Building wine brand communities: A conceptual model

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There is a strong emphasis in the literature today on the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with customers. Often, a strong brand is the first step in relationship marketing. Strong brands lead to brand loyalty and the promise of long term profitable relationships with customers (Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn, 1995). One way to achieve the "Holy Grail of brand loyalty" is through brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002). Brand community is a specialized community "whose primary base of identification is a brand or brand consumption activity" (McAlexander et al., 2002, p. 38). Community, brand or otherwise, is not restricted by geographic area. However, the members of community need to interact (in-person or online) to create a sense of "we-ness" or felt connection to the brand, the company and community members (McAlexander et al., 2002). Further, shared rituals pass on stories and traditions where the meaning of community is produced and shared. Many types of brand community exist. Brand communities can be organic, but a growing number are based on dedicated company resources. For example, companies like Jeep, Harley Davidson and Apple sponsor and facilitate their brand communities. These examples are top brands in their product categories, but many smaller, less known brands sponsor brand communities as well. For companies to have the ability to cultivate community, they should be perceived as a competent firm with a strong reputation and a high level of quality.

Introduction

Brand communities have been explored in may contexts: college basketball, high tech products, motorcycles, automobiles, and magazines. With regards to wine, as many wineries strive to grow wine clubs and festivals we ask, do brand communities apply to wineries? There has long been recognition in the wine business that developing ongoing relationships with customers can lead to brand loyalty (Dodd, 1999). Fountain, Fish and Charters (2008) find that making a connection with customers when they visit a winery is a way to build brand loyalty. Likewise, Nowak and Newton (2008) find that trust and quality influence perceptions of brand equity and customer satisfaction with tasting room experience. However, both articles conclude that wineries need to do more to build these connections with consumers. Therefore, we offer a theoretically grounded model that depicts the necessary characteristics a winery must possess to cultivate consumer identification with the winery and the characteristics of the community needed to build identification among customers. We then develop how identification with the winery leads to brand community.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a model based on winery characteristics, community characteristics and relational factors that will inform those in the wine industry and in academic wine research as to the necessary steps to build a brand community. Below we develop the model (see Figure 1) based on past research and offer practical tips related to brand communities. The model builds upon the brand/customer literature where traditionally researchers explored the customer-brand relationship. This work progressed to the brand community triad of the brand to customer relationship and customer to customer relationship Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), then to a customer centric model of brand community (McAlexander et al. 2002). We build upon this research and join these models with the relationship marketing theory to build our model.

Winery Characteristics

Competence. Wineries need to be competent in producing wine, bottling wine, packaging and logistics and management of the "enhanced customer experience" in tasting rooms, wine clubs and events (Olsen and Thach, 2008). Observation and evaluation of these actions communicate the competence of the winery to the consumer. Consistent competent performance is often an antecedent to trust as competence is associated with reduced uncertainty and ambiguity. Further, perceived winery competence will lead to greater identification with the wineries' brands among consumers (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). For instance, if a consumer tastes the wine from a winery and perceives distinctiveness compared to other wineries, this distinctiveness increases the extent to which consumers identify with that wine. As consumers discover the salient characteristics that distinguish a wine from other brands, it enhances the attractiveness of the winery to consumers. Attractiveness of the identity of the company (winery in this case) is associated with strong brand identification (Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994).

Reputation. A solid reputation is the stepping stone to building loyal consumers (Muniz and O'Guinn), case in point: Harley Davidson and Jeep. A solid reputation leads to trust in the winery (Ganesan, 1994). Reputation is based on consumers' interactions with the winery and consumption of the wine. Consumers gauge reputation based on the evaluations of past consumption experiences and information from other sources (friends, media, and opinion leaders). Results from wine competitions and ratings from prominent writers can be instrumental in the success of a winery by building a strong brand presence. Wine competitions are seen as providing unbiased credibility for wineries and a comparison of brands. Medals earned are perceived as a symbol of quality that provides in a consumer's mind an objective rating of the wine. Wine writers often have a wide range of enthusiasts, especially amongst highly involved consumers who closely follow recommendations and look for new trends and types of wines. These highly involved wine consumers are the opinion leaders for people with an interest in wine and this can strongly influence consumption trends as wine information is shared between acquaintances. Following professionals becomes especially popular with the development of social networks, such as Facebook or Twitter.

Quality. If consumers are going to be interested in joining a brand community and associating themselves with the brand, it is a necessary first step to offer a quality product and consumption experience. Tangibles such as the label, facilities, and signage can all influence perceptions of quality (Fountain *et al.*, 2008). For a winery interested in forging a relationship with a consumer, the tasting room experience service quality is key to the affective attachment a visitor develops towards a winery (Dodd and Bigotte, 1997). Quality will lead the consumer to trust the winery and identify with the brand (O'Mahoney, Hall, Lockshin, Jago, and Brown, 2006).

To build brand community the brand must be perceived as competent as consumers will want to identify with a competent brand. Competent brands will build a positive reputation that leads consumers to trust the brand. Quality is the necessary first step in having a solid brand. Thus, competence, reputation and quality are the brand characteristics needed to build a brand community.

Relational Factors

Brand identification. Identification is a form of psychological bonding between individuals and brands (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995). Brands do reflect specific values and traits that individuals consider central to their identity (Aaker, 1997). Some wineries strive to provide visitors with a sense of personal and emotional connection with a winery and its brand (Fountain *et al.*, 2008). This affective attachment leads to identification with a particular brand that stands out relative to all other competitors on a shelf in a store. Greater identification with a brand leads to enhanced familiarity and distinctive brand associations (Underwood, Bond, and Baer, 2001).

Trust. The binding factor in relationships between people and brands is trust. When wineries are competent, have a good reputation and offer quality, consumers are likely to trust in that brand and feel committed and satisfied with the organization (Nowak and Newton, 2008). This is especially relevant to wine club members. In a way, signing up for a wine club membership is an indication of trust in the brand.

Brand commitment. Brand commitment is a deep emotional attachment with a specific brand (Desai and Raju, 2007). When consumers identify with a brand and trust the winery, they become committed to their favorite brand. Establishing brand commitment means that there is an emotional link that ties the consumer to the brand (Fountain *et al.*, 2008) and identification with the organization occurs (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

Winery Satisfaction*.* Satisfaction is based on experiences with the winery that exceeded expectations. Trust leads to satisfaction and satisfaction is positively related to identifying with the organization. If consumers are made to feel special, satisfaction is enhanced. This can be extended through events, newsletters and email (Nowak and Newton, 2008). Satisfaction builds a bond to the brand and increases identification (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

Identification with the Winery*.* Consumers who have positive experiences with the winery and its wines are committed and identify with the winery (Mitchell and Hall, 2004). When consumers connect emotionally, they feel a part of the winery (Nowak and Newton, 2008). Positive experiences at the winery and with the staff form an ongoing connection to the winery (Roberts and Sparks, 2006). Satisfaction and commitment lead to identification (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Customers who identify themselves with the brand in essence become brand ambassadors for the winery.

A solid brand is the entry to building a brand community, and then the marketer must build the relational factors. Competence, reputation and quality lead to identification with the brand and trust in the winery. Trust leads to commitment and satisfaction which in turn leads to identification with the brand (Bhattacharya et al. 1995).

Community Characteristics

Communities are made up of members and the relationships among them (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Many communities exist that are based on identification with a brand or a certain consumption experience.

Interaction. Community members build community within the context of their interaction. For example, customers may share their experiences while tasting wine or visiting wine festivals. Many wineries, especially local smaller businesses, put effort into building wine communities through interaction. In addition to the most common wine club membership benefit of discounts on wine purchases, many wineries practice invitations to events, parties, and celebrations; yearly anniversary gifts for staying in the club, VIP services when visiting a winery, and many other unique ideas for interaction. For community to exist, these interactions must occur and then reoccur with some reasonable frequency (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). By attracting repeat visitors wineries can build loyalty (Dodd, 1999) and community based on their interactions.

Rituals. Communities have shared rituals and traditions which marketers may help to foster. These rituals are needed to share meaning, to form traditions and to develop a sense of "we-ness" (McAlexander et al. 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2002). Wine enthusiasts share stories and consumption experiences during these rituals. Wine clubs and festivals are perfect venues to foster these rituals that build brand community.

Identification with Others*.* Based on the dynamics and the identification with a brand, consumers share experiences that help them bond with others based on their passion for a brand and company (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). This can be facilitated by having activities at tastings and events that get people interacting with each other. For example, a new winery in Texas organizes dinners for its wine club

members, where customers can not only taste new wines, but also interact with one another. It is through this interaction that the sense of community is being developed.

Brand Community. Consumers interact with each other and often representatives of the winery. The "conciseness of kind", shared rituals, and interactions lead to the formation of a brand community (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002, p. 42). Thus, identification with the winery and identification with others who identify with the winery lead to a formation of brand community. Wine marketers would be well served to develop this community of devoted, loyal and fervent consumer.

When consumers interact in a community, there are interactions and shared rituals that lead to identification with the owner. Take for example the Harley Davidson community. Consumers learn to identify with the brand through brand characteristics and relational factors. Identification with the brand is positively related to brand community.

Future Directions: Brand Community Management

We will further develop the practical nature of our model by discussing the central tenets that are necessary to consider for managing a brand community (Fournier and Lee, 2008). Understanding the myths and realities associated with brand communities can help winery managers develop a community strategy. We will detail why brand communities are on the radar of every manager who is trying to grow a brand, specifically we will discuss the applicability of this model for wineries.

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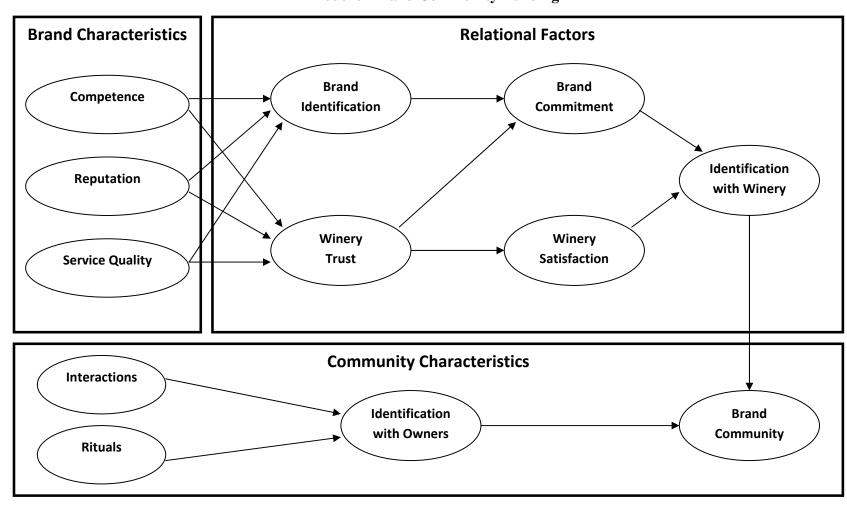
Figure 1
Model of Brand Community Building