

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CUSTOMER CONTACT POINT: IT'S ROLE ON BRAND EQUITY

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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>Increasingly social media is being used both by the consumers and the businesses as a customer communications channel and because of the open nature of social media this interaction is fundamentally different from the traditional customer service mediums, while this development is at the core of this thesis it focuses on the brand equity implications of this interaction. Brand equity in simple terms can be defined as the ‘value of a brand’ and how consumer-brand or consumer-consumer organic interactions on social media is affecting it along with highlighting the efficient rules of engagement when optimizing customer satisfaction are the two research objectives. This study first provides a theoretical framework by discussing relevant literatures concerning the three fundamentals of this study: Social media marketing, Customer relationship management and Brand equity. Then it moves on to the empirical part where a mixed method consisting of quantitative and qualitative approaches had been undertaken. The quantitative study consist a survey that sought consumer opinion while the qualitative study is based on two expert interviews. After that, by juxtaposing the consumer data with the expert opinion the two research objectives were answered. Firstly, a different do’s and don’ts on social media for the brands were listed; Secondly, by taking Keller’s Customer based brand equity (CBBE) model into account some specific ways how brand equity are influenced were highlighted and discussed. As for limitations, the small sample population size could be mentioned, since the research area was Europe the sample population of 102 respondents is too narrow for a broad conclusion. Finally, this research can serve as rudimentary guide for an SME when designing a social media strategy.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

For his apprenticeship the researcher has had the opportunity to work with two ICT companies operating in distinct business areas. The journey started with working for a Helsinki based startup that provides social media business intelligence, where the researcher was baptized with the world of earned media and the role of the social web in it. In the developed markets where internet is ubiquitous companies now are directly accountable to their customers, whether they like it or not the people powered media are talking about them constantly. While the social media help generate and accelerate perceptions the companies very much like the traditional marketing can only influence shaping it. However, the difference is: a new set of rules of engagement.

With this realization the researcher moved on to his second internship: to be a Sales and marketing assistant at yet another IT firm. This time it operated on the E-learning industry- and one of responsibilities of the researcher was to help set up a social media strategy and execute it. The researcher was reaffirmed with this new medium and the opportunities and challenges it holds for a brand.

From these experiences it can now be said with conviction that the status-quo of the marketing mindset is shifting. Marketing is now getting more and more democratized, no longer it's the case where TV commercials and an aggressive PR campaign can win or retain customers. The brands now need to communicate directly with the customers, answer to their questions, and remedy their complaints in a very public way. After all, an 80% of the people have changed their mind on buying a product/service after coming across negative feedback about them on the internet (Gesenhues, 2013).

This brings us to the second focus of this research: customer service management in the connected age. While we are living through a time where interaction is increasingly virtual it is no surprise customer centric activities too are getting more and more 'cloud' based, with social media being in the forefront of this development. In a related research conducted in Alto University, Pia Flinc cited the following quote from Avenade white-papers:

‘The emergence of new social media technologies gives businesses the opportunity to change the way they relate to customers, shifting the focus from managing transaction to building deeper relationships’ (Originally by Avenade (2008), taken from Flinc, 2011)

So questions arise of the nature of this trend: How do the consumers feel about this new customer service medium? Or how are the businesses responding to it? Since social media is open to the world, what are the brand implications of all these? In searching answers to these questions the researcher felt there is a space for inquiry and that it could be of some real life relevance. The previous studies done in this regard do not exactly address the brand implications of the customer management activities on social media and this research has focused on it.

1.2 Research Objectives

Since social media is a relatively new phenomenon there are nuances in its literature with little previous works and the impact of social customer relationship management or SCRM on brand equity is one of those. Because of the open nature of social media the customer-brand engagement on it could be seen from a marketing angle as well hence one aim of this research is to shed light on social customer services’ marketing implications. Secondly, this study would go on addressing the efficient ways of engaging with consumers, by analyzing and juxtaposing opinions from consumers and industry insiders.

To be specific the research would go along remembering these questions:

- 1) How to effectively use Social Media as a customer service/customer relationship management medium?
- 2) What impact does customer relationship management via social media plays in creating brand equity for a company?

1.3 Description of Methods

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods has been employed to execute this research. The first part of this study contains literature review which is then followed by an empirical part.

The arguments presented in the literature review contains the discussion based on books concerning social media, academic journals, research work done by businesses, news articles, and case studies. The three central theme of this study- Brand equity, social media marketing and customer relationship management are discussed in separate chapters and together lay down the foundation to this study. Four case studies have also been presented to better grasp the real life relevance of the theories discussed.

The empirical research was conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively: for the quantitative study a survey was conducted where the questionnaire was developed from the theoretical framework. Then two interviews were carried out for the qualitative study: one semi-structured and a group interview taking into account the opinions of three experts. By analyzing the outcome of both the processes the research questions were answered.

More on the research methods can be found on the Methodology section (chapter 5).

1.4 Outline of the Study

The literature review section consists of the next three chapters. Since brand equity is the central theme to this research, chapter two was devoted to discussing the term and specifying the model to be applied in this research.

Chapter three discusses social media marketing from a variety of perspectives: current trends, its evolution, its correlation with earned media and content marketing, developing brands in the social web, and the impact of social media marketing on ROI. Then three case studies were discussed focusing on the theories discussed on this chapter. Chapter four provides an overview of the literatures relating to new age customer relationship management. It generates a discussion on social media as the new customer

management tool, the nature of engagement here, and its impact on brand perception. This chapter too presents a relevant case study.

Chapter five discusses research methodology in detail focusing on research design, data collection and data quality. On the empirical part chapter six and seven analyses the quantitative and qualitative data respectively. Then taking both the analyses into account the research findings were discussed and summarized in chapter eight. Lastly chapter nine consist conclusion which details self-critique and suggestions for further research.

2 WHAT IS BRAND EQUITY?

Brand equity is a foundational concept in marketing literature, though hard to measure it's not difficult to observe. According to Investopedia brand equity is the '*value premium that a company realizes as compared to its generic equivalent*', in simple terms it is the additional money that consumers are willing to spend to buy Coca Cola or Pepsi rather than the store brand soda. (Retrieved on 2014).

However brand equity is not a concept beyond debate, the core definition of it being the 'value of a brand' is universal but views collide when discussing its nature and implication. A school of thought believes that brand equity is more of a process rather than an objective, it is a process that builds a company intangible assets, Tony Aperia explains:

'Good marketing builds the firms intangible assets. We need a single term to describe it, whatever the sector. Metrics research has shown that brand equity is by far the most frequent term for this asset and it is adopted here. Marketing can be seen as building brand equity: if a company gets that right. Profits will take care of themselves.' (Aperia, 2004, p 39)

This research would align to this line thought, where brand equity is a continual process and the prime objective of this study would be to better understand the effects social customer relationship management (SCRM) activities plays on brand equity.

Going further this research would take into account Kevin Keller's well known customer based brand equity (CBBE) model, it will help us dissect the concept of brand equity and do so with a customer centric attitude. In discussing the four stages of the CBBE model we would be laying down the framework for the succeeding chapters- and set a unified tone to reach the research objectives.

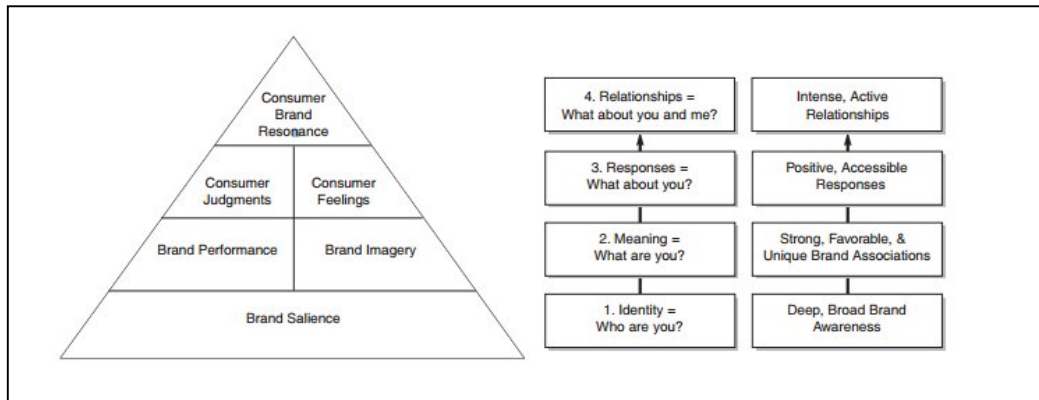


Figure 1: Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity Model [Keller, 2001, 7]

Brand Salience

Keller asserts that the first in building brand equity is to develop brand salience. It starts with knowing who the customers are, their decision making process, how do they see a brand and its rivals and finally how does the brand stand out in consumer's mind. By knowing these we get an idea on brand awareness which is at the core of this stage. According to Manktelow (2013) brand salience is not only about creating brand identity and awareness, it's also trying to ensure that brand perceptions are 'correct' at key stages of the buying process.

Brand Meaning

Once there is awareness of the brand the next stage becomes to give meaning to it. Keller proposes two principle blocks of brand meaning: performance and imagery of the brand.

Brand performance relates to the ways in which the product or service attempts to meet customers' functional needs. Keller (2001) states, *brand performance refer to the intrinsic properties of the brand in terms of inherent product or service characteristics*. There are five categories that paramount brand performance: Primary characteristics and secondary features; Product reliability, durability and serviceability; Service effectiveness, efficiency, and empathy; Style and design; and Price.

The second brand meaning according to Keller is brand imagery, it implies how well the brand caters to customer's needs on a social and a psychological level. Compared to

performance which can be quantified it's more intangible and imagery refers to the abstract aspects of the brand. Keller points to four main features of a brand imagery: User profiles; Purchase and usage situations; Personality and values; History, Heritage and values. (Keller, 2001).

Brand Response

It refers to what customers *think or feel about the brand based on its marketing activities or other sources of information* (Keller, 2001). Brand responses are categorized by brand judgments and brand feelings.

Brand feelings are customers' *emotional responses and reaction with regards to the brand* thereby it's more of an internal response of the customers which is evoked the marketing activities or earned media. Keller goes on to identify six prominent brand building feelings: warmth, fun, excitement, security, social approval, and self-respect. (Keller, 2001)

Brand judgment refers to *customers' personal opinions and evaluations with regard to the brand* (Keller, 2011). Customers form judgment over a brand with regards to its performance and the imagery promoted by it. Keller has identified in particular four types summary brand judgments that are most relevant to a brand and they are: brand quality, brand credibility, brand consideration, and brand superiority.

Brand Resonance

The top of the pyramid is occupied by brand resonance- the most desired stage a brand can reach. Brand resonance is achieved when customers have transcended the typical buying-selling paradigm and feel a deep psychological bond with the brand. Keller describes this stage by:

'Brand resonance refers to the nature of the relationship that customers have with the brand and the extent to which they feel that they are 'in synch with the brand; it is characterized in terms of intensity or the depth of the psychological bond that customers have with brand as well as the level of activity engendered by this loyalty e.g. repeat purchase rates, the extent to which customers seek out brand information, events, other loyal customers and more' (Keller, 2001)

Brand resonance can be broken down in four categories: behavioral loyalty, attitudinal attachment, sense of community, and active engagement. The latter two- sense of community and active engagement is of particular relevance to this research because in both cases social media can play an important role. In the digital realm social media provides the most accessible medium for people to form communities and to have an organic interaction.

To summarize this model would serve as a guide while this research attempts to better understand customer relations management ventures through social media. With empirical data and the theoretical framework to be discussed in the following chapters, this model would come back in chapter 8.2 in discussing social customer service's effect on brand equity.

3 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

This chapter would be looking on to the different aspects of social media marketing: its evolution, developing brands and managing it and would explore three case studies to discuss the real time significance of the theories presented.

3.1 The Earned Media

Any discussion on social media marketing is incomplete without discussing the very relevant discipline of earned media. In classical marketing earned media is known as the publicity that was gained bereft any promotional effort from the brand's part (Yu, 2013). By some observers of the marketing industry earned media is only a contemporary rendition of classical word of mouth marketing; Ballave (2013) states that earned media in essence is the digital-age term for word-of-mouth advertising and it's an idea that has grown hand in hand with content and social media marketing. Thomson (2013) defines earned media as being any communication made by any entity but not the brand while carrying the brand's message; he also asserts that this mode of communication can tell a brand's story with more credibility and opens up a space for a dialogue with the pertinent community. This claim is further strengthened by a 2013 Nielsen survey on '*Global trust on Advertising and Brand Messages*' which found that word of mouth or earned media is the most trusted source of information in all the countries that it surveyed. The web 2.0 or the 'interactive web' (Meiners, 2010) has only opened new doors and thus invited it's users to participate pro-actively in the form of user generated contents (Meiners, 2010). When it comes to marketing spending however, the analog channels still outstrips digital ones by a factor of three to one (Sorofman, 2013). But this is a quickly changing scenario since the digital marketing genre has created a clear bridge between the marketing spending and its result, the top marketers today predicts a swift move towards the digital age (Yu, 2013). Since earned media is at the core of digital marketing we can only expect the reign of earned media to be ushering.

3.2 Content Marketing and Social Media Marketing

Content marketing is a relevant topic while discussing about social media marketing. Although they are two separate entities often times we would see them intersecting. Therefore to better understand the scenario we would need to know the difference, similarities and most importantly the symbiotic relationship between these two ways of marketing.

Content Marketing Institute defines this particular practice as followed:

‘Content marketing is a marketing technique of creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action’ (contentmarketing.com, retrieved on 2013)

Oftentimes content marketing is misconstrued to be the same as social media marketing but however that isn’t the case. Though content marketing heavily involves social media but its role here is primarily being a carrier. Toby Murdock (2012) of the Content Marketing Institute states that despite having many similarities between the two, there are also fundamental differences regarding the objectives and process.

The difference lies in the focus of the marketing activities- in Social media marketing it’s on the Social media sites whereas in Content marketing it’s on the firm’s website. The brands with a content marketing strategy of course can extend its reach to social media but the purpose would be to get them involved directly with the company website. (Murdock, 2012)

The case study of King Arthur Flour (Section 2.6.2) would depict this phenomenon in action, a brilliant content marketing campaign executed predominantly through social media channels. In conclusion, this chapter could be summarized by stating social media marketing is about promotion and content marketing is about creation (Chris, 2014).

3.3 The Evolution of Social Media Marketing

While Social Media isn't the only medium available for achieving earned media but it is certainly the most well suited medium for it (Thomson, 2013, p.109); therefore Social Media Marketing has developed in a way nourishing the earned media principles at heart. Although the word of mouth marketing might perhaps be as old as other more formal ways of marketing its only recently this form of marketing came to a great significance. According to Friedman (2012) until very recently marketing consisted almost entirely of 'outbound marketing' which is to say marketing that interrupts the consumer talking at them instead of with them. He goes on saying the period up until the dot-com bubble in the 2000's consisted of marketing mediums that supported outbound-type marketing not the organic earned media-type communications. However, the inceptive use of internet as a marketing channel could be traced back to the year 1994, although in the preceding years there were a few small scale examples of internet marketing but it was 1994 when a Phoenix law firm advertised their services by posting a message (or 'spam' as it's known now) to several thousand newsgroups (Hubspot, 2012), ushering the way of a new marketing channel. With the inception of search engines from 1995 onwards the internet marketing got a new force and it was predominantly used in outbound marketing up to the year 2000. The dot-com bubble blasted on March 2000 and since then the internet entered a new era characterized by a greater emphasis on information sharing, user-centered design, and collaboration thus finding its way to the inbound marketing phase (Robinson, 2002). With the emergence of Social media in the early 2000's to its coming to prominence a few years later has poured but more fuel to the ongoing inbound marketing trend; Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Myspace, Pinterest, Youtube, Google Plus amongst others are all to be thanked for that. The common norm of marketing in these platforms have been very content driven, oftentimes user generated and defined by an universal access to data- thus a perfect breeding ground for earned media (Ballve, 2013). In present days, increasingly the internet users are moving on to mobile devices (i.e. smart-phones, tablet computing devices) and Social Media is tweaking its presence to stretch out to these frontiers, as a result marketers are more and more re-directing their focus from personal computers to these mobile outlets (Ahmad, 2013).

To sum it up we can say that ‘Going Mobile’ could be seen as the emerging practice in the realm of Social Media marketing.

3.4 Social Media’s relevance in developing Brand Awareness

‘I believe that “brand” is a stand-in, a euphemism, a shortcut for a whole bunch of expectations, worldview connections, experiences, and promises that a product or service makes’¹

–Seth Godin, Marketer, Author and Public
Speaker

While the concept of a ‘brand’ has been defined in ample ways, in this research we would lean on the emotive side of a ‘brand’. The emotional connection a ‘brand’ paves in-between the individual and a product/service will be our point of concentration, and this is because in order to assess the cognitive impact customers obtain while experiencing some sort of service via social media and the ones who because of the open nature of this medium witness this interaction, we need to particularly be aware of the perceptual side of the brand experience. This view of a brand resonates with Sean Adams, a reputed graphics designer/branding professional who believes a brand to be a ‘*promise of an experience*’ (Adams, 2013). So how does social media blend’s in this equation?

In answering that we can first take a look into classical literature. Kapferer’s (1992) in his well known brand identity prism have identified six pivotal traits of a brand and one of them is the ‘relationship’ between a ‘brand’ and the consumer; in describing the ‘relationship’ facet he articulates that it is possible for a brand to have regular interpersonal exchanges with the consumers. Aperia (2004) while interpreting kapferer’s prism commented that this direct reach out was pointed towards primarily the service sector or the retail brands. In today’s connected context however this notion transcends any specific industry and applies across sectors. We can also look into Marry Goodyear’s (1998) brand development model ‘Continuum of Consumerism’, where she stated that in competitive markets mature brands leaves the traditional product level and start acting on the societal or social arena. One of the characteristics of the mature phase as Goodyear

¹ Collected from: debbiemillman.com/brandthinking/definition-of-brand.php

continues to describe is the movement of advertising messages from rational persuasion to more emotive arguments or symbolism (1998).

Social media as an epicenter of the connected age kicks in right here; it provides the matrix of communication between different parties. According to Chaffey et al (2003) one of the core tenants of the new media is to generate dialogues through interactivity. The changing sphere of the customer-brand diametric also resonates with Deloitte, one of the big four global professional services providers; in explaining how Social Media is changing brand management practices, it states:

‘The rise of social media has fundamentally changed the way brands and customers interact, turning existing brand customer relationships on their head. We have witnessed a change from organizations talking and the customer listening to dynamic, two-way, customer-led interactions’ (Deloitte Customer UK, 2012).

We can summarize this chapter by glancing at a practical example with the following rendering of Kapferer’s brand identity prism on Starbucks, in the relationship facet we can notice it chiefly talks about giving a human touch to the brand. Social media interjects right here. More about Starbucks’ social media operations is discussed on section 3.6.1.



Figure 2: Kapferer's brand identity prism applied to Starbucks [starbuckscoffie.blogspot.fi, retrieved 2013]

3.5 Social Media and the Sales Mix

To conclude, since social media now is accepted as a necessary medium for brand development, conversations today are gradually shifting beyond that. Marketers are now looking for ways to directly impact their sales via the social web. With that in mind Nichole Kelly's (2013) social media sales funnel could be taken into account, which discusses the larger question of social media and the return

on investment (ROI). This model where Social media engages in harnessing brand awareness eventually brings in sales leads through a five step process.



Figure 3: Social media sales funnel [Kelly, 2013, p 34]

In this model Brand awareness as a foundational aspect of social media marketing dominates the first three categories of this model through Exposure, Influence and Engagement and with that comes the Action/conversation of fans followed by the Retention of customers (Kelly, 2013, pp 34-41).

This is yet another sign of a shifting marketing spectrum and the rise of new form of marketing. We can end this chapter by quoting Toby Murdoch of the Content Marketing Institute:

‘The Internet has unleashed a revolutionary ability for every brand to communicate directly with its customers without the need for a media industry intermediary’ (Murdoch, 2012)

3.6 Brand related examples in the Social Web

In this chapter three interesting case studies that would demonstrate the nature of brand development in the social networks has been presented. Each case has been chosen with distinct characteristics, they would demonstrate: brand-consumer engagement, the intersection of content and social media marketing and also it would show us the ‘not-to-dos’ on social media through an example.

3.6.1 Starbucks: The Case for Pro-active Engagement

As of February 2014, Starbucks has over 36 million likes on Facebook and over 5 million followers on Twitter. According to a report from Deloitte UK, Starbucks’ real strength lies in the depth of user engagement. By paying a visit to its Facebook or Twitter outlet we would find credence to this claim. Starbucks’ shares well thought contents with its fans and its response goes beyond answering important queries to replying creatively to interesting comments. It seeks quality materials from fans such as pictures, stories that has some relation to the brand and shares them on their social outposts.

For years Starbucks has suffered from this sensitive recurring rumor on being unsupportive towards the US military. Time to time this accusation appears in its Facebook page. Regardless of how it started a brand like Starbucks has a lot to lose if such perceptions are to get cemented.

Starbucks of course fights it with the formal channels by publicizing their partnership with the US military time and again. Nonetheless when such complaint surfaces the interesting thing just as the below extract demonstrates that in every case it appears that loyal fans come to its defense.

Any bystander in the example below would not only be exposed to Starbucks’ reply where it posts the link to its workings with the military but could also see ‘civilians’ coming to its defense. This would reduce the possibility if not neutralize totally of any major stain on the brand image.

This points to the depth of the brand loyalty fans share with Starbucks, and social media could be thanked big in this.



Figure 4: Fans rushing in Starbucks' defense [Starbucks Facebook page, retrieved 2014]

3.6.2 King Arthur Flour: The Brilliance of Content Marketing

Established in 1770 King Arthur flour is the oldest flour company in the US. The Vermont based company has been selected by the researcher because of the very unique use of Social Media in its marketing efforts. Although flour is its main product the company in recent days has branched out to baking tools and accessories as well.

To note a major difference from the previous example of Starbucks, KAF is a quite small entity to begin with, serving predominantly the US consumers. It's very innovative blend of content marketing with social media has become a textbook example for successful social media operations (Young, 2013).

Flour as a product although is necessary commodity but it's not typically a 'glamorous' one. Therefore the marketers in this case were faced with an inherent challenge while embracing the digital age. To address this they adopted a strategy focused on content marketing on SM and the contents revolves around the ample ways flour could be used in improving our lives; It started to giving out recipes, held baking courses, contests, charitable baking etc. And in all of these endeavors social media was an integral part, the result of course is a thriving virtual community.

Amongst all these the main objective of promoting the product wasn't overlooked at all. Trevor Young of Expermedia explains:

'The brand is adept at earning the attention of its customers and adding value to their lives in interesting, relevant and respectful ways. This way, its 'sales pitch'

can be deliberately low-key and still be effective because consumers have already bought into the brand and its story’ (Expermedia, 2013).

As of February 2014, King Arthur Flour has almost 250k likes on Facebook, about 21k followers on Twitter, 32K followers on Pinterest and also has strong presence in Google Plus and Instagram. Almost all the contents it shares on these outlets become active discussion boards. The Brand is quick to answer any question, replies to interesting comments and seeks and shares worthy customer materials regularly.

For any marketer looking for an inspiration in social media marketing this company could serve as a quintessential example.



Figure 5: A typical personalized conversation held in the KAF Twitter outpost [king Arthur Flour Twitter outpost, retrieved 2014]

We can conclude this chapter by the above conversation held in KAF Twitter page. A customer while querying about a franchise product ends up becoming a sales lead. Examples like these are quite common throughout its Social Media installments.

3.6.3 Bing: The Backlash over a Myopic Tweet

For the final example in this section, the researcher has chosen the case of Bing, a search engine owned by Microsoft. Bing, after the devastating earthquake in Japan had sent out the following tweet which it hoped would be seen as a charitable effort from their part,



Figure 6: The troubling tweet [Bing's Twitter outpost retrieved 2014]

Unfortunately for the company it was perceived downright offensive, with the public seeing it as a de facto marketing campaign out of a horrible event. The result was that Twitter and the larger social media landscape busted with rage instantaneously and prompted Microsoft to go on damage control.

It apologized 7 hours later:



Figure 7: Bing's response [Bing's Twitter outpost retrieved 2014]

Although Microsoft was fairly quick to assess the situation it quickly went out of control. Huffington Post placed the mishap as one of the worst twitter misuse ever (2011).

Comedian's picked it up going on tirades of how it is just a symptom of the 'greedy manipulative' corporations, a view mimicked by many others.

This incident very much undermined Microsoft's larger effort to help the disaster plagued nation, besides donating cash the company also had provided various logistical support to the authorities and the people by giving out free licenses to its different products for a certain period of time, including a cloud based disaster response communications portal (Microsoft.com, 2011).

This again points to the relevancy of social media in brand engagement, when used wisely it can be an excellent tool as demonstrated in earlier two cases, it can spread the word, bring in new customers, create and lure people in their story, even could be used as a defense mechanism (tackling Starbucks' rumor), and most importantly could impact positively on the ROI; in the same breath it also possesses the capability of turning a tiny mistake into a detrimental one. To forestall such incidents brands need to be extra cautious in social media operations.

4 CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN THE CONNECTED AGE

The root of customer service goes back to the beginning of rudimentary trades in the human societies. Since then despite the obvious changes one practice had remained unchanged: building a trustworthy relationship between the parties.

With the invention of telephone came a landmark breakthrough that paved way to the concept of customer service call centers in the 1960s. From that point the evolution of customer service didn't stagnate at all but instead reached today's connected age where internet has brought in another wave of massive splash. The digital customer management apparatus has now integrated email, live chat and social media in its operations along with the more traditional ones. (Castillo, 2012)

In this research we would focus on the 'new-age' customer service practices; we would go through a variety of developments in this regard- the use of social media, it's implication on brand perceptions and to solidify it all we would look into a case study of social customer relationship management.

4.1 Customer relationship management in the 21st century renaissance: *The rise of the engaged customer*

The 21st century renaissance meaning 'Web 2.0' or 'Social Networking' is evolving fast (Gama, 2009). Not so long ago it used to be paid tools such as banner ads that dominated the digital marketing spectrum, now to call this approach outdated isn't a bold one. According to marketing agency Hubspot, the average banner ad has a click through rate of just 0.1%, for Facebook ads it's even worse- only 0.04% (Zwilling, 2013).

If this is the state of paid marketing in the social web, what is then replacing it?

To answer that we have to look at the digital renaissance we are experiencing in a holistic way. Transparency is at the very core of this era, or one can also view it as a very democratic environment, all the participants in any activity must receive something of substance. The brand and the customer in this context engage in a subject that is of mutual interest. This is reflected on Marketing Zen's Shama Kabani's statement who be-

lieves to engage customers with a brand; they must believe something of value is presented to them in exchange for their interaction. This is a two way interaction; both sides must receive something of value (Chaffey et al, 2003, p 257).

The core of customer relationship management in this renaissance sprouts from this very principle. If brands want to create an admiration, it has to deliver on its promise. While it was true even before the social web now customers have the option to call upon their experience and to share it with the rest of us through a very accessible medium.

This brings the discussion to the engaged customer. And by referring to engaged customers we can think of all of us. In short this is the state of relationship we the consumers have reached with the different brands out there- before making a decision we roam through the social web, talk to our trusted ones, ask opinion from relevant reference groups and then finally make the purchase. The cycle however is not finished yet; in the following step we share our experience, provide feedback, and depending on the satisfaction level seek comradery with the like minded then finally become a point of reference ourselves.

It could be hence asserted that the sign of a 'healthy' customer today is being an engaged customer. Therefore an ideal customer relationship management strategy should espouse the organic dialogue today's consumer love. According to Jon Ferrara the CEO of a social CRM platform, customers today are having conversations amongst themselves online and in social media, they make decisions on their own about what they want to buy from talking to companies on whatever channel they choose and they expect relevant conversation. He continues: companies now need to be nimble enough to be a part of the conversation in an authentic way, so that customers can know, trust and value them as trusted resources. (Ferrara, 2013).

So we can see that the core of a successful relationship management boils down to having an effective engagement with the customer base. Social media here is only an accessible channel, an enabler. And that handling customer relationship from the company's part is not limited only to taking phone calls anymore, it is this entire cycle that they have to pay attention to and be an active part of.

4.2 Social media as a gateway for customers: The Social CRM

The previous chapter focused on the changed customer-brand relationship matrix, which brings us to social media's role in this changed circumstances.

To fully understand social media as the new age customer service medium we can first discuss internet as the broader umbrella in being a customer contact point by going through the scholarship that researched the impact of internet on CRM. In the early 2000's when social media was on its infant stage, researchers predominantly focused on the unfolding role of internet on customer relations. Jill Dyche a management consultant and a prolific author on CRM believed that internet will eventually change the rules of engagement of customer relationship management. He further elicited that not only the internet provides a 24-hour access but it presents up-to-minute information, the ability to compare a product or service, virtual self-service and online customer support and thus it is very natural that this new medium would be the place to go for the customers (Dychem, 2002, p 10). This description points to the simplicity internet brought in the bidirectional communication and provides the context for social media to move in.

Fast forward to 2014, the Web 2.0 is here and to better understand how businesses are dealing with new media we refer to a study done by IBM on social media as customer contact point. The study authored by two of the company's leading execs concluded that for many companies social media will become the gateway, if not the primary, communications channel to connect with customers. With the continued development of the virtual customer communities the traditional CRM mechanism has fallen into a difficult spot and is forced to adapt to the new circumstances. This resulted in a more 'social' CRM approach. The IBM study continues: *Companies need to embrace this shift with a new strategy- Social CRM, which recognizes that instead of managing customers, the role of the business is to facilitate collaborative experiences and dialogue that customer's value.* (Baird et al, 2011).

A 2011 survey conducted by IBM Institute for Business Value Analysis which included sectors such as Distribution, Communications, Industrial and Healthcare, Public sector and Financial services found that 79% of the companies are on social media. This is not a surprise, in the same research IBM had directed a survey towards the customers to understand their engagement habit, they found out that customers are willing to interact

with the companies on social media if they see something of value, and it also found out that up to 80% of the consumers are giving an affirmative opinion on engagement. (Baird et al, 2011).

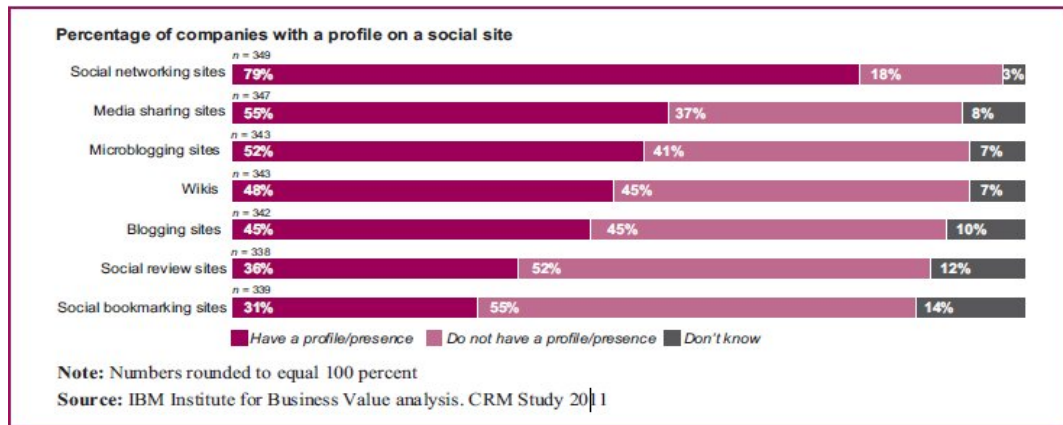


Figure 8: Percentage of companies on social media [Baird et al, 2011, p 30]

In conclusion we can state a commentary by Huffington Post Business, according to this publication ‘social customer service’ should no longer be thought of a luxury but be a component of any customer service strategy (Grast, 2014). The good news, as the above figure depicts, majority of the businesses today are aware of the situation and on their way figuring out the consumer expectation.

4.3 How Engagement Occurs

4.3.1 The Engagement Cycle

Since the core of a social canny CRM strategy is engagement let us take a deeper look at this phenomenon. One way of approaching it could be through ‘The user engagement cycle’. This cycle depicts a pragmatic scenario on the unfolding social media interaction,

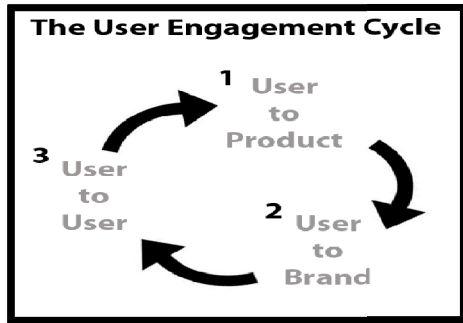


Figure 9: The user engagement cycle in social media [socialfresh.com, 2012]

This cycle as we can see from the above figure has three stages, which starts from user first reaching out to the product (or service) on social media, then in stage 2 following a successful dialogue the product is promoted to a brand status in the customers mind. Finally there is inter-user connectedness that represents the highest form of brand loyalty, in this stage the users seize to call themselves as mere customers and becomes part of a community (Spinks, 2012) .

The three stages have been discussed by Martin Zwilling's (2013), his narration of this cycle:

User to product or engaged user base: This part starts from a solution that solves a real problem. The first move in the engagement has to come from the user, and it can only come when she has gained something of value. The brand before this stage keeps itself accessible on different social media channels, but of course the customer should have a reason to reach out

User to brand or engaged audience: In this stage we look to take the initial reaching out to an advanced level where the user would have some sort of emotional connection with the product. This happens by a dialogue between the two. In social media businesses have to develop the habit of holding authentic conversations with their customers. The end result is the product is elevated to a brand status.

User to user or engaged community: Now that there's an audience which feels an emotional connection to the brand, it is the right time to connect them with each other. So-

cial media brings in the perfect medium for this interaction, such as through Facebook groups, forums or blogs.

In short, businesses need to instill such a practice that would embody the engaged customer of today, and this cycle provides a framework in understanding the basic nature of the customer-brand interaction. In any case what's important is to formulate a decent engagement strategy, because sincere engagement not only creates a positive emotional connection with the customers but it results in a user experience that exceeds a simple matter of supply and demand. (Sprinks, 2012).

4.3.2 Developing & Nurturing Communities through Social Media

When dealing with consumers through internet, we should keep in mind the 'tribal' nature of this medium. Here people are prone to group influence; oftentimes they form a community along mutual interests and brands should seize this opportunity. As Dyche (2002) argues the virtual customer communities are here to stay and businesses that haven't taken this phenomenon seriously should take important note of.

Solomon et al (2012) submits that a brand community is a set of consumers who share a set of social relationships based upon usage of interest in a product and unlike other kind of communities, these members typically don't live near each other- and they often meet only for brief periods at organized events or 'brandfests'. While the notion of brand communities precedes social media the digital age have given marketers a powerful tool to reach out and to engage with more people.

From the user engagement cycle discussed in the previous chapter, a community is the natural succession of the 'User to user interaction' stage; here the brand image is strong enough for a community to come together. Once a brand has reached this stage it has gotten itself a loyal customer base, a base with whom the relation transcends buying and selling, this group could provide feedback, generate new ideas and would be goodwill ambassadors. Researchers also found that this group is more positive about the products, are more forgiving on the product failure and lapses in the service quality and less likely to switch (Solomon et al, 2012, p 358).

When there's a community to nurture it we can refer to communities of practice. The term 'community of practice' refers to an age old phenomenon; Etienne Wenger (2002), a consultant of this topic defines it as-

'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2002)

In the social media context this seems almost to be an obvious choice. The way COP is pursued is by joint activities and discussions; all the parties (members and in this context the brand) interact and learn and grow together. In the process they develop a shared repertoire of resources which might include stories, experiences or predictions (Wegner, 2002). This notion is also supported by Solomon et al (2012) stating that the three main practices of communities of practice are: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. The role of the brand here is to be an active and candid moderator: to continually learn from the community through first hand engagement.

4.4 The Impact of Social Customer Service on Brand Perception

'71% of consumers who experience a quick and effective brand response on social media are likely to recommend that brand to others, compared to just 19% of customers who do not receive a response'

—NM Incite²

A recent study on consumer-business relations on social media by Bain and company had found that not only the customers who interact with companies over social media spend 20% to 40% more but also demonstrate a deeper emotional commitment to the companies. The study continues- the speed and access to information customers came to appreciate has made them more demanding; for example, many now expect real-time

² Source: Socialmediatoday.com

customer service recovery and quick responses to their online feedback. Hyper-connected individuals regularly broadcast their opinions, and they rely on their friends and social networks for news, reviews and recommendations for products and businesses. (Barry et al, 2012).

The trend of customers turning to social media for services is rising steeply, Nielsen reports that more than half of all U.S. customers now go to social media for queries and complaints (Morris, 2014). This trend is slowly being reciprocated by the businesses; according to Aberdeen Group only 41% of the companies use social channels to deliver customer service (Aberdeen, 2012).

This could be the result of not yet having an integrated social media strategy in place. Of the companies that have an active social media presence a good portion of it is solely aimed at garnering publicity and thus managed by the marketing people only.

To address this we are witnessing more and more companies are integrating marketing and customer service. This marriage between the two gives credence to the idea that social media's customer oriented activities does have a feasible impact on brand image. Gartner a leading IT research and advisory firm explains- Marketing's increasing partnership with Customer Service to engage customers more systematically and holistically across all channels – social or other, is opening up new opportunities for the brand, and in the process creating new challenges (Maoz, 2014).

In the empirical part, we would look into this phenomenon deeper with first hand data concerning the role social customer service plays on brand equity.

4.5 Case Study: KLM's Social Customer Service

KLM or The Royal Dutch Airlines is the 95 year old flag carrier of Netherlands and one of the world's leading airlines. Its story of embracing social media has an interesting background, although the company had presence in Twitter and Facebook for some time it really sensed the power of going social after the Icelandic volcano eruption in 2010. At that period air travel was severely hampered for days. To handle unprecedented volume of customer queries KLM resorted to social networks which not only helped them to respond to customers but brought in a lot of positive publicity.

Encouraged KLM decided to pursue an integrated social strategy aimed at leveraging ‘service, brand and commerce’ (Social bakers, 2013). To execute it KLM built a cross functional team with Marketing, Customer service and acquisition responsibilities.

According to Social Bakers a social media analytic firm, KLM’s social strategy is focused on three aspects. *Firstly*, it strives to respond to user’s comments or questions enthusiastically and with alacrity. *Secondly*, the company recognizes that consumers are talking about brands on social media, affecting the reputation of a brand in a very public manner. By proactively monitoring and actively influencing the conversation around the brand, KLM intends to manage its social reputation. *Thirdly*, social media is a great earned media generator since consumers are more influenced by their friends rather than by marketing campaigns. (Social Bakers, 2013).

Following its grand success with social customer service the company now has moved on to make social platforms its chief customer communication platform. By making the customer relationship management very public KLM has leveraged its brand image as well. Currently KLM encourages customers to resort to its social networks for any kind of customer query, not only it’s there on its website but also it is routinely announced to passengers in flights.

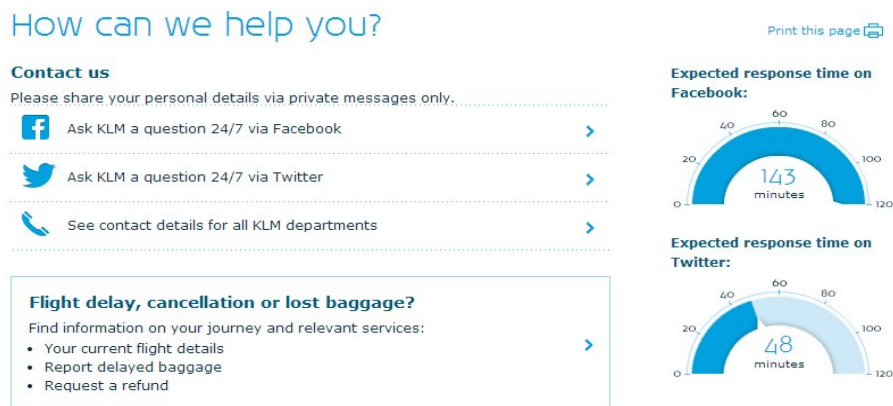


Figure 10: The customer support section at the KLM webpage, fully integrated with social media [KLM website, retrieved 2014]

To get a practical look below are some examples of the KLM social customer service, which is active 24/7 and although they strive to attend questions within 60 minutes the 'expected response time' available in the company website (the above image) would give the precise information regarding the response time. A common pattern in their replies is to have a personal tone along with being substantive. To a bystander most of the conversations between the brand and the customer would seem to be quite lively even when KLM is addressing a complaint.

A personal tone while providing diligent information,

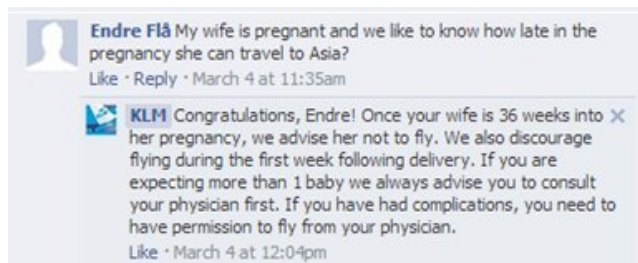


Figure 11: A typical KLM response, personal yet informative [KLM Facebook page, retrieved 2014]

Or when someone complains, there's no defensiveness about it, the proactive engagement continues,



Figure 12: Handling of a Complaint [KLM Twitter outlet, retrieved 2014]

In conclusion KLM's very well thought social customer service has not only enhanced its brand image but moreover it also has had an impact on the employee base who now

feels more proud to be a part of a socially well perceived brand. Anna Ketting, KLM's social media manager explains:

'Today our social two way communication results in more efficient customer service and enhanced internal product development and processing. But most importantly, KLM employees are proud to be a part of the most socially devoted company in the world' (Social Bakers, 2013)

5 METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design and method

The objectives of this research are twofold; firstly it is find out how to communicate more effectively with consumers on social media; secondly, it is to determine how this interaction is affecting brand equity. The preceding chapters have laid down a theoretical framework along with the four case studies on this topic which will serve as the basis for this research's empirical study. The empirical study would be a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative method is any data collection technique or data analysis procedure that generates or uses numerical data (Saunders et al 2009, p 151); from a business research point of view the merit of quantitative study could be seen as collecting data as an instrument to measure attitudes, and the collected information is analyzed from a statistical and numerical point of view (Creswee, 2003, p 22). On the other hand qualitative approach addresses an issue in a more subjective way; Saunders et al (2003, p 378) points out that this approach could be seen as capturing the *richness and fullness* of a subject in as real a manner as is possible and further asserts that *qualitative data are based on meaning expressed through words* (Saunders et al 2003) and that the aim of qualitative data is to better understand a phenomenon through the views of the participants (Creswee, 2003, p 22).

The literature review or the theoretical framework serves as the secondary data and the foundation for this research. The focus of this study is to better understand how customer communication through social web is affecting brand equity. That brings us to the three core tenants to this research- customer service/engagement, social media and brand equity. The former chapters had discussed all three of these in details; to recap that centered on marketing trends on social media- its nature and evolution and the contemporary practices. Then customer relationship management activities on social media were discussed while highlighting on its engagement aspect. Both these discussion on social media marketing and engagement were done in light of the final research goal- how brand equity is influenced by this new development. As detailed in chapter 2, to measure the impact of customer-brand engagement on social media we would take into account Keller's CBBE model. Meaning, based on the theoretical framework a ques-

tioner was developed to seek consumer opinion on issues related to the research questions. Then a semi-structured interview was conducted with three industry veterans to better interpret the data and to gain an insider look.

Finally from the survey and the interviews, we would look for specific areas in the CBBE model that would be affected by this new customer engagement mechanism. End product is we would be able to form an idea of how social media acting as a customer relationship management tool and is affecting brand equity.

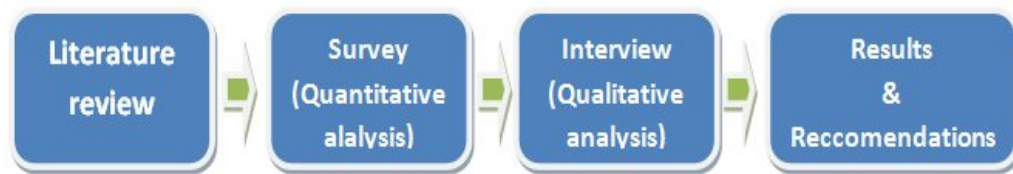


Figure 13: The Research Outline for this study [source: the author]

5.2 Data Collection

To collect data a multi-methods approach was implemented. Multi-method or mixed method research employs both primary and secondary data and uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswee, 2003, 238; Saunders et al, 2003, 99). As pointed out in the figure above (Research outline), this would be implemented by collecting quantitative data through a survey and to complement it two interviews would follow bringing in qualitative analysis of the data. Multi-methods process has a number of benefits, one of them is the so called *triangulation* effect, and triangulation refers to the use of different data collection methods within one study in order to ensure its correct reading (Saunders et al, 2003, p 99), one of the reasons prompted the researcher to employ this method.

To gather quantitative data the survey strategy has been used. The reason behind this selection was this strategy allows the collection of a large amount of data from a sizeable population in an economical way. There are a number of ways to collect data that belongs to the survey strategy however in this research only questioner method would be implemented. Data collected through this approach are standardized, easy to compare and considered authoritative in general. (Saunders et al, 2003, p 92).

The development of the questioner was done with two ambitions- firstly to query about the nature of engagement the respondent has with a brand; secondly how this interaction on social media impacts the brand. To address this, in light of the theory a total of 27 questions were asked. Though the questions were all closed ended however the array of possible answers to each question was put in place meticulously to draw a relatively clear picture. Although it was closed-ended in at times where necessary an option was given where the respondent had the liberty to inject an answer if the provided possible answers weren't suitable. More on the nature of the survey collected data will be discussed on the next chapter.

To fulfill the aim of this study, which is to better understand social media's role as a customer contact center and its inevitable impact of brand equity it is necessary to link the gathered quantitative data with qualitative one. The way this second approach was executed is through an in-depth interview and a structured interview. The interviewees are veteran professionals with expertise ranging from brand management, social media operations and business development. For one of the interviews the semi-structured approach was followed; semi-structured interviews are classified as non-standardized interviews with a list of themes as guideline (Saunders et al, 2003, p 246). This particular method was chosen with the aim to cover as much area as possible regarding the research questions, namely: the correlation between customer engagement and brand image and the role of social media in the process.

Secondly, an additional structured interview was conducted through email where two interviewees merged their opinions together in answering the questions. Structured interviews are categorized as having pre-meditated questions (Saunders et al, 2003, p 246) and in this instance the researcher was apparently in touch with one of the interviewees beforehand to better form the questions.

5.3 Data Quality: Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to constancy or repeatability of the research over time and to ensure data reliability a research should be designed auditable vis-à-vis transparent and clear that the reader should be able to take the same method themselves and can expect to yield similar results (Greener, 2008, p 38). Validity on the other hand is concerned with the research measuring what it purports to measure and to approximate the legitimacy of the results (Kimberlin et al, 2008). In other words, *whether the research findings are really about what they appear to be about* (Saunders et al, 2003, p 101).

To preserve data integrity a great emphasis was put on the questioner design; the validity and reliability of the data, to a large extent depends on *the design of the questions, the structure of the questioner and the rigor of the pilot testing* (Saunders et al, 2003, p 291). With that in mind, before the questioner went public, it was pilot tested and refined according to the feedback. Also after the initial development the questioner was presented to the thesis supervisor for his opinion. To better collect the data a variation of questioning style were implemented namely: list questions, category questions, rating or scale questions and quantity questions. The wording of the question was meticulously modeled from the checklist picked-up from the book '*Research Method for Business Students, Saunders et al, 2003*)' and from '*SurveyMonkey*' a popular cloud based survey services' question format.

The targeted audience to this research is the people who are generally active on social media, to reach that demographic internet was chosen as the survey medium. As previously stated, to get a more cohesive idea of social CRM's role on brand equity the research sphere is pre-dominantly Europe, therefore the survey form was distributed in places focusing an '*European audience*' in mind. This does not however asserts that only European citizens were targeted, rather Europe is more of a generic term here and all of its inhabitants are relevant to this research.

Since it is the Millennials who are usually the most social media savvy generation, this particular audience was the most sought after, however they weren't exclusively targeted, other generations are present in the respondent list as well. The survey form was shared with the degree students at Arcada through a mass mail, the researcher's personal

contacts were also notified, and finally it was posted in a variety of social media outlets such as Facebook groups, pages and in Twitter with mostly Europe centric audience.

6 DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the analysis of the collected data through the questioner. The data collection method, the quality and validity of the data have been discussed in the previous chapter and the end product is a total of 102 responses. It can be mentioned here that because of the survey nature it wasn't possible to determine how many had actually seen the questioner thus an estimate of the response rate couldn't be given.

To make an efficient analysis the 27 questions asked were categorized into 4 categories based on their nature and it starts from the general essence of the data and gradually moves towards more specific aspects of the research area; and as it progresses step by step the relevancy of the presented data are explained.

However, this chapter would not present any definite remarks regarding the data implications rather it is a general verbalization of the data. The remarks would be presented in chapter 8, after the qualitative analysis been executed on the following chapter.

6.1 General Background

It is quite hard to pinpoint a single Male-Female ratio on social media overall, because the landscape is fragmented into many platforms: each social media platform has their own gender ratio, moreover if we become a bit more specific then from country to country it would differ as well. As a representative of the social networks Facebook can be looked upon, where it seems there is a trend of the equilibrium pointing a 50-50 distribution; for example in Finland according to Social Bakers statistics the male-female user ratio is 48%-52%, in Germany it's vice versa (52% to 48%) and in France its 49% to 51%³. Taking Facebook as a benchmark it was ideally intended to maintain a 50-50 balance gender wise.

However as the survey progressed it seemed that Male responses were sharply outnumbering Female ones, the researcher had to take some remedial steps by especially encouraging his female friends and acquaintances to participate. Finally the ratio settled at a 64-36 percentile point, although not exactly ideal, it would restrain the study leaning towards a particular sex.

³ Latest stats available at: <http://www.socialbakers.com/all-social-media-stats/>

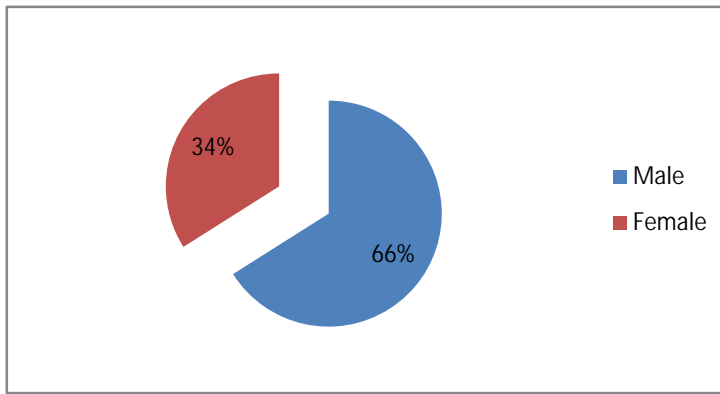


Figure 14: Gender Ratio

The second important factor that needs to be considered when examining the sample population is their age distribution. Since social media is a recent phenomenon, it's the Millennials who are the most savvy demographic in this comparatively new medium. From Social Bakers statistics, in Finland among the total Facebook users, 18-44 year olds comprise almost 63% of the user base while in Germany it is 67%, and this pattern is echoed throughout Europe as well. For other popular social networks the user base is somewhat similar (except maybe for specific demographically oriented social networks, and that does not concern this research directly). Thus when distributing the questioner this particular demo was the primary target and with that perspective, the sample population is very sensible.

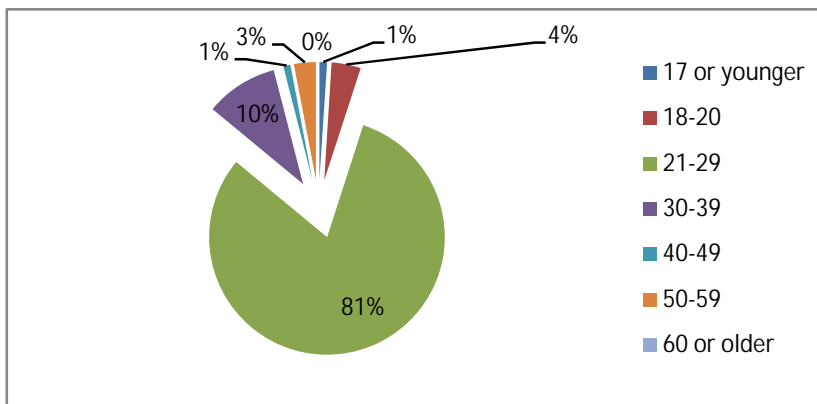


Figure 15: Age Structure

From the figure above we can see the main response group is 21-29 years age group which accumulates about 81 (%) of the pie, followed by 30-39 age-group with 10 (%) of the total share. Together in between 21 to 39 year olds we have 91 (%) of the respondents. Qualitatively this means the data attributed to these individuals would provide us with a solid understanding of an internet savvy population.

6.2 Social Media vs. Mass Media

A second factor prudent to explore before we are on the more specific questions, is the comparative state of social media against traditional media. This is important because as we talk about developing brand equity, a lot has to do with the 'brand' earning a anchoring itself as a trustworthy entity. Has social media as a medium earned the same level of legitimacy as the existing mass media? Or has it already triumphed over that? Or how about, the mass media in its traditional understanding if actually fading or this is only a temporary turbulence?

Well, these are all important questions deserving extensive research in their own merit.

Yet undertaking a research such as this one these questions are important to keep in mind since the medium's virility and vitality serves as a conjugate between the brand and consumers.

From that point of view, one aspect of the survey was to see where social media stands against mass media. In the Earned media discussion (chapter 3.1), word of mouth marketing has been described the most potent tool to brand trustability, and since earned media is in the core of social media marketing two parameters have been put in place to compare social and the traditional media side by side- usage and trustability.

Time spent on both mediums per week:

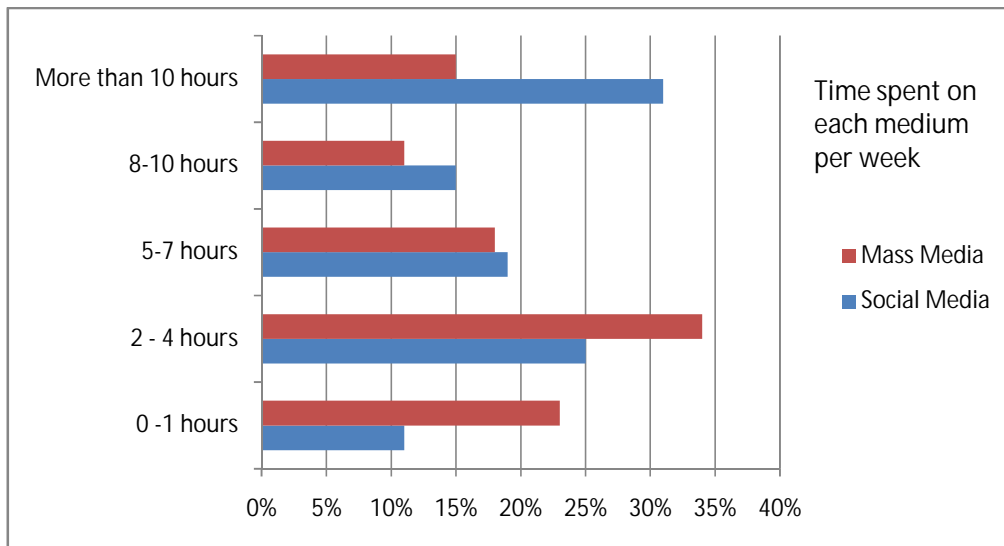


Figure 16: Time spent on social and the traditional media

From the above chart depicts, social media is beating traditional media in the top two categories- in the '8-10 hours' category 15 (%) of the respondents spend time on social media compared to 11 (%) in mass media. Among the '10 hours or more' category the difference is even starker; it is 31-15 (%.)

Interestingly the middle ground of this chart, the 5-7 hours category is occupied by both the mediums in same fashion: 19 and 18 (%), while social media with the slight advantage.

In contrary mass media is beating social media in the lower two categories, with 34 (%) in 2-4 demo and 23 (%) in 0-1 hours demo traditional media is in the lead.

We can interpret this chart by commenting social media in general is more utilized than mass media although the gap isn't that big. This shows us although social media is gaining momentum the existing mainstream media is still very relevant and it would be pertinent not to phase it out of the strategic vision.

The reliability issue:

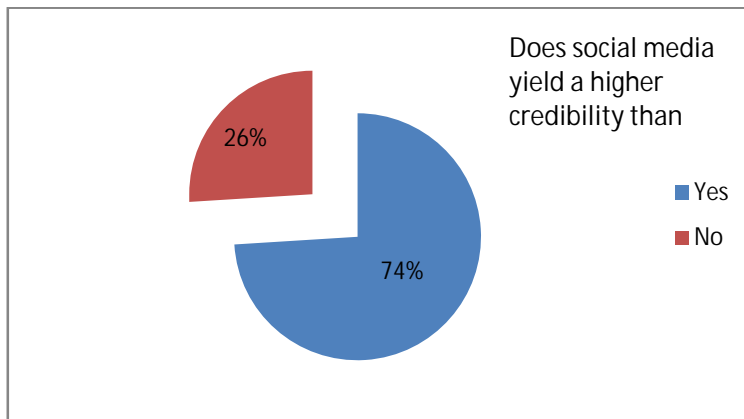


Figure 17: Social media carrying greater reliability

A second question centrally important to explore is the credibility of social media when compared to traditional media. In the questioner traditional media was defined as mass media such as TV, radio or newspapers and the question was- does user recommendations, reviews blog posts etc. on social media have a higher reliability in comparison to the different marketing means in mass media.

The response pattern in this case wasn't surprising. The elaborate theory discussed the literature review in particular in the Earned media and the evolution of social media marketing (chapter 3.1 & 3.3) section provides a basis for it- people to people organic communication has always carried a higher level of trust and social media is only a new medium paving way for it.

6.3 The Different Social Networks

The social sphere consists of a good number of different websites; some are forthcoming, some established and some becoming outdated as we speak. In this very delicate environment it's important to know the user attitude as they sail through the web. With this in mind a part of the survey was designed to look into the popularity of different genres and specific networks from customer perspectives.

Networks with most active users and what it means in terms of customer service

To start of a question was asked to determine which social networking websites the respondent's primarily use-

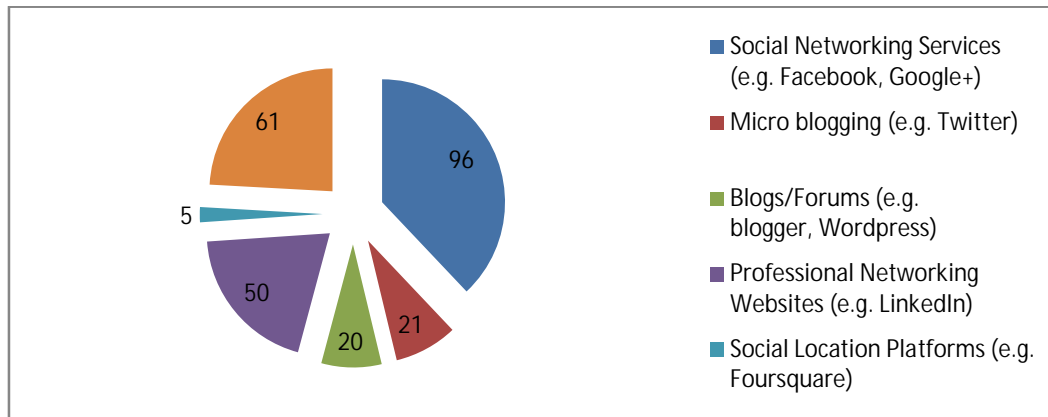


Figure 18: Which social networking website are you currently active in?

The above chart indicates that out of 102 respondents some 96 are active in the Social networking sites such as Facebook or Google+ meaning 94 (%) of the respondents are active on these networks; followed by photo and video sharing sites with almost 60 (%) of the users are present there.

Micro blogging networks are particularly important because of the ubiquitous nature of Twitter, however its low usage rate in Europe isn't a secret when compared to Social networking websites; 21 out of the 102 respondents are active in these mediums.

Blogs or Forums and Social location platforms are particularly important for this research since they are tailor made mediums to share and discuss customer service experience. Blogs and Forums come across as very unique and well suited platforms in discussing a product/service and they possess a high potential in spreading in-depth knowledge. Although only 24 (%) of the respondents are active in this genre, businesses should not ignore it.

Social bookmarking platforms on the other hand provide a handy tool in giving ratings, short reviews and tips. Also when integrated to other widely used networks (e.g Facebook, Twitter), these platforms (e.g. Foursquare) provides a very adept marketing tool, since the Foursquare check-ins could be shared with larger social networks.

Since for small businesses this is a lucrative option to generate ‘word of mouth marketing’ it’s not uncommon to observe ‘Check in here by Foursquare’ (as the below image) or any other social location platform in places like restaurants, pubs or recreation centers. Thus the 5 (%) who regularly uses this service are the right 5 (%) who could be the segway to a broader audience.



Figure 19: A Foursquare check-in sticker [source: blogs.sapo.pt]

Finally, the professional networking sites although important are not directly relevant for this research since it is very rare for this particular medium to come into use as B2C contact point. The brands on these networks and the users following them are more prone in seeing their relationship from a professional/career centric angle. However, as an important category it was put in place to see its relative position to other popular genres.

Searching for pre-purchase information before making a decision:

Next is to study the pre-purchase information seeking through different social networks, providing information to potential buyers is an important CRM responsibility and this chapter also goes in lengths to see how the different social networks are used from this angle and what its repercussions on customer decision making.

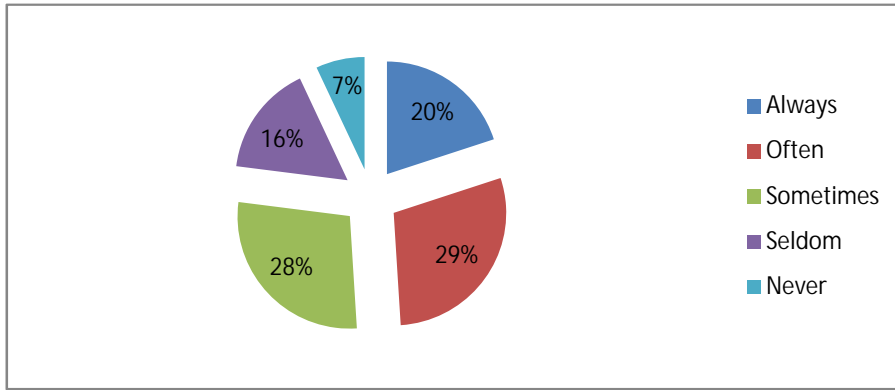


Figure 20: How often you search for information on Social media before making a purchase?

The above figure depicts a very important point, with 20 (%) and 29 (%) respondents claimed that they always or often have sought information before a purchase while 28 (%) of the people are in the middle saying they sometime look for information on the social web. Finally a minority of 16 (%) and 7 (%) of the sample population claimed that they seldom and never search any information before making a purchase decision.

This data can be interpreted by saying that overall 77 (%) of the social media users (excluding the later two categories) are seeking information before a purchase. A chunk of this information comes from people to people connection rather than businesses so companies need to have a strategy in place that would help shape the popular opinion.

The result:

Once we know how many people looks-up information before a purchase, the natural next step is to examine how it affects their decision making process. The respondents were asked if they had any initial purchase preference, did it alter after the search-

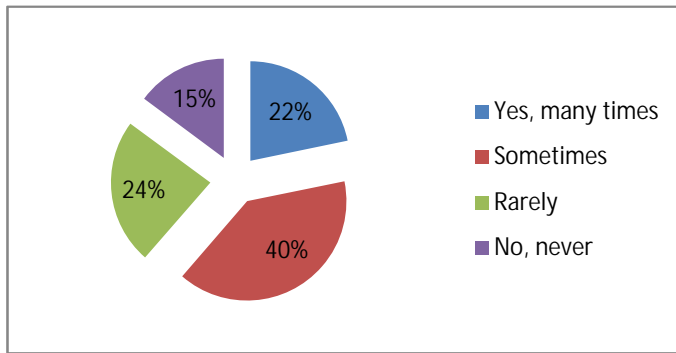


Figure 21: Changing initial purchase preference after the information search

A 22 (%) of respondents have claimed to have changed their initial preference after roaming in the social sphere while another 40 (%) have claimed to have occasionally changed their preference.

A quarter (24%) has mentioned that they seldom change their decision based on social media suggestions or general information while a 15 (%) of the respondents claimed social media does not influence them to change preferences.

From this chapter, it appears that the majority of the users do utilize pre-purchase information and that a large chunk of the users are open taking suggestions from different social media sources.

Most Utilized Social Networks while searching for information

A follow-up question from the previous point was asked to determine which social networking platforms the respondents utilize to seek pre-purchase information. The results came out quite interesting, although from the earlier discussion we know that social networking websites are the most popular amongst all, it seems while seeking pre-purchase information the case isn't exactly the same. As the figure below depicts, comparatively Facebook or Twitter isn't a user favorite for this purpose.

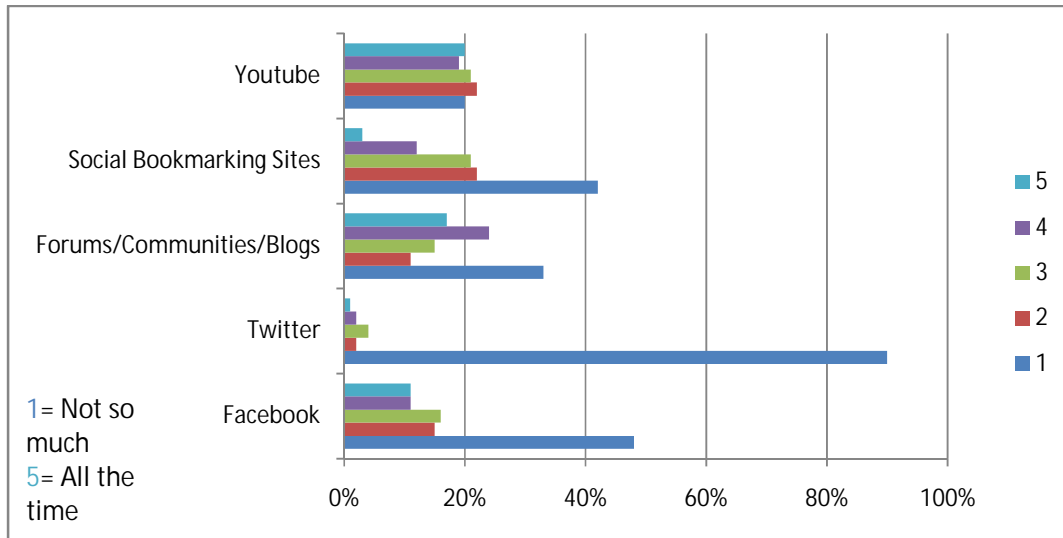


Figure 22: Searching for pre-purchase information on different networks

The other forms of popular social media categories namely Micro blogging and Social bookmarking sites are even less likely to be utilized when it comes to making a purchase decision. For Twitter it does makes sense, given that it is not so widely used in Europe compared to the U.S.

Rather surprisingly, the two categories that are on the top while searching for pre-purchase information are Forums/communities/blogs and Social bookmarking sites. As the chart indicates, a widely used medium from this chart is Youtube, with 60 (%) of the respondents giving it 3 and above ranking. Finally Forums or Blogs are ranked most favorably with 56 (%) of the respondents giving it a 3-5 score.

From this discussion, an idea can be obtained as to which mediums are to be emphasized while putting product/service related information on the web. Of course it wouldn't be prudent to give less emphasis on Facebook or Twitter because people are more prone to visit these websites for general information; while Youtube and other video sharing sites do provide a way for a more visual presentation, Facebook and Twitter are the platform to share their feelings about it to a larger audience. Rather a lesson for the marketers from this chapter could be to not to limit themselves in popular networks only and to take Video/image sharing platforms and Blogs/forums/communities seriously enough and to try finding ways to implement a multiplatform social strategy.

6.4 Engagement Nature

The previous chapters in this section has provided us with the right context, we know who the sample population consists of, what social media sites they spend the most time on, how much trust do they spend here and where do they go looking for purchase information. Based on these this chapter would elaborate on the nature of the brand-consumer communications. To study that several questions were put in place to inquire the relationship respondent maintains with a brand. A broad range of probable answers were put in place to these questions to develop a broad idea.

Firstly, the respondents were asked if they are following any business/brands/Ngo on social media:

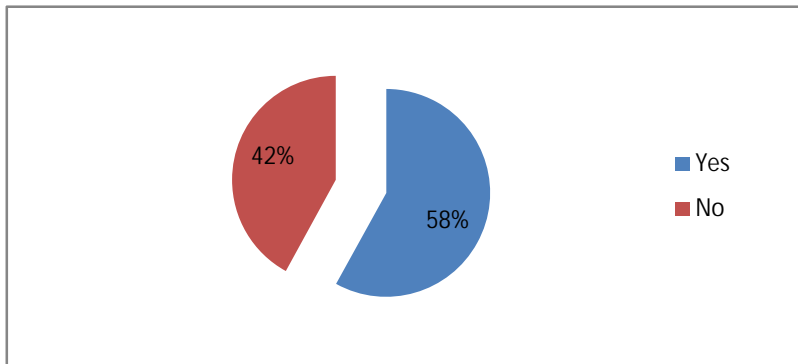


Figure 23: Following a brand/business on social media

This graph as it indicates shows a total of 59 (%) of the respondents are following a brand on social media and 41 (%) are not, we'll first take a look onto the portion that had said 'No'.

Those who are not following any brand on the social web were inquired on their indulgence, the result:

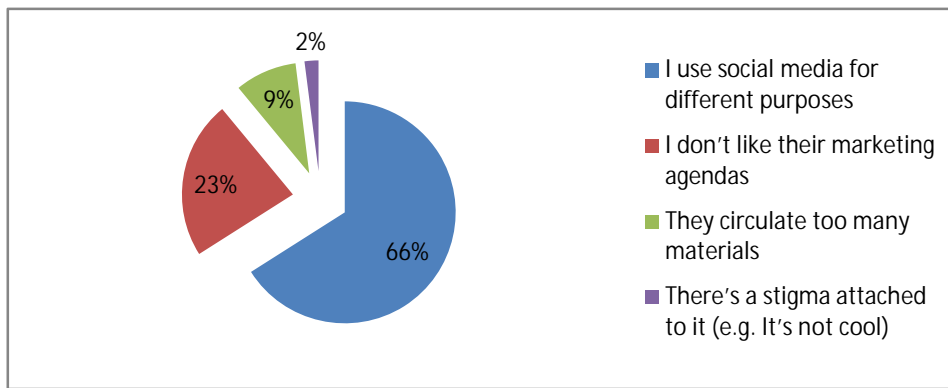


Figure 24: Reasons for not following a brand on social media

Here among the four options the majority responded by stating they follow social media for different purposes (namely personal networking), however the more specific ones- not liking the brand's marketing agendas, getting annoyed by too many materials and the stigma sometimes perceived to come with it have been submitted by 19 (%) 8 (%) and 4 (%) of the respondents which is very telling. Marketers ought to take a note from this and can try to put forward suitable tactics to outreach this annoyed crowd. On the other hand the 67 (%) who said they use social media for other purposes unfortunately could be very difficult to persuade, since often times this group are adamant in their belief to keep social media strictly restricted to their friends and family. Although, not following a brand does not mean they are out of the social customer service apparatus as evident by the up-coming questions, therefore brands could take it (SCRM) as an opportunity to reach out to this reclusive consumer base.

Those who are in fact following a brand on social media, are doing so because..

39 (%) and 33 (%) of the times respondents are looking for general and exclusive information consecutively while following a brand on social media. Again a 14 (%) of the respondents in each categories pointed out that customer service availability and emotional connectedness to be the reason behind following a brand. It is important to mention since the respondents had the choice to select multiple answers here these figures are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but gives a general estimate of the category's individual popularity.

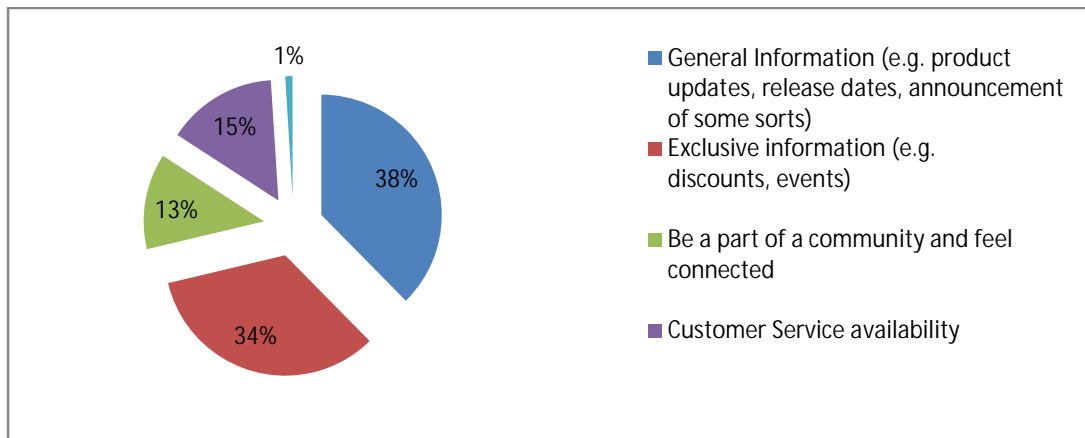


Figure 25: Reasons for following a brand on social media

Interaction relating to brands:

To better grasp the nature of communications, a follow-up question was asked to see if a respondent had interacted voluntarily with a brand on social media. To make this question precise and easy to understand, social media here was represented by Facebook and interaction was defined by liking/commenting in an unfolding conversation to a product/service related post/comment/share in Facebook.

The responses are:

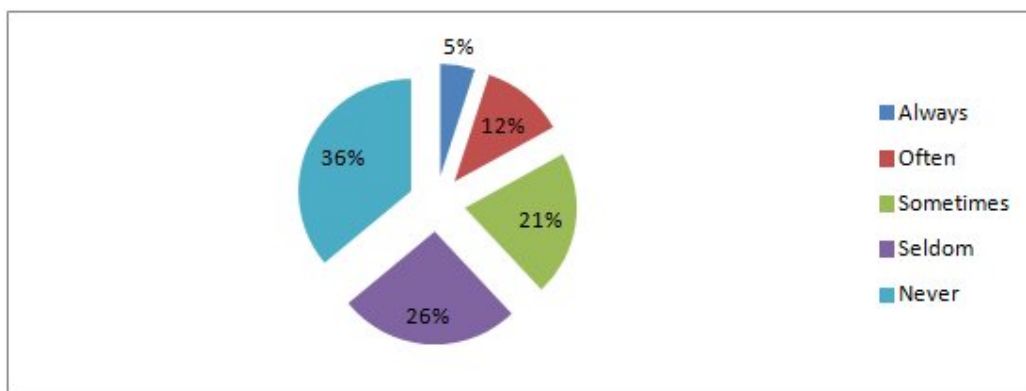


Figure 26: Taking part to an unfolding discussion regarding a service/product in Facebook

It seems that a total of 38 (%) of the respondents are somewhat likely to participate always, often and sometimes in a Facebook page that is related to a commercial enter-

prise. Whereas, a 36 (%) of the sample population has stated to never have participated in such conversations or another 26 (%) are very unlikely to converse in such fashion.

Even though a majority here seems not taking part in an active conversation in brand/product or service related social media entities (in this case Facebook pages), they still might be reachable by other means on social media. From that angle to study the overall sample population including those who are apprehensive in following or directly engaging with brands on social media two implicit questions were asked and were mandatory to answer which helped look at the overall engagement futility.

Firstly, there are a variety of customer oriented activities on social media, such as different perks (like discounts or bonuses) or maybe pro-actively serving customers in case of an impediment which doesn't require consumers to directly follow a brand. Therefore, to know what customers may feel with such activities a question was asked to find out the validity of such effort-

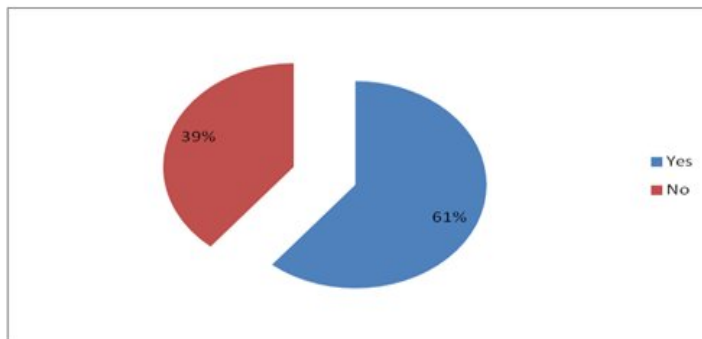


Figure 27: Have the customer centric activities on social media made a brand stand out in your mind

And this question draws a very positive picture, 61 (%) of the respondents claimed that different customer centric activities on social media have helped a brand standout in their mind.

Secondly, to go even further another question was put in place to determine the effect of social media marketing (defined as e.g. advertisement, blogs, user reviews), on trying new products/services.

The responses are:

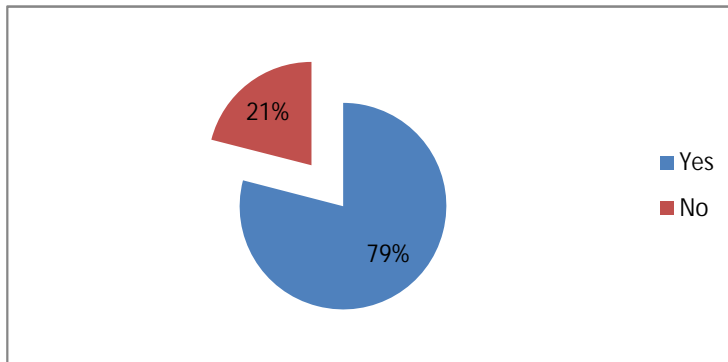


Figure 28: Do advertisement/blogs/user review on social media influence you trying new products?

The overwhelming response is yes, social media marketing does influence consumers to a visible extent. The 79 (%) affirmative answers could be seen as an optimistic sign for social media marketing's stretch although not all of them might be reachable through a single approach.

6.5 Social Customer Service Experience and the Impact it stirs

This chapter would examine the different aspects of social customer relationship management. It was discussed in chapter 4.1 (The rise of the engaged customer) and 4.4 (Customer service and brand perception) that customer service and marketing are both part of a holistic approach in creating a strong brand equity. In the following discussions we would remember this holistic nature of SCRM as we go deeper into different scenarios regarding firsthand customer service experiences and the implications it invites.

Different do's and don'ts of social media customer service:

Firstly, the respondents were asked if they had ever contacted a brand/company through Facebook or Twitter for general customer query or to com plaint about something-

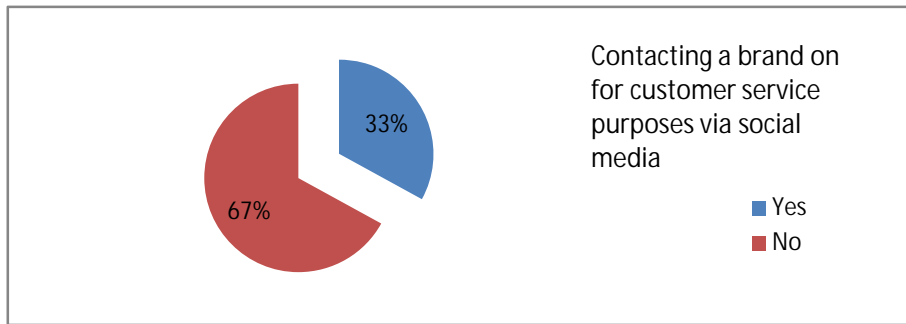


Figure 29: Have you ever contacted a brand/company via social media

The result- a 33 (%) of the respondents have indeed reached out to a business for customer service purposes. To reflect on their experience a series of questions were asked subsequently, starting with the scenario if their query were left unanswered, in that case their chosen reactions are:

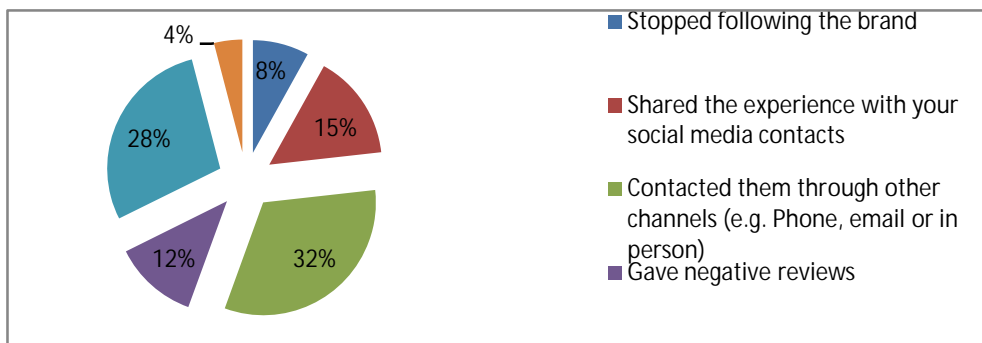


Figure 30: Probable reaction when not being answered to a customer query

This chart depicts only a quarter (28 %) of the respondents have claimed to do nothing if being ignored by a business entity on social media. The rest of the population all have claimed to react in some way, the most common of which is to contact the company through other channels (a 32 % claimed to have done this), while a 35 (%) have pointed out more rough responses either by stop following the brand (8%), sharing the experience with others especially via social media (15%) or by providing negative reviews on the company (12%).

If left unanswered then it seems customers will not only form negative opinions about a company themselves but will share that thought to many others, and as discussed in the

theoretical framework social media provides an instant tool to share and call out on these issues and thus multiplying that negative energy rather quickly. Therefore to omit the space an unattended question/complained leaves on the brand, the company should always be alert of customer reach outs, even if there's no direct or optimistic reply it should at least be present and let the customer know that it is listening to the customer; the following graph reveals when responded from the firm's part it not only drastically reduces probable undesirable implications but could turn the situation in their favor-

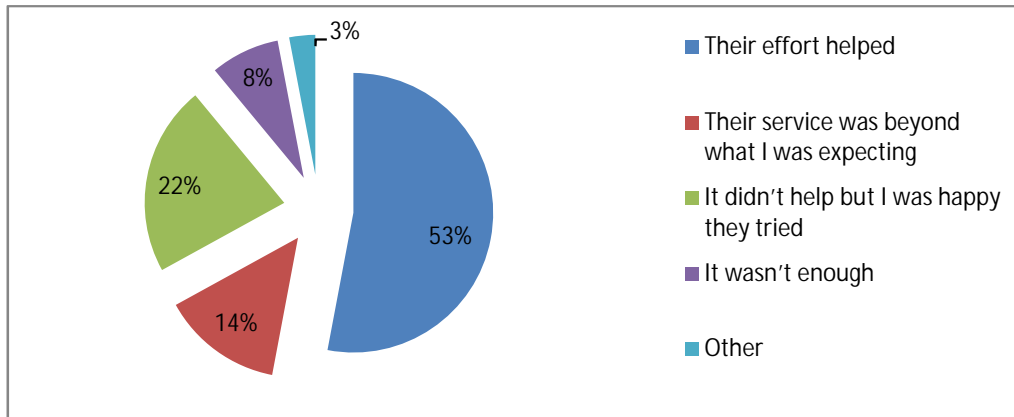


Figure 31: Customer opinions on brand's response to customer query

This chart shows that when responded a 53 (%) stated to have been assisted and 14 (%) mentioned that the responses they got were beyond what they were expecting; this means that this share of satisfied population will carry and likely to share this experience. A quarter (22%) claimed although the company's effort didn't help they are happy that at least it tried, this acknowledgement is very revealing, this shows even if there's little a business can do to remedy something only by being present it can do significant damage control. Finally only a tenth (8 %) of the population have showed dismay to a customer query response, an attitude that is more likely more penetrating if it was left answered.

At this point one thing is clear that is whatever the situation is, it is crucial to respond to customers in social media. Therefore the next stage is to understand the characteristics of responses and the effect it holds on customers. From this perspective a few questions were asked to determine the customer attitudes to test a variety of 'brand responses'.

To study on the customer satisfaction via social customer service, we focused on the response mechanism of the brand once they had been contacted, as efficient responsiveness is an important part of the SCRM apparatus. Respondents were asked extensively of on their best and not so good customer service experience on social media to find out what factors stirred such feelings.

Firstly to detect the reasons behind favorable customer experience on social media, a question was put asking the respondents to rate their most satisfied experience with a service/reply to a query, and a solid majority (60 %+) gave very high ranking to it, now to go behind this response the follow-up question was, what was so special about that particular time, the result:

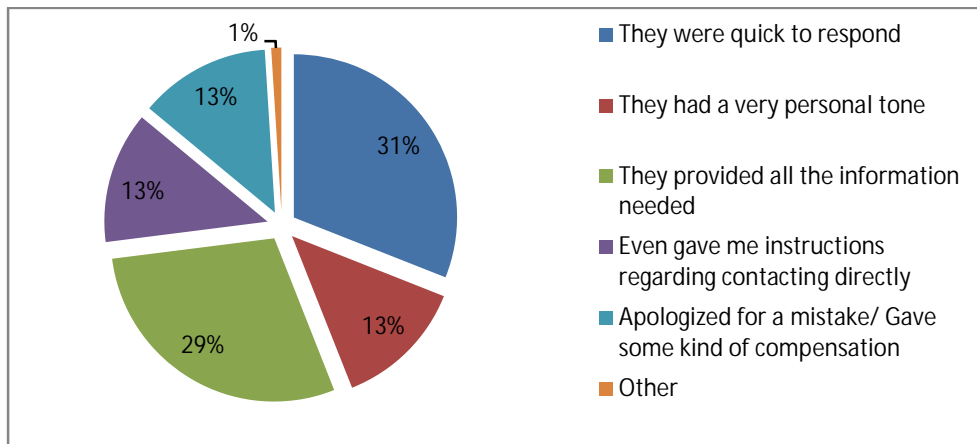


Figure 32: Factors that drives customer satisfaction

The two most pro-forma responses namely responding fast and providing all the needed information came on top with 31 (%) and 29 (%) respectively, this implies that only by being sincere a company can accomplish much in the social web.

On the other hand a more sophisticated approach is likely to generate higher level of brand equity but they require more devotion; having a personal tone, taking direct responsibility by inviting the customer to an individual care or giving proactive compensation in case of a mistake- all will generate more value in the customer mindset and it seems all of them have an equal share of 13 (%) in our sample population.

Similarly, to study the negative experience an approach was taken by first asking the respondents to rate their least favorite encounter with a business on social media. Here a few (20 %) respondents gave very damaging ratings to their ‘worst’ customer service experience; while the rest stuck with calling it ‘poor’. To following question, inquiring what went wrong collected the following responses:

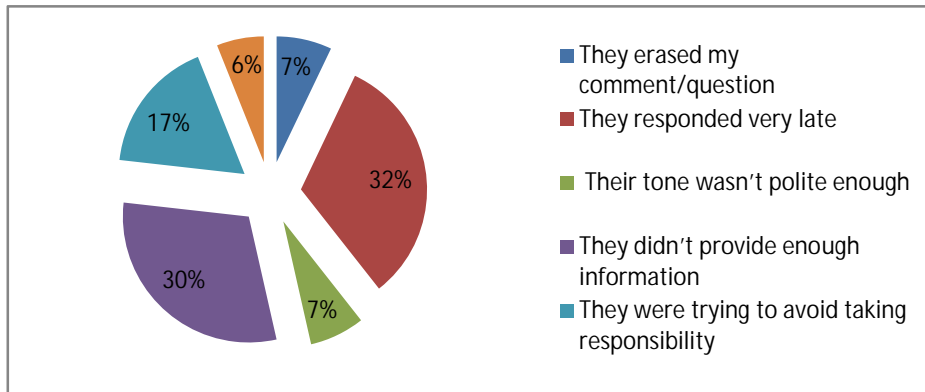


Figure 33: Factors that creates customer dismay

From the above figure it appears that with 32 (%) and 30 (%) of the share the two most common wrongdoings of the business are not providing enough information and responding late, both of which can be remedied by the company without requiring much effort, by actively monitoring the social sphere.

The less likely ones, namely erasing a question/comment, not having an adequate tone while conversing, and trying to evade responsibility in case of customer dismay does occur time to time and are the causes for greater dissatisfaction. These are the ones that customers are likely to remember more with them and share with others.

The result of an effective social customer service experience:

Lastly in *chapter 4.4* the correlation between social customer service and brand health have been discussed, this chapter could be considered to be its direct reflection as it would put this correlation to test. Given the customer service experience had gone in the right course this research wants to find out its impact on brand equity by focusing on

sales and referrals, therefore a number of questions were asked in relation to this notion. From that two most relevant ones are discussed in this chapter:

The first one, after experiencing an excellent customer service the respondents were asked to clarify their subsequent behavior-

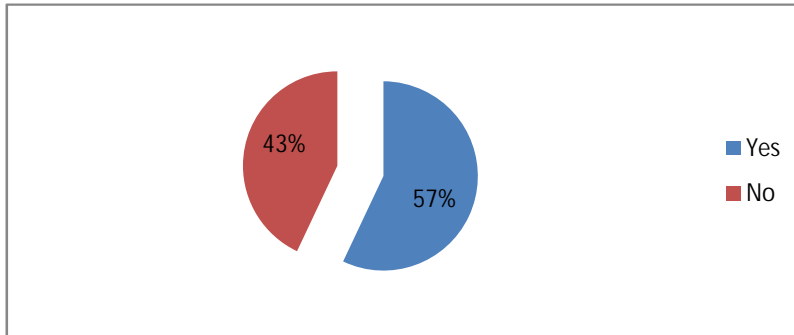


Figure 34: Have the customer service experience on social media encourage you to refer a brand to others?

The answer is vivid; a majority of the respondents have claimed to have referred a brand to others based on positive customer experience on social media.

The second question, going a bit further, to find out the correlation between social customer service and direct sales, it was asked that if the customer experience have ever had made the customer buy more purchase with company,

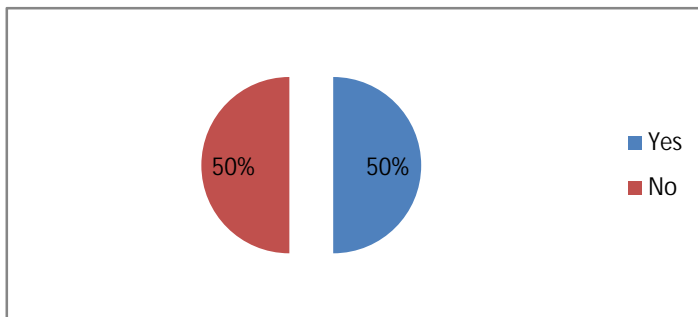


Figure 35: Have the customer service experience through social media prone you to make more purchase with the company?

Here half of the respondents claimed to have in fact made a purchase based on the excellent customer service experience through social media. Here although half, this fig-

ure could be interpreted quite pragmatically, as this is the direct result on the cash flow itself. Furthermore, a Bain and Capital study on consumer-business relations on social media found out that not only the customers who interact with companies over social media spend 20% to 40% more but also demonstrate a deeper emotional commitment to the brand (Barry et al, 2012), on that note that we can also state this portion of sample population has the potential to be turned into organic brand ambassadors.

7 QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

To collect qualitative data two interviews were conducted as described in the methodology section. In selecting questions the theoretical framework has served as the first tenet as in the case with the survey form. However, before finalizing the interview questions it was juxtaposed with the questioner to make sure there would be a direct thematic relation between the two- to see issues from both the consumer and the business side.

The interviewees are from two IT companies both based in Helsinki.

EzyInsights- a social media business intelligence provider and the two interviewees from this company brought in a variety of expert knowledge with them. Ms. Christel Vaenerberg is the Business development manager of the company and before joining here she held positions such as Design and concept director, Senior brand manager in companies such as Iittala Group and Designor Oy. The second interviewee is Mr. Steve El-Sharawy, the Digital engagement manager of EzyInsights, an expert on business-customer relations on social media. To better communicate the research objectives, the researcher was in contact with Ms. Vaenerberg for quite some time taking her suggestion into account, and finally sent the questions to her (Appendix 2). It is then she who decided to bring in Mr. El-Sharawy in the interview as well to better answer the questions.

The third interviewee is Mr. Oladimeji Joseph Fakayode an internet entrepreneur, who until March 2014 served as the Business development manager of CBTec another Helsinki based company. Operating in the E-learning industry this company's virtual learning platform '*Eliademy*' is a popular cloud based service. In his capacity Mr. Fakayode oversaw the efforts designated to social media marketing and the customer relationship aspects related to it. With over 19,000 likes on its Facebook page, social media is a pertinent part of CBTec's operations. The interview with Mr. Fakayode was conducted in a semi-structured manner [Appendix 3] to cover a variety of topics, other than the practical aspects of social media marketing and customer services the researcher had discussed a broad range of topics related to brand development and the relative position of social media in it.

Position	Expertise	Work Experience
Business development manager	Brand management/ business development	Over 15 years
Digital engagement manager	Social media/ Digital engagement	10 years
Business development manager/ Entrepreneur	Communications, brand management/ Social media	3 years

Table 1: Interviewee profile [source: the author]

The interviewees have provided excellent on-point responses while being cautious of the broader picture, which will now be discussed in five central themes.

Customer service and brand image

To start with a general notion, it was asked the interviewees the significance of customer service in shaping a brand image. Ms. Vaenerberg pointed out that the first thing to remember is that brand image isn't something owned by a company, yes it can help shape it but not control it. With that being the case they believe customer service is fundamental in forming brand imagery. They elicited the fact that in today's world one customer has the power to alter the brand image to many people, while in the past it might have been limited to a relatively small social circle now thanks to social media it is much wider. Individual stories of remarkable customer experience are now being shared and echoed across the social platforms, anchoring those brands in consumers' minds. Finally, Mr. Fakayode believes that brand equity is more of a process, and that product development, marketing and after-sales services equally contribute in the coherent running of this cycle.

Social media's suitability as a customer management tool

Secondly on social media's suitability as a CRM tool the interviewees commented that social media provides person to person interactions at the point of inquiry. This interpersonal communication is what social media brings in to customer service management and brands that do this right doesn't channel customers towards where they've put the

solutions; instead they bring the solutions to the customer. According to them, incorporating a social strategy that provides a multiplatform customer service is one of the keys to an efficient social presence. The interviewees have suggested Microsoft Xbox on Twitter and KLM Airlines of Facebook as quintessential examples of social customer service examples (the case of KLM has been discussed in chapter 4.5).

Organic engagement and relationship building

Organic engagement and relationship building are important steps in creating resonance with the brand as we know from Keller's brand equity model (chapter 2). In that light the researcher sought expert opinion on social media's role in achieving brand resonance. The interviewees believe that in social media users should be considered as 'passive consumers of a product'. There are plenty of people who uses a service/product regularly but don't feel the need to talk about it on the social web and transferring these passive consumers into 'active ambassadors' is key in tapping into a rich word of mouth marketing.

Why some businesses are still hesitant in adapting a social customer strategy

An interesting point discussed in theoretical framework is that still a sizable portion of the businesses are reluctant in adapting the social front to provide customer service, to be precise a recent Nielsen poll showed that more than half of the U.S. customers now retreat to social media for queries & complaints; however another study articulates that only 41% of businesses are actively using social media to provide customer service. This dilemma was presented to interviewees and the following are the likely reasons from their perspective:

- a. Existing infrastructure in place - companies want to push customers to customer service centers that already exists. They have invested money in these.
- b. Extra cost to support social media - new scripts, training in how to respond to customers on social media, privacy policies, complications tying in and recording efforts and customer history to existing CRM tools.

- c. They don't think they can respond to customers immediately due to lack of resources (even though people are willing to wait 24 hours for a response).
- d. Social media is not taken seriously by many big brands especially in the decision making level.
- e. Negative comments by a few could trigger the wrong perception in people's minds.
- f. Brands concerned about supporting social media platforms which then become obsolete.

Downsides of having social media as a customer contact point

The interviewees were asked if they think there's any visible drawback to social media's customer service role. They believe that the main challenge is logistical; people are always talking about a brand whether the brand chooses to listen to it or not and attending all these conversations will make CRM more complicated. Furthermore it is likely that during the process of direct interaction a brand would make mistakes the result is this poor service would have much more visibility.

Finally, to minimize these drawbacks and an effective social CRM strategy should have the following core tenets according to the interviewees: constant monitoring, being able to interpret the question/comment correctly, react quickly and clearly and communicate with customers across platforms appropriate to each.

8 FINDINGS

This thesis has been conducted with the aim to investigate the answers to the questions presented in the section 1.2 and in that light the findings will be categorized in a twofold discussion- one is to discuss the findings of an efficient social CRM practice and the second aspect is how this communication between the brand and the consumers are shaping brand equity.

8.1 General Observations Regarding the Efficient Social CRM Approach

From both the customer's side and the professional's point of view the researcher has sought to understand the proper rules of engagement for companies on social media. It was done by detailing consumer attitude on social media, its comparative position against mass media, how and why they interact with brands on social platforms, the nature of this interaction, and their encounters with brands in customer issues.

8.1.1 Consumer Attitude towards brand engagement on social media

In the theoretical framework it was asserted that people to people organic communication or word of mouth publicity is at the heart of social media marketing. Although there exists an ample literature detailing fruitfulness of this type of communication one of the objectives of this research was to explore this concept from different directions- from the consumer perspective, the professional perspective and is social media any better creating this awareness than mass media channels.

From that perspective our first observation is consumers do trust people to people communication or word of mouth publicity more than other forms of publicity. When asked over two-thirds of the sample population gave favorable view toward word of mouth communication. Secondly, when talking about organic engagement the experts opined in the interview that word of mouth marketing could be the most trusted source of information.

Since the customers and businesses have mutual opinion on organic interaction the next step is to find out social media suitability in producing word of mouth publicity. To better understand customer opinion here social media's merit was tested by its relative position against traditional media and by their engagement habit on social media itself-how and why do they interact with brands, what are they looking for or how much credibility do they perceive the brands to have in social media.

First off, social media came out with flying colors in terms relative trustability against mass media. Then, when detailing consumer-brand engagement, the trajectories has shown that efficient engagement (engagement that is valued by the consumers) has not only a result on brand image but a direct result on sales as well. Social media as argued on theory is a people driven medium; when a brand successfully mingles here the result will be inevitable.

Mr. El-Sharawy mentioned that the primary challenge of social media marketing is to turn the passive consumers into active brand ambassadors; he defined passive consumers as having been using a product/service but not willing to communicate about it. Since it could be done mostly by other ambassadors brands must seek out these people and properly incentivize them, if successful it will create a ripple effect rendered in the following figure-

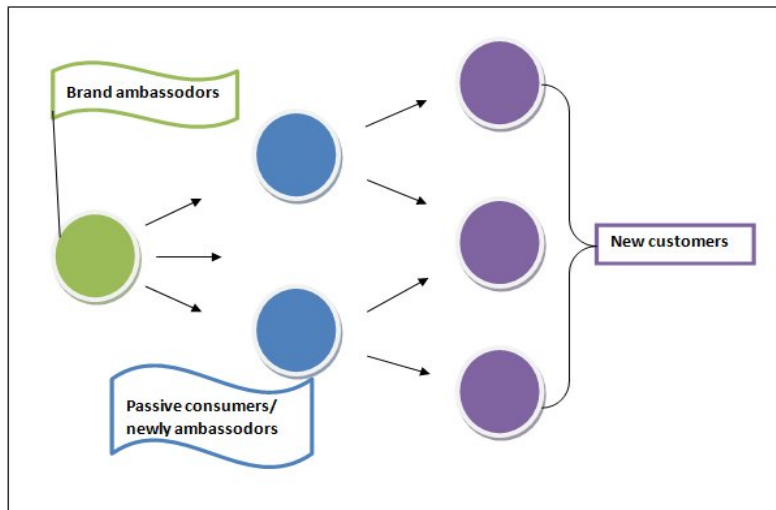


Figure 36: Brand ambassador ripple effect on social media [source: the author]

8.1.2 The Do's and Don'ts of an efficient SCRM Operation

Since more than half of the respondents have claimed to either recommend or made additional purchase based on customer service experienced on social media it was forthcoming to analyze the mechanism that leads to this satisfaction. Yet it was kept in mind that social media is only a medium and at best could be one of the drivers that propels customer satisfaction. This research was primarily focused on the engagement dynamic of customer-brand interaction and tried to find right ways to approach consumers on the social web. From that light a set of findings that either drives or drains customer satisfaction have been identified. These issues can radically alter the customer satisfaction level and thus could potentially harm or boost the brand equity. To make them palpable two lists have been formulated one focusing on the common hindrance of customer satisfaction and brand equity, then the other one detailing the pertinent factors driving customer satisfaction.

I) The most common pitfalls from the brand's part-

Not responding/deleting a comment: When a customer query is left unanswered it sends all the wrong signals, as the interviewees pointed out the customers talk these experiences and even though the companies that don't put enough emphasis to social media might have deemed the social web to be not 'just worth it' as part of a regular operations but what they are in-fact doing is putting stains on their brand image. The case studies especially the King Arthur Flour case (chapter 3.6.2) has shown when there is a large number of reach outs from customers and logistically which may be very difficult to respond to all, the company can chose the interesting ones to respond besides those which require direct business related response which can accomplish a lot; what it does is the give the customers the belief that their comments are being noticed and if they ever comeback with a problem or a solid question their query would be answered. This in turn builds trust and in the long run generates word of mouth publicity.

Lack of authenticity: Customers can always tell when they are not fairly treated. This could be evident by the fact a total of 54% of the respondents have claimed that either not providing all the sought information or not taking responsibility in case of a mistake from the companies part are the things that disappoints them the most. It can be juxtaposed by the things that satisfy the customers the most: responding timely with proper

information and if the company goes a bit far by providing a direct contact channel to the customers (e.g. phone number or the email id of the responsible personnel) the satisfaction level with the customer service could be increased exponentially. As Ms. Vaernerberg pointed out customer service is inseparable from the brand image, these little instances of sincerities would resonate with favorable brand recognition.

Being too 'commercial': A great reason for people who does not follow any brands on social media say they either do not approve their marketing agendas; business are commercial entities and thus it would be naive not to expect that their social media activities would somehow not be related to ROI. But there's a way to do it, as good examples such as demonstrated by Starbucks or King Arthur Flour who with content marketing practices [discussed in chapter 3.4) uses the social web to cater to consumer's interests and then find ways to make it relevant to their products; on the other hand there are many brands who executes social media marketing in pro-forma fashion that is just plain and simple marketing with different product or service related materials and news dominating their operations and in this instances only the very loyal customers would be willing to follow such brands. From the interviewees point of view also the brands need to find what their consumer base talking about and develop their marketing strategy around that- in other words that is a form of content marketing. So it is advisable that, in order to give the commercial entities a human face content marketing approach on social media might just be the best way.

II) What Drives Customer Satisfaction-

Interaction brings results: As previously stated this research has revolved on the concept of organic interaction taken place in the social sphere thus a major part of empirical and theoretical study was devoted to see the nature of this interaction. One finding is that a good chunk might not appreciate if a brand approaches a consumer directly with its business motives, it would mimic a real life situation that would negate these activities as marketing ploys. To make a way around this behavior the researcher would suggest resorting to content marketing. The theory discussed on this matter including the case studies would suggest the businesses to look for the interest areas consumers' value and design a marketing strategy that would revolve around those interests; in other words marketers must provide their base something to care about, if its only about

‘how great their product is’ unfortunately in the busy world of social media it would be left in vain.

When consumers value the social presence of a brand it not only becomes a part of that community but would also bring their social networks in the sphere of brand influence. Such as described in the Starbucks case [chapter 3.6.1], if there’s and uncanny rumor spreading around Starbucks, it’s their fans that first come to its defense making it easier for the brand managers to tackle. Granted for companies like Starbucks their brand building process started way beforehand and social media might only be the tip of the iceberg still there’s a lesson to be learned and social media is making their brilliance very visible. And the brilliance of social media is it is much fairer than any other medium, small business might not have the teams of graphic designers, content writers but just by being pro-active and sincere in the social web they could showcase their commitment to the consumers and this authenticity would sow the seeds of strong brand equity.

Creating a multiplatform social strategy: According to Mr. El-Sharawy a common practice among the companies is limiting themselves in specific platforms for social customer service. For example the company may have an existing infrastructure that handles customer queries through its website and when a customer reaches out to it via a social platform the response she gets (if at all) is contact them thorough the ‘legitimate’ channel. It might be afraid that the existing documentation system would get more complicated if they started reaching out through social media. This is not the wisest policy, if anything it was an opportunity to showcase their effort publicly; Yes, there are matters that could not have discussed overtly but even in these instances a response would convey sincerity if nothing else. Helping the customers at point they indicate needing help saves time and has direct implications on customer satisfaction. Identifying the relevant platforms was an objective of this research, from that point it is recommended that other than the most common networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) depending on the industry Blogs/Forums or video/photo sharing websites (e.g. Youtube, Instagram, Pinterest) could be included in operations as well. Not all the channels would bring in same amount of activities but being there would allow the brand to respond the customers at the point of entry.

Better to ask for feedback: An important step in continual development is having regular feedback. From that angle social media's role in gathering feedback was researched in the empirical study. A substantial majority of the sample population have given favorable opinion on providing feedback. In collecting customer opinions social media can be a great tool because it not only could ask for formal opinions but could also trace the informal talks people are having about the product.

A good portion of the sample population stated to have given feedback only when asked, and social media could be the place to ask for it perhaps by circulating a virtual form or confident companies could take it further and ask to rate their service/product publicly. These activities would ensure ongoing product development in the short term and healthy brand equity in the long run.

Monitor constantly, react quickly, converse personally: Or the three core tenets of a successful SCRM strategy pointed out by the interviewees. Going back to the quantitative data certainly these three factors could be given factual grounds as well, all three of them such as coming back to the customer swiftly, providing the necessary information, sharing a direct communication channel when needed bolsters customer satisfaction level. On the other hand not trying being defensive had something went wrong, having a personal tone while conversing helps the brand develop a persona that steers a positive perception in the consumers psyche. This again implies that even SME's with budgetary constraints can master the basics of SCRM and serve their customers better and strengthen their brand equity.

This chapter could be summarized with the following key points:

Driving brand loyalty/consumer satisfaction

- Responding quickly and diligently-it helps exceeding their expectation.
- Interact with authenticity- people love a human tone.
- Bring in solutions to the point of entry- don't make customers run around.
- Collect feedback- and deliver on it.
- Endorse people to people interaction- don't try to control it.
- Develop a story around your product/service- take help of content marketing.

Table 2: Some traits of an efficient SCRM strategy [source: the author]

8.2 How SCRM Effects Brand Equity

Chapter 2 categorized brand equity as a *process of developing intangible assets for the business* (Aperia, 2004) and the different facades of this research had been conducted in accordance to this theme. To better understand brand equity Keller's CBBE model was discussed earlier and the empirical study would now be placed against this model to study SCRM's impact. Keller's model has four stages and each stage has its own set of functionalities as described briefly in chapter 2.

To quickly recap, Keller's customer-based brand equity model or the CBBE dictates a four step process in garnering brand equity and the following figure depicts the possible way each stage can be affected by SCRM.

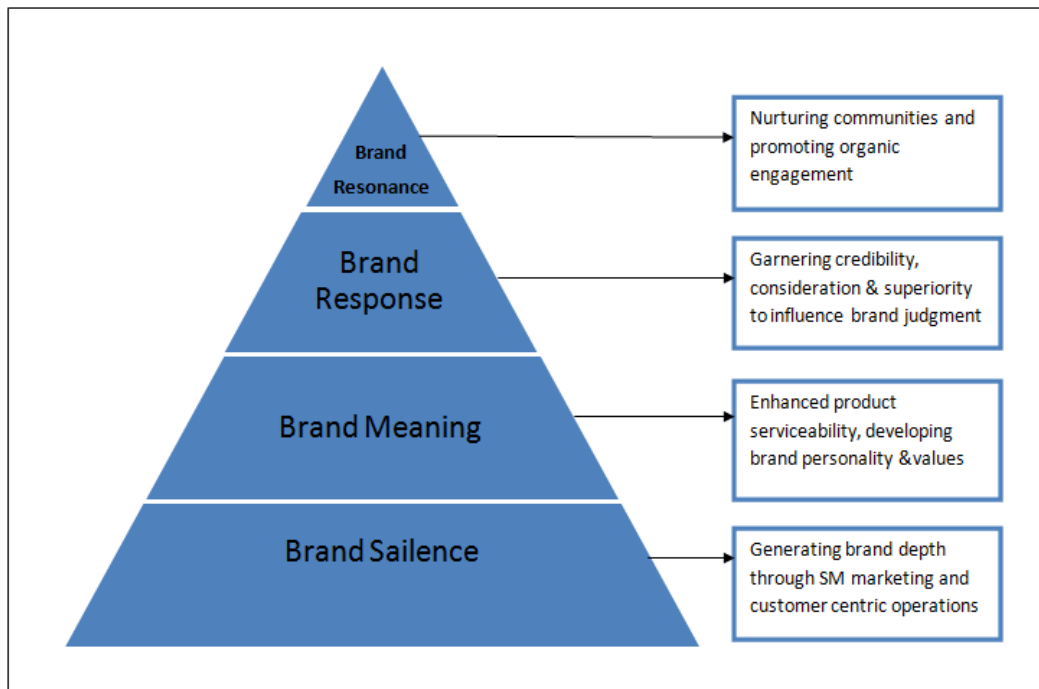


Figure 37: SCRM's effect on the different stages of CBBE model [Source: the author]

In light of this figure the stages are discussed below:

Brand Saliency starts with knowing who the customers are, their decision making process, how do they see a brand and its rivals. Here social media can complement the market research operation in determining brand awareness which is at the core of this stage.

However a specific aspect of brand saliency is to create 'brand depth' which is defined as how easily customers can recall or recognize a certain brand. The sample population and the interviewee perspective both would agree that social media marketing along with its customer service operations plays a clear role in helping a brand stand out. It goes further, a sizable chunk of the sample population stated that based on the customer oriented acts on social media they have recommend brands to others and this experience have even prompted them to make more purchase with the company.

Finally, as Manktelow (2013) stated that brand salience is not only about creating brand identity and awareness, it's also trying to ensure that brand perceptions are 'correct' at key stages of the buying process social media can be interjected in this process to better influence the perceptions.

Brand Meaning is made up with two blocks: performance and imagery of the brand. A Key aspect of brand performance is product serviceability, which Keller defined as the *ease of repairing/remedying if anything goes wrong the product/service* (Keller, 2001), here SCRM can play a very visible role. Social customer service can be a new front for customers to reach out. By building a robust social media presence the brand can build communities around them which in turn can share ideas, experiences among themselves and could bolster the consumer satisfaction level.

The second brand meaning according to Keller is brand imagery, it implies how well brand caters to customer's needs on a social and a psychological level. One key aspect imagery is brand personality and values; since this is more of an abstract issue its somewhat out of the direct reach of the companies, all they can do is try shaping it. In developing a brand persona social media can be by far the most suitable tool since it allows the brand to directly reach out and have conversations with its customers.

The KLM case study [chapter 4.5] would not only narrate a successful SCRM strategy but in the process represents a unique airliner that is: friendly, warm and emphatic to its customers. When executed diligently a social strategy could qualitatively yield similar results to other brands.

Brand Response refers to how the customers think or feel about the brand based on its marketing activities or other sources of information (Keller, 2001). Brand response is consisted of two main blocks- brand judgments and brand feelings.

Brand feelings are more of an internal response of the customers which is evoked by a brand, social media in and of itself would not directly affect this. However, when it comes to brand judgment the social web can play a more assertive role. Brand judgment refers to *customers' personal opinions and evaluations with regard to the brand* (Keller, 2011). Brand credibility, consideration and superiority are among the core tenets that make up brand judgment; and the social web provides a more trustworthy medium to

communicate the brand's message with customers. Thus to create trust and to outstand the brand from the crowd a well coordinated SCRM strategy could garner judgment in favor to the brand.

Brand Resonance comes into play when customers' transcend the buying-selling paradigm and feel a deep psychological bond with the brand. This step is typically pertinent for our purpose as it involves organic engagement from the customers' part. Keller characterizes it in terms of: *intensity or the depth of the psychological bond that customers have with brand as well as the level of activity engendered by this loyalty e.g. repeated purchase, the extent to which customers seek out brand information, events, and other loyal customers etc* (Keller, 2001).

This stage is broken into four categories: behavioral loyalty; attitudinal attachment; sense of community and active engagement. The latter two- sense of community and active engagement is particularly attainable through SCRM. With social media brands would be able to better form communities and be able to nurture engagements. Also to seek out loyal fans, to rally them off the virtual realm to real world the social web can play a role (e.g. by organizing events through social media, give them bonuses, discounts to retain loyalty).

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 Summary

This study embarked on a journey to deduce the brand implications of having social media as a customer contact point, and because of the nature of this investigation the right practices of social CRM operations came naturally in the discussion. The result is that the study has produced a twofold discourse: one is identifying a set of practices to better operate in the social sphere and secondly, how this operation is affecting brand equity. This research thus would not only come handy when understanding social media's impact on the brand but businesses formulating social media strategy can also take its list of 'rules of engagement' on the social web as a starting point.

The literary arguments especially Keller's CBBE model served as the light house to this research and along with the case studies discussed from secondary sources and with a bit of common sense have argued the case for brand-consumer or consumer-consumer organic engagement. The subsequent empirical part, which took and analyzed opinions from both the consumers and experts have validated the literary arguments

So in conclusion, the summary of this research would be for companies to take social media as what it is: a people powered, universally accessible medium and with time which can only gain more prominence. Perhaps the platforms reigning today's landscape would be irrelevant tomorrow but the larger philosophy behind it all would remain in place.

9.2 Research Limitations

Like any research body this work is not without weakness. From a general point of view, there could have been more in-depth analysis to some of the concept presented such as- Earned media, Communities of practice or Content marketing. Because of the lack of time-resource they were left discussed in a reserved manner. Also not having a detailed case study could be mentioned here. The four cases discussed were based upon secondary sources, thus the pragmatic knowhow's of their workings can only be deduced and might lack objectivity.

Secondly, sample population of the survey didn't yield the most ideal representation of the population; the Female-Male ratio in this research is 34-66 (%) which is not the best considering the almost 50-50 distribution the popular social networks embody. Furthermore, the sample population consists of 102 responses, a figure although provides the basics but might pose certain biases. For the qualitative part, among the two interviews one was conducted virtually, where the respondents provided the answer in writing thus the interpretation of the text has the potential to be misconstrued.

A third limitation to this study could be the relevance of some theories and statistics discussed. Since the literatures related to social media is relatively new and still in development, a variety of research bodies from related but not from exact field was taken into account. In terms of the statistics used a few of them are not conducted very recently and given the fast changing social media landscape this too also to be kept in mind.

9.3 Suggestions for Further Research

One interesting continual research could be to study the SCRM's impact on Keller's brand equity model. The specific factors this research proposed affecting brand equity could be the subject of further inquiry. As stated in the Research limitations, there have been multiple concepts brought up and only were scratched on the surface, they all deserve independent studies on their own merit; topics such as '*Content marketing's role in creating brand equity through social media*' or '*Communities of practice in nurturing social media communities*' could provide food for thought.

If the further studies are conducted for companies, then the identified traits of an efficient social CRM strategy could be taken in for in-depth scrutiny and the framework depicting brand equity and SCRM could be the subject of an empirical study.

In a holistic note, the role of social media in the larger media landscape and how the rift settles between the new media and the traditional media is yet to be seen; perhaps this also could provide an interesting field of research.

GLOSSARY

COP: ‘Communities of practice’ are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ (Wenger, 2002)

CRM: ‘Customer relationship management’; the principles, practices, and guidelines that an organization follows when interacting with its customers. (Investopedia, 2014 [www])

CBBE: Customer based brand equity; a brand equity model proposed by Kevil Lane Keller. It approaches the concept of brand equity through a customer centric attitude.

ROI: Return on investment, a performance measure used to evaluate the efficiency of an investment or to compare the efficiency of a number of different investments. (Investopedia, 2014 [www])

SCRM: Social customer relationship management; ‘Social CRM is a philosophy and a business strategy, supported by a technology platform, business rules, workflow, processes and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted and transparent business environment’ (Greenberg, March 2012. [www] collected from The customer & leadership blog) .

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APPENDIX 1: THE SURVEY QUESTIONER

‘Social Media through Customer Eyes’

1) Your Gender

Male/Female

2) Which category below includes your age?

17 or younger

18-20

21-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60 or older

3) Which social networking websites are you currently active in?

- Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook, Google+)
- Micro blogging (e.g. Twitter)
- Blogs/Forums (e.g. blogger, Wordpress)
- Professional Networking Websites (e.g. LinkedIn)
- Social Location Platforms (e.g. Foursquare)
- Photo & Video Sharing Sites (e.g. Instagram, Youtube)

4) In a typical week, about how much time do you spend using social networking website?

- 0 -1 hours
- 2-4 hours
- 5-7 hours

- 8-10 hours
 - More than 10 hours
- 5) Approximately how much time spend in an average week on the mass media such as TV, radio, newspapers and so on per week
- 0 -1 hours
 - 2-4 hours
 - 5-7 hours
 - 8-10 hours
 - More than 10 hours
- 6) Before making a purchase do you search for related information on social media?
- Always
 - Often
 - Sometimes
 - Seldom
 - Never
- 7) On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the information source you utilize before a purchase
- Facebook
 - Twitter
 - Forums/Communities/Blogs
 - Social Bookmarking sites
 - Youtube
- 8) Are you following any business/brands/Ngo's in social media?
- Yes/No
- If not, why?
- I use social media for different purposes

- I don't like their marketing agendas
 - They circulate too many materials
 - There's a stigma attached to it (i.e. It's not cool)
- 9) When you are in fact following a brand on social media, you are looking for:
- General Information (I.e. product updates, release dates, announcement of some sorts)
 - Exclusive information (i.e. discounts, events)
 - Be a part of a community and feel connected
 - Customer Service availability
 - Other, please specify_____
- 10) Have you ever changed your initial purchase preference after searching relevant information on social networks?
- Yes, many times
 - Sometimes
 - Rarely
 - No, never
- 11) Do advertisements/blog posts/ FB pages/user reviews on social media influence you to try new brands/products/services?
- Yes/No
- 12) Do you agree, for instance, user-recommendation/ reviews/ blog posts etc. on social media have a higher credibility than advertisements/ editorials/ other marketing means on mass media?
- Yes/No
- 13) Have you ever contacted a brand/company on their Facebook page or Twitter account for a customer service query/or to complaint about something?
- Yes/No

14) If it did not come back at you, did you-

- Stopped following the brand
- Shared the experience with your social media contacts
- Contacted them through other channels (e.g. Phone, email or in person)
- Gave negative reviews
- Did nothing
- Other, please specify_____

15) If it did reply, what did you make of their effort?

- Their effort helped
- Their service was beyond what I was expecting
- It didn't help but I was happy they tried
- It wasn't enough
- Other, please specify_____

16) In a scale of 1-5 what would you give to the time you were most satisfied with a service/reply to any query on social media?

17) What did they do right?

- They were quick to respond
- They had a very personal tone
- They provided all the information needed
- Even gave me instructions regarding contacting directly
- Apologized for a mistake/ Gave some kind of compensation
- Other, please specify_____

18) In a scale to 1-5 what would you give to the time you were most disappointed with the response of the company?

19) What went wrong?

- They responded very late
- Their tone weren't polite enough
- They didn't provide enough information

- They were trying to avoid taking responsibility
- If other, explain_____

20) If you liked a brand on Facebook, have you ever taken part (liking a comment, or commenting yourself) to an unfolding discussion regarding a service/product/customer query on its page?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Seldom
- Never

21) Have the customer oriented activities on Social media (such as- interacting with customers, proactively replying to people in case of an impediment , giving discounts or other perks etc.) made a brand stand out in your mind?

- Yes/No

22) Based on the customer service experience on social media, have you ever referred a product/service to others?

- Yes/No

23) Have the customer service experience through social media ever prone you to make more purchase with the company?

- Yes/No

24) How often you give feedback after a purchase?

- Yes, all the time
- Sometimes, when it something extra special/horrible
- Seldom, depends on my mood
- Only when asked for feedback

25) Which medium you use to convey your feedback?

- The company's website
- Social media
- Verbally by phone/in person
- Through letter
- Other_

26) After a purchase do you feel encouraged to voice out your opinion with relevant communities in social media?

- Yes, very much so
- Well sometimes
- I'm in the middle, depends on the circumstances
- Rarely so
- No, never

27) Do you feel that social media has made your decision making process more complex?

- Yes/No

APPENDIX 2: THE STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Interviewees: Christel Vaenerberg & Steve El-Sharawy, provided answers in writing on 7th of April 2014.

1. First of all, from a brand manager's point of view, how important is customer service in shaping a brand image?

The first thing to consider with this question is that brand image isn't something owned by the company. It's what people think about your brand. As such, customer service is fundamental in terms of shaping any company's brand image. In today's world, one customer has the power to potentially change your brand image singlehandedly to many people. In the past this might have been limited to a smaller social circle.

Example:

<https://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20140402113751-23168-airbnb-saves-the-day-and-earns-a-client-for-life>

These hero stories shape brand image to people who may not use the service for years, or may never use it. But when someone else asks they can confirm "Oh yeah I heard they were good."

2. What is your opinion on social media's suitability as a customer management tool? Would you agree that social media has provided more effective platforms to new products/services/brands to draw consumers' attention than mass media channels?

Despite being potentially fragmented across social platforms, social media provides person to person interactions at the point of query. Brands that do this right don't channel customers towards where they've put the solutions, they bring the solutions to the customer regardless of platform. See someone like Samsung who insist on servicing customers in the traditional way on social media, vs Microsoft Xbox on Twitter and KLM Airlines on Facebook.

3. A part of this research concerns the brand-consumer organic engagement; I know EzyInsights works to improve brand-customer interaction on the social networks, in that light can you comment on the role engagement plays in turning ordinary followers into brand ambassadors?

Social media provides a platform where conversations between brands and customers is trivial. The term 'ordinary followers' could be a bit leading. Let's consider them 'passive consumers of a product'. So you have plenty of people who use services and products every day but feel no need to comment or talk about them. Transforming these passive consumers into 'active ambassadors' is key in tapping into a rich source of word of mouth marketing, which is the most trusted of all sources. Deepening the relationship between customers and brands happens when brands acknowledge the efforts, comments and contributions of their best/most loyal fans.

4. A recent Nielsen poll shows that more than half of the U.S. customers now retreat to social media for queries & complaints; however another study says only 41% of businesses are using social media to provide customer service. What might be the reasons behind it?

We constantly preach the idea of helping the customer at the point they indicate they need help. Like you mentioned, a significant % of people go to social media to express opinions, give feedback, tell about problems and ask questions of brands. But only a small % of brands seem willing to help them there. There are likely several reasons for this:

- a. Existing infrastructure in place - companies want to push customers to customer service centres that already exist. They have invested money in these.
- b. Extra cost to support social media - new scripts, training in how to respond to customers on social media, privacy policies, complications tying in and recording efforts and customer history to existing CRM tools.

c. They don't think they can respond to customers immediately due to lack of resources (even though people are willing to wait 24 hours for a response).

d. Social media is not taken seriously by many big brands.

e. Brands concerned about supporting social media platforms which then become obsolete.

5. Do you see any down sides for the brands having social media as a customer contact point? Such as some claim social media has made the decision making process more complex?

Social media as a contact point already exists. Whether the companies choose to listen or not is irrelevant. People are trying to get in contact and talking about the brand on social media whether they are present or not. People ask questions of many brands even though they will never receive a reply. It may make logistically managing CRM more challenging. It will certainly make mistakes and poor service more visible and easier to share.

6. N. Now, to end with a bit broader topic, as social media is changing the status-quo of the customer relationship management scene, what characteristics would you look for in an effective social customer service strategy?

An effective social CRM strategy involves being able to react quickly, monitor all the time, and also communicate with customers in a way appropriate for each platform. --

APPENDIX 3: THE SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Interviewee: Oladimeji Joseph Fakayode, conducted face to face on 25th of April at Technopolis complex, Helsinki.

NR: I noticed you have around 19,000 likes on Elidemi's Facebook page, so surely you got approached by customers over there so how did you handle that?

OJF: I make a comment very quickly on how we built this community of 19,000 then I can talk about how we approach them as customers. Firstly these 19000 people they were quite fragmented than our real user base is because the initial strategy we had to grow our user base on Facebook we ran advertising and spend a lot of money to acquire those users and the idea was that Facebook would be a content publishing place for us to share product updates, or to share blog posts or interesting contents and to an extent it worked. But the if I be honest in the beginning we made a mistake that our targeting wasn't that great so acquired a lot of users who didn't had any interest in our business. So it got to a point that there wasn't actually any integration between our user base and the Facebook likes and the result was that there wasn't any visible engagement.

Now to go back to the main question, how we handled customer questions on Facebook, we had a support email, an in many cases we gave that out the customers to channel them in the right place and btw this is not only restricted to Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and Pinterest. To manage them efficiently we used Hootsuite (A cloud based service that helps manage multiple social platforms). I remember when I came to the office I opened Hootsuite right away to see what is going on the social media.

Nr: Ok, since when someone approaches you on social media and because of its nature that is visible to everyone there is a marketing aspect to it. With that in mind did you used to see social customer services from a marketing point of view as well or was it just plain customer service issue?

OJF: The way I think is customer service is very much a part of marketing. I remember when I joined CBTec as the business development guy part of my responsibilities was marketing and i was trying to convince my boss that customer service should be work-

ing very closely with marketing, you just cannot separate them. So the question becomes how does it affects the image of the company. So what we did is made this policy of how to respond to customers, number one we need to get back to the customer in a maximum of 24 hours, number two- you need to be polite no matter how the customer is acting and number 3, if possible channel the customer from social platforms to private messaging.

And the thing with marketing is that opportunity you had to interact with customers is also an opportunity to convert them into paying customers (there are two categories of services provided by the company: one is free, and the other one is priced) to say them 'hey btw, we have this other service as well, would you be interested?' and then we start talking with them about the benefits and features of the paid service. So for us it wasn't only a tool in solving issues, but an opportunity to sell more.

NR: Have you ever erased a question from your social web?

OJF: I don't think so. We believed that a question should always be there, unless its degrading or racially motivated.

NR: Do you see any drawbacks of this sort of very open customer service mechanisms?

OJF: The thing is I believe the benefits outweigh the drawbacks in so many ways. Social media is common! People are always on social media and if they want to complaint about something instead of going the mail server or by phone it's a easier to do that over there (social media).

Then the drawback perhaps the amount of time it takes for the customer service representative or the social media marketer to dig up questions, if you have email or a support platform the people are skewed to answer questions but if you come from social media then the social media team would have identify that question, forward to the support team and the time it consumes makes you less effective.

The second thing that could be mentioned from a drawback point of view, is that customers can start posting negative comments about you on either Facebook or twitter which is of course open to the whole world and at the same time if you are able to man-

age it in the right way, if you know how to respond then there's a chance to elevate the brand value.

NR: What would you look for in an essential social customer service strategy?

OJF: I think that the number one thing you should have is the ability to interpret the customer's comment in the right way. From experience what I've realized is that when I'm reading it, am I decoding it right? This btw I think is another challenge of social customer services because many times I thought I understood what the customers meant but I actually didn't. So that's number one, you need to be very skewed so that you can answer it in the right way.

The second thing would be when you understand what the customer is saying to communicate in a very concise and coherent and in a language that the customer would understand.

Another trait I would be looking for is the ability to manage operations when you are on the go, meaning you should be able to respond to customers from mobile devices. This is especially because if you have a time limit of 24 hours (to respond) and you are not in the office.

Another thing could be important is the ability to interact in different languages or in other word localizing the system.

And then one final thing would be, to be able to measure. To see how the customer services done by social media differs from other channels or how the customer satisfaction level is different. Because if you can't measure something it doesn't exist,

NR: Excellent point, so what can be done to better measure this? Perhaps a rating system?

OBJ: Well yeah, that could be done and also when you do the customer satisfaction survey you add some questions relating to different channels. Just to check how many cus-

tomers who took support from social media were satisfied afterwards and compare that with other mediums.

NR: My next question is that what would you say of the role customer service plays on developing brand equity?

OBJ: That's a very good question by the way. Lets see it from a point of view where you design a product, then you sell it then you have the last part where you provide after sales support. I believe a brand is the sum of all this, brand equity is more of a process. So selling the product and providing the after sales support they are inseparable and the after sales support (Or customer service) I would value it equally in relation to designing, selling a product. And that's why you see many of the companies in the western societies who are going from a product to a more service oriented approach, for example it doesn't actually matter if a customer actually buys this phone the kind of support and service the customer gets after the purchase is as equal or probably more important than the customer buying the phone.

NR: To end the interview, when a brand provides services via social media is it because the customers proactively seek out customer support there, or

OBJ; I think it depends on the level of understanding of management in terms of social media. I feel now a day the majority of the companies do have social media strategy its becoming more mainstream every day. Having said that still there are a lot of business that are not utilizing social media. I think its apparently a result of the higher management who still stuck in the old way of thinking, this a challenge to convince them. But overall I would say it's now quite integrated with the business's operations. Any marketer who doesn't understand social media or say digital marketing or content marketing would find it very difficult to stay relevant.

