brand community and co-creation of value, the paper analyses new trends in online community behaviour, taking an in-depth look at two specific cases through an ethnographic/netnographic approach: the Warhammer tabletop wargame community and the CouchSurfing travel and accommodation community. It appears that such communities may constitute a significant risk for companies who have thus far based their offering on a ‘market with’ approach. The case study clearly shows that groupings of consumers are capable of developing potentially dangerous opposition and/or competitive offerings with little or no assistance from companies. These online groupings generate alter brands and counter brands that present opportunities and threats for existing brand managers.

Keywords brand community; co-creation; CouchSurfing; tribal marketing; Warhammer

Introduction

Brand communities have become an increasingly important phenomenon in contemporary marketing (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). This was clearly stimulated by the rise of Web 1.0 (McWilliam, 2000). With the emergence of Web 2.0, many marketing and consumer-behaviour commentators believe that brands have found the perfect toolset to collaborate with their most loyal consumers and co-produce linking value for the brand (Cova & Cova, 2002). This linking value represents a surplus that belongs to brands that have developed a community of enthusiast consumers, as opposed to those who do not. Nevertheless, new developments in online marketing demonstrate that the situation has not evolved in the way that the promoters of brand community management had expected (Atkin, 2004; Vescovi, 2007). Thanks to Web 2.0 technologies, consumers that belong to communities become significantly empowered in their relationships with companies that manage their favourite brands (Uncles, 2008). This has led them not only to collaborate with
those companies as the latter wished, but also to produce their own interpretations of meaning and strategy associated with the brands that they prefer (Wipperfürth, 2005). Hence, these consumers produce a linking value that is not always exactly what the brand strategists had in mind (O’Guinn & Muniz, 2005). Moreover, these consumer-producers can now generate their own brands, which can then be disseminated widely using Web 2.0 technologies (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). There are many examples of this, such as Linux and Firefox but also Bookcrossing, Letterboxing, Geocaching, and so on.

The goal of this paper is twofold: (i) to explore the relationships on the web between communities of consumer-producers and brands when these communities do not collaborate with the companies concerned; (ii) to explore what motivates consumer-producers to engage in these relationships without collaborating with companies.

We shall begin by redefining the notions of brand community and the type of value they co-create for the brands. This will lead us to examine the side effects of current strategies upon consumers, and consequently to investigate drawbacks of brand community strategies through a first case study. Then, using a second case study, we shall investigate how initiatives that emanate directly from communities of consumers are able to generate brands with a strong communal value. Finally, we shall endeavour to analyse these cases, and structure what they teach us about the future of online tribal marketing using the relevant theoretical frameworks.

**Brand communities**

Over the past decade, a postmodern outlook paved the way for so-called communal approaches to consumption (Cova, 1997). One paradigmatic example involved groups of Harley Davidson devotees, which were detailed in a pioneering article by Schouten and McAlexander (1995). The advent of the Internet subsequently advanced the idea that brands can create consumer communities revolving around their websites (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; McWilliam, 2000). Reincorporating studies on the complex relationship between brands and consumers (Fournier, 1998) into this consumer community construct, a brand community concept (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) then came to the forefront of the marketing scene. Such has been the rapid diffusion of brand community management over the past five years (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Hermann, 2005; Cova & Pace, 2006; Schouten, McAlexander, & Koenig, 2007; Thompson & Sinha, 2008) that it has overshadowed other tribal marketing approaches, which were not centred on a cult brand (Cova & Cova, 2002). Many companies have sought to gain profit from groups of fanatics of their brands. The specialised press, together with academic publications, have largely supported these moves. *Business Week* (August 9, 2004) announced, in its 4th annual *Business Week/Interbrand* Ranking of the World’s Most Valuable Brands, the rise of the cult brand:

Analyzing the shifts in this year’s ranking, though, it’s clear something else is in the air: Consumers are changing how they view and even relate to brands. They remain purchasers of products, true, but through the power of the Internet and as a result of cultural and demographic shifts, many consumers now actively form larger communities around their favourite brands. Creating this new sense of belonging is what the most successful marketers are striving for.
Finally, marketing research (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009) has shown that identification with the brand community leads to positive consequences on consumer behaviours, including loyalty to the brand. This explains why brand community has become one of the hot topics in marketing, and especially in online marketing (Vescovi, 2007).

In the rapidly expanding field of brand communities, alongside the US brand Harley Davidson – which has hypnotised marketers everywhere – in Europe there is the famous example of Ducati (Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005). The management model that Ducati created has led to great success, and today Ducati is not only the darling of the European motorcycle industry, but also a cult brand with a growing number of followers called Ducatists. In this model, staff members and consumers have the same status with regard to the brand community, that is, they are indistinguishable insofar as they belong to the same community. On the one hand, staff members consume brand products; on the other, consumers can be transformed into producers of events, ideas, and even brand accessories. Thus Ducati and the Ducatists represent a classic example of how brand communities provide a favourable context for the emergence of consumer-producers who can become true partners of the company.

Co-creation of value on Web 2.0

This erasure of boundaries between consumers and producers is clearly very much in fashion, as witnessed notably by the consumer-generated content approaches that Web 2.0 has popularised, and above all by the co-creation concept that the new Service-Dominant Logic (SDL) marketing theory has introduced (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The point is no longer to ‘market to’ consumers but to ‘market with’ consumers. The company’s co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) together with the consumer(s) is the key process in this new marketing logic, which has become increasingly popular over the years (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). With brand communities, the concept of value co-creation has been pushed to the limit insofar as brands are being transformed into virtual platforms (Arvidsson, 2006) used to stage the aggregation of staff members and consumers united by the same passion.

One of the basic foundations for success among brands that develop community spirit is the quest for specific value, which is jointly created by consumers and producers, and is known as linking value. The linking value is the value of the brand and its related products and services for the construction, development, or maintenance of the interpersonal link – even ephemeral – between consumers (Cova, 1997). According to Kates (2006, p. 96), ‘the linking value reaches its most organized expressions in brand configurations such as brand communities, subcultures of consumption and cultures of consumption’. Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) study of brand community provides evidence of this sort of linking value. The research they carried out in the neighbourhood of Fairlawn in Bloomingdale, a small Midwestern town in the United States, revealed (among other things) the informal, assumed, and symbolic linking value of the Saab brand for Saab drivers and of the Bronco brand for Bronco drivers there. Ponsonby-McCabe and Boyle (2006, p. 182) argue that the linking value:

... can be formal or informal, stimulated or supported by a firm’s marketing endeavours or independently by a number of independent consumers. It can be
physical, in the form of organized events and/or conventions in particular locations, or it can be symbolic and assumed – that is, consumers assume that other owners/consumers of the product or service feel in some way linked to them.

Linking value has to be produced, and at present, companies invest significant resources in this. However, companies cannot produce linking value without the support of consumers who work at producing it. Communities of consumers are both creators and users of linking value: the most important resource in offline and online gatherings is the crowd. The more people participate, the greater the opportunities to interact and develop relationships: the consumers create the community through their participation. Consumers generate the linking value that is then attached to the brand and its products or services, which is consequently perceived as more valuable.

Recent research (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008) highlight the consumers’ communities active role in the creation of linking value on the Web. First, consumers’ communities provide an affective value. Consumers produce and use communal relationships and create feelings of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, and passion that permeate the brands, products, and services with which they deal, which are, subsequently, redistributed among these consumers. Second, they provide a cultural value. Consumers are responsible for selecting ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, and images that are then put into products and services. These voluntary contributions of consumers’ communities ‘rely on motivations intrinsic to humanity’ (Cook, 2008, p. 68). According to Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell (2008), that consumer contribution on the Web tends to be driven by three main factors: intrinsic enjoyment, when individuals create for the sake of creation – what happens to the creation and the effect of the creation are secondary; self promotion, when individuals create with the specific goal of self-promotion – here, the creation is a means to an end, such as a potential future career; and change perceptions, when individuals create because they intend to have a specific effect on a target audience – the goal of the creation is to change hearts and minds, to influence people.

**When the scenario is unexpected**

However, the ideal corporate scenario, formulated by the SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) and its adopters (Cook, 2008) in which consumers jointly create and produce linking value for the brand, seems to be threatened by a series of phenomena, which have been favoured by or even driven by Web 2.0 technologies. Recent research has highlighted the many problems a company can have when interacting with this kind of hard-to-control collective actor whom the Net has spontaneously helped to foster and nurture (Muniz & Schau, 2007). Online consumers appear to be more active, participative, resistant, militant, playful, social, communitarian (Kucuk, 2008) and overall savvy (Macdonald & Uncles, 2007) than ever before. Through the integration of resources, they become influential participants in the construction of experiences (Baron & Harris, 2008). Certain consumers’ shared passion for a cult brand will translate, through a range of collective learning systems, into expertise and competency, imbuing online tribes with greater legitimacy in production and marketing matters (O’Guinn & Muniz, 2005). As a result, the presence of tribes composed of passionate, united, and expert fans has led to a rebalancing of company–consumer power
relationships. Thus the question today is who owns the brand? ‘This is an obvious question … Brand communities assert considerable claims on ownership … These impassioned and empowered consumer collectives assert more channel power and make claims on core competencies formerly reserved for the marketer’ (O’Guinn & Muniz, 2005, p. 268). Consumers now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property rather than as privately owned intellectual property. Familiarity breeds ownership: brands ‘belong to us’ and not to the companies that supposedly own them. In this approach, consumers worked together in a dematerialised manner, using Web 2.0 technologies to create linking value, but not necessarily as the company might have imagined. Companies are not always capable of capturing this value. Furthermore, some consumer communities can create their own brands and capture the value that such brands generate. This is notably the case in the open-source software community with the emergence of brands like Linux, which has become a real competitor for brands developed by traditional market players (Pitt, Watson, Berthon, Wynn, & Zinkhan, 2006).

The idea of co-creating value with communities of consumers who love a given brand is increasingly being integrated into new theoretical marketing frameworks (Atkin, 2004, Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004), but consumer-producers seem not to want to be pigeonholed. Web 2.0 tools have allowed them to develop communities of fanatics of a given brand that interact with companies to create value jointly (tribal partners). In addition, as all the research published in Consumer Tribes (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007) has shown, consumer-producers can also generate communities that may oppose or contest the management of their favourite brands (tribal opponents). Another possibility is to develop communities that will create a brand related to a collective project which may in turn compete, either consciously or unconsciously, with existing corporate brands (tribal competitors). What follows are two case studies: in the first, a brand has been generated on the web by a community that has decided to oppose the brand community from which it emerged; and in the second, a brand has been created spontaneously by a community that was created to work on a project. The collective innovation orientation (Kozinets et al., 2008) of the two communities differs: the first shows a communo-ludic orientation on a wargame, while the second presents a telo-specific orientation on a hospitality project.

**A dual case study**

In order to analyse the situation effectively in an exploratory manner, the case-study method has been retained (Bonoma, 1985). The two case studies are based (Belk, 2006; Kates, 2006) on a dual ethnographic/netnographic method. They are both part of the wider research programme aimed at understanding the future of brand communities. The first case study deals with a brand community: the Warhammer community. Warhammer is a strategic battle game played with various miniatures on a battlefield. An ethnographic approach has been developed, involving participant observation and active interviews with a community of Warhammer fans in France. A netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002) has been conducted on two major forums connected with this community (Warhammer on line; forum Warhammer). The second case study deals with a community brand: the CouchSurfing community. An ethnographic approach has been developed, involving non-participant observation and active interviews with a community of CouchSurfing members in France. A
netnographic approach has been conducted on the site of this community and on its related links. Both ethnography and netnography have been completed by an analysis of the archives of economic magazines (*Business Week*, *New York Times*, etc.) that have dealt with the phenomena at play inside these communities. This data has been analysed in an interpretative manner.

**Warhammer and the opponent community case**

Warhammer is a strategic battle game played with various miniatures on a battlefield. It was launched in 1983. Warhammer belongs to Games Workshop (Nottingham, UK), the largest and the most successful tabletop wargames company in the world. Warhammer is a social and convivial activity loved by millions of gamers, who spend many of their waking hours collecting, creating, painting, and building up the metal or plastic miniature armies that they will go on to command on a carefully prepared tabletop battlefield.

For consumers, entering the Warhammer universe involves them making an effort that they hope will be rewarded by the joy of becoming an insider: ‘Buying a Warhammer figurine does not mean that you are buying a basic product but instead that you are penetrating a rich universe where customers can do something transcendent’ (Marc). In reality, Warhammer is a very complex universe. Moreover, this is what really interests fans: not the purchase of some product, but the fact that they are embarking on an initiation path that will help them to improve their performance (learning assembly or painting techniques, familiarising themselves with the rules of the game, etc.). Buying Warhammer products also means joining a social environment in which relationships are constructed against a backdrop comprised of diverse and stratified contexts (outlets, clubs, parties, events, etc.). Consumers take full responsibility for their passion and are ultimately very happy to find a company that responds to their desire to create and/or play.

Warhammer is not a marketing thing but a sect that is not very dangerous at all since nobody forces you to join. You believe in Warhammer principles but you don’t need to. However, you also know that if you do join, there are rules to follow because it’s a community. It’s like when you play a board game with somebody, you can’t do just anything. (Nicolas)

Consumers are asked, where necessary, to offer an opinion, come up with new ideas, or criticise rules. Customers’ opinions, especially when communicated in online chat rooms, enable Games Workshop to improve its products and bring out new items that will solidify fans’ loyalty, especially since the ultimate consumers are the people who actually came up with the idea for the innovations in the first place. The underlying goal here is to promote exchanges among fans in order to create a kind of emulation and shared intelligence within the community. Some will create their own clubs and organise tournaments to be sure of regularly finding other fans who share their hobby. As fans, they know what profile a person needs to join a Warhammer community.

In my school, we created a Warhammer club and play matches at lunchtime or if the teacher is off. There are always other friends who don’t know Warhammer but come to play. It’s cool knowing that you’ll be the person explaining the rules and giving advice about how to get an army. (Gregory)
The biggest consumer-fans – the hobbyists – create costumes that they wear to define their army and associated beliefs. Watching them walk around during a Games Day is an event in and of itself. They can be admired or laughed at because of their army. In reality, they are even more involved in promoting the passion than employees, since they like to show off without seeking any reward, doing it for the simple pleasure of defending what they believe in. The positive motives of consumers to co-create value (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) are the development of the community, enjoyment, and self improvement.

That said, Games Workshop has had to face contestation within its own brand community for several years. Some members harbour serious doubts about Games Workshop’s role, accusing it of making exorbitant profits from players. This criticism is embodied in many players’ joke that Games Workshop’s acronym GW actually stands for ‘Great Weasel’. This theme is particularly prevalent online. For example, the following comment was seen on a forum: ‘It costs a few cents to make a plastic sprue. It really does. GW makes exorbitant amounts of money selling stuff to stores, who in turn have a standard 40% markup, and then they sell it to you and I – the consumer’ (Dashofpepper). The question became more embarrassing for Games Workshop when a number of consumers, outraged at sales prices, began manufacturing fake figurines and offered them online (http://www.boardgamegeek.com) or at collectors’ fairs. At the same time, other consumers opened sites explaining how to create battle decors for Warhammer oneself (http://www.military-kits.com). The company countered by criticising the counterfeit figurines or decors for their mediocre quality and use of dangerous materials. The company was assisted by some members of the brand community who attacked the anti-capitalist position defended by the consumer-producers of these imitations: ‘It’s rubbish to say that counterfeiters are operating the capitalist system by producing figures cheaper than GW’ (Kilkrazy). It remains that many fans felt in love with these counterfeit figurines and ended up purchasing them en masse. Furthermore, a game called Confrontation was created a few years ago by two French men, Jean Bey and Raphaël Guiton. Bey is a role-playing-game enthusiast and has been interested in figurines for a long time. He worked at Games Workshop for six years before creating Confrontation with Guiton, a fellow figurine fan. Bey sought an original environment that would be less complicated and onerous than that of Warhammer. Confrontation was the result. The game was immediately successful, and a community of ex-Warhammer fans sprang up around the game. The main motive of these players was to escape from what they perceived as outrageous commercial exploitation of players by Games Workshop. Very quickly, the company founded by Bey, Rackham, became very successful, and some members of the Confrontation community nickname it « Racaille » (a play on words with the French term for rabble) to criticise the exploitation of wargamers that the company will in turn resort to. One can hence see that for members of a brand community, the main negative motive that can explain the opposition of gamers is the feeling of being exploited by the company.

**CouchSurfing and the competitor community case**

CouchSurfing is an online travel community of globally minded and socially conscious travellers. It ‘seeks to internationally network people and places, create educational exchanges, raise collective consciousness, spread tolerance and facilitate cultural understanding’ (http://www.couchsurfing.com). Its founders claim that they are aiming at ‘Creating a Better World, One Couch at a Time’ (http://www.couchsurfing.com).
CouchSurfing is enabled by an interactive Web 2.0 website that offers free membership to anyone, thereby facilitating social interactions amongst people.

Except for some technical staffers who maintain the website, CouchSurfing is run entirely by volunteers, where some members have particular responsibilities within the organisational structure of the community. CouchSurfing requires a contribution from all its members, for example providing accommodation and showing another member of the community around the town requires care, hospitality, imagination, and a certain symbolism. There are also ambassadors worldwide who organise gatherings and activities that attract both local and travelling couchsurfers. The goal of the project goes way beyond mere accommodation, and is an opportunity for safe and cosmopolitan cultural encounters, secured by the different systems of follow up and peer endorsement. CouchSurfing was not the first community service of this type (the first was Hospitalityclub, the latest is Bewelcome), but it has become the most well known and most widely recognised. Without any strategic or commercial intent, CouchSurfing has become an alternative option for a young audience seeking accommodation and hospitality in an unknown city (the average member age is just 26). One of the advantages of the system is that it allows travellers to meet new people quickly, spend an evening together, and discover the more genuine side of a new town.

CouchSurfing is increasingly listed in many tourism offices, along with hotels and bed-and-breakfast establishments. The phenomenon has therefore become part of the worldwide accommodation market without any exchange of money. This sector is experiencing an intense diversification phase, where establishments worldwide continue to distinguish and redefine their image by incorporating themes, amongst other things, to create an authentic visitor experience. The same process of diversification is also present in the CouchSurfing project, where authenticity has a meaning that goes well beyond traditional tourism products and landscapes. It is all about seeking authentic visitor experiences while staying at other couchsurfers’ homes at any destination: ‘Instead of just sightseeing, you participate in the daily life of locals’ (Andrea). Indeed, this is the biggest difference with official accommodation: with the help of their local hosts, CouchSurfers are likely to visit places off the official tourist map that generate the authentic visitor experience. The experience that a CouchSurfer goes through is perceived as having a greater value than that which is offered by the traditional players in the accommodation sector. It is perceived as more authentic, more community-oriented, and more active.

The motives of individuals to take part in the community and the CouchSurfing project are primarily to seek a philosophical fit with their expectations in life: ‘CS has been a great opportunity to know people from all over the world, to share travel experiences, to understand many different cultures, to start writing a book about travels…’ (Carlos). Many CouchSurfing members participate in the community on a voluntary basis and because they want to share their pleasures:

When I lived in NYC, I hosted about 60 couch surfers. It was incredibly fun! I remember what my travels were like in the decades before CS, how great it was to meet people in far-off places; stay with new friends, families; really get to see a place from the inside. I wanted to share that with a new crop of travellers, and the Internet – specifically CouchSurfing – makes that possible. (Alex)

‘Friendships forged, languages learned, fun times shared and a world opened up to us’ (Kristin). For some, it is not about altruism but about developing and maintaining the community: ‘It is a community that turns “strangers” into friends’ (Pete).
There are any number of events that go on in the community, from nights out partying, to movie nights, to day-long hiking trips, to weekend trips to small towns, to simply grabbing a coffee with someone new to town. It’s the creation of this world wide community that is most interesting. (Molly)

Motives concerning participation in the CouchSurfing project and creating value are positive and similar to those found in other communities created around open-source brands (Hertel, Niedner, & Herrmann, 2003).

**Discussion: Beyond brand community**

The two cases discussed allow us to highlight three different phenomena: (i) a well-known phenomenon of community accumulation around a brand, which is identified as *brand community*; (ii) a phenomenon of aggregation against a company that manages the brand and which leads to the creation of competing brands by members of the community, which we shall refer to as *counter-brand community*; (iii) a phenomenon of aggregation around not-for-profit projects that nevertheless creates a brand that can compete with the brands of certain companies, which we will term *alter-brand community*. We shall attempt to conceptualise on the basis of the case studies, which represent two types of community brand and which have been catalysed by Web 2.0 technologies.

**Counter-brand community**

The creation of counterfeit products sold online, and especially the development of a competing brand (*Confrontation*) by dissatisfied Warhammer fanatics infuriated by the management of Games Workshop, leads us to assimilate the concept of brand rejection – the rejection of brand hegemony – introduced by Cromie and Ewing (2009). Brand hegemony refers to both the domination of one brand over others (e.g., Microsoft) and the domination of this brand over its consumers. Indeed, the co-creation process of these brands is often a way to take advantage of the consumers (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). Productive consumers increase the linking value of brands, and companies capture this value on the market, but almost none of this is returned to consumers. If cult brands belong to their consumers, as advocated by O’Guinn and Muniz (2005), their profits do not (Foster, 2008). This is indeed the main source of frustration for members of the community: given the pricing, they feel exploited by Games Workshop and even doubly exploited if one follows the reasoning of Zwick et al. (2008). First, consumers are not generally paid for the know-how, enthusiasm, and social cooperation that they contribute to. Second, customers typically pay what the marketing profession calls a price premium for the fruits of their labour, as the value provided by co-created offers is said to be higher than that which can be achieved through company creation. As a consequence of this double exploitation, consumers gather into communities in order to rebel against strong brands and companies. They do that not only by criticising companies or boycotting their products, but also by becoming competitors of the brand that they once supported. Counter brands exist mainly as a reaction from members of the brand community who are frustrated with the company’s behavior. In this case, the community creates value by spinning off products or concepts that are branded, and this value is captured directly by this secessionist community. There is hence no co-
creation of value for the company. The company gains no value from such creations; on the contrary, these creations diminish value creation because they create direct competition that may be either legal or illegal.

Alter-brand community

Alter brands, such as CouchSurfing, provide ‘an open perspective to branding wherein prosumers create the physical offering, author the text, generate the experience and evolve the brand meaning’ (Pitt et al., 2006, p. 119). In this perspective, ‘the brand community is not just formed around a brand; it creates the brand. The brand community is not just formed around a product; it is part of the product’ (Mairinger, 2008, p. 118). And, inside these community brand systems, ‘the product does not exist until it is designed and developed by the project team. In most cases, membership of the project team is voluntary and based on desire for the product under development’ (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p. 219). Thus ultimately the producer is also a consumer of the product. ‘But the process is not value co-creation in the sense of producer and consumer as separate entities . . . Producer and consumer are, in fact, one and the same group’ (Cromie & Ewing, 2009, p. 219).

Contrary to counter brands, the reasons that lead consumers to create alter brands are in no way related to economic frustrations or other forms of dissatisfaction in terms of what the market is offering. It is rather a series of positive motives that guides consumers towards co-creating such brands. One can find some motives that are common to members of brand communities when there is no cause for frustration – such as satisfied Warhammer fanatics – and to members of community brands – such as CouchSurfers – who want to develop the community. Yet the main motive is more utopian – a desire to create a better world and not just withdraw into a community of fanatics. Alter brands exist mainly to serve the common collective goals of community members. In this case, the community creates value by generating its own concepts, services, relationships, and so on without interactions with the company, and this value is therefore captured directly by the community. Companies gain no value directly but must face a risk of indirect competition.

While the brand community model, which has been made popular by different approaches to tribal marketing, assumes that there is co-creation of value between communities of consumers and the company with acquisition of the value by the company, recent phenomena, underpinned by Web 2.0 technologies, show alternative approaches in which the company fails to capture this value (Figure 1). This creates serious issues for brand managers who will not be able to capture the value produced by consumers and may have to face a new type of competition.

Implications: The impact of Web 2.0 on the future of online tribal marketing

What are the opportunities and threats for existing brand managers? Brand managers must react to these new phenomena, which seem to be difficult for them to control. On the basis of some successful experiments, there appear to be two possible options that are related to the different motives of consumer-producers. In the case of counter brands, it is essential to reduce the frustration felt by the members of the community by recognising the value of their contributions. Indeed, the feeling of being exploited, which is at the root of this frustration, is not just an objective phenomenon but also a highly subjective felling linked to the extremely poor quality of online contacts.
between the company and the members of the brand community. In the case of alter brands, companies should help members of the community in their utopian projects while combining the project ephemerally with the company’s brand. The example of Dell with Hell and then Idea Storm is a good example for brand managers seeking to influence a counter brand. The same can be said about Jeep with Geocaching in relation to an alter brand.

**Getting counter-brand communities on your side**

It is better not to increase the frustration of consumers to a level where they will create fakes or a counter brand. One brand recently managed to lower the level of frustration of its consumers: Dell. Remember Dell Hell? Jeff Jarvis coined the term Hell to slam Dell for his horrific customer experience buying a laptop. He wrote about his experiences and frustrations on his blog, BuzzMachine (http://www.buzzmachine.com). This series of posts epitomised growing dissent against the company, and served as a channel to punish the Texas computer maker for bad products and customer-service experiences. Dell did not respond on Jarvis’s blog. However, other Dell customers with similar customer-service issues did. In fact, Jarvis’s story struck a chord with many other Dell consumers. His posts generated hundreds of comments about Dell’s customer-service issues from angry and frustrated customers. Jarvis’s posts ignited a wildfire that passed through blogs and social media to traditional media, criticising Dell for a perceived drop in customer-service levels. Jarvis’s Dell Hell story affected Dell’s brand and corporate reputation. Dell’s reaction is interesting and shows how a company can fight against a movement of frustration that had almost generated a competing brand: Hell! Once Dell learned how much negative sentiment existed regarding Dell’s customer service, the company began to understand how to engage customers through social media. Dell has launched Idea ...
Storm as a new way to listen to customers on how to build the best products and services. It is an online community where customers can post their ideas on technology and Dell products, services, and operations. The community votes for the best ideas and discuss the ideas with other users. Dell shares the ideas throughout its organisation to trigger new thoughts and evolve everything that is done at the company. Not only does this process help to provide insight into customers’ needs and desires, it also reduces the frustration of customers because Dell is willing to act on the ideas that the community supports. The company is struggling a bit with how to manage all of the ideas internally – more than 12,000 in two years of the existence of Idea Storm! Anyway, Dell has convinced Jeff Jarvis who wrote two months after the launch of Idea Storm that ‘It is clear that at least at some levels, Dell has changed its culture and certainly its attitude toward bloggers. They now see value in reaching out’.

**Co-opt alter-brand communities**

Online tribal marketing is likely to become a heterogeneous field, where traditional brand communities will coexist with alter-brand communities. However, this dual phenomenon does not necessarily mean that there will be confrontations between the two. Co-branding efforts between two types of brand already exist on the Internet. The automobile company Jeep has been able to build a strong offline brand community through the organisation of events that bring brand fans together with people who simply like Jeep (the Jeep Club, the Jeep Academy, the Jeep Jamboree, etc.). Beyond these organised get-togethers, the expansion of Web 2.0 has paved the way for a growing online community. This development has involved the creation of a website offering consumers a wide range of activities (http://www.jeep.com/en/experience/community). As the cornerstone of the Jeep community, this site is first and foremost a place enabling access to the many other brand-related activities that the firm is trying to build. In particular, the company supports activities tied to tribes outside of its own brand community, like snowboarders or mountain bikers. It is in this vein that the Jeep 4 × 4 Geocaching challenge has been created. Geocaching (http://www.geocaching.com) is an entertaining outdoor adventure where people use GPS or maps to search for hidden containers, called geocaches, that are hidden around the world by other participants in the activity. The Geocaching project was imagined shortly after the removal of selective availability from GPS on May 1, 2000. Geocaching is enjoyed by people from all age groups, with a strong sense of community and support for the environment. Here, we see how a company is trying to multiply the opportunities of interactions between its brand community – Jeep – and a community brand – Geocaching – in order to enlarge the former. However, this obliges Jeep to focus on geocachers and not to over-exploit their potential. In their encounters both online and offline, they carry a brand – Geocaching – which must remain in the front line and not disappear behind the Jeep brand. Otherwise, there may be a significant risk of rejection, following such a demonstration of flagrant brand hegemony.

What can be learned from these two cases about the future of online tribal marketing? Uncles (2008, p. 229) recently stated that:

...more and more opportunities exist for consumers to engage with brands – through brand communities, product sites, forums, blogs. But, simultaneously, there may be less and less reason to engage – why should a consumer go to the trouble of engaging when perhaps all that he or she wants is a value-for-money product that will perform satisfactorily?
This paper has shown that there are two reasons that drive consumers to commit to brands, but to brands that are not conventional. The first reason is when they think they are not getting a value-for-money product and feel exploited (counter brands). The second is when they want to develop a project that goes beyond the scope of traditional brands (alter brands). This phenomenon of consumer tribes counterbalancing corporations through community brands obliges us to reassess the idea of a ‘market with consumers’, which underpins new marketing approaches such as SDL (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Online, the idea of a market with consumers has three distinct meanings that must all be taken into consideration: (i) according to the SDL and the brand community management models, it means that a company must collaborate with consumers in order to co-produce value; (ii) in relation to this research on the emergence of alter brands and counter brands, its primary meaning is that companies must act on markets that consists of communities of consumers that may indeed constitute a new form of competition; (iii) this research also demonstrates that consumers grouped together inside online communities are able to generate offerings, services, and brands without assistance from companies.

Conclusion

The multiplication of cases of the creation of community brands – either counter or alter brands – could lead to what has been foreseen by Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar (2007, p. 21):

Where once tribes were seen as transformative to their members, we are beginning to see how they are transformative to business and communicative practices and through them, to society itself.

Indeed, with the diffusion of networking technologies, collective consumer creation and production is taking on new forms that are transforming the nature of consumption and work and, with it, marketing. Consumer tribes and their brands could counterbalance corporations on the Net, ‘in particular, when those corporations are seen as to be acting abusively, unethically, or irresponsibly’ (Kozinets et al., 2008, p. 353).

References


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