Wine blogs: Expressing diverse wine opinions in a new realm of online wine relationship marketing

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Abstract

The number of wine blogs has grown dramatically in the past decade, with diverse viewpoints from wine bloggers around the world.   At the same time, very little research has focused on this area. This study is the first of its type to conduct a content analysis of 222 English language wine blogs in order to determine what is being discussed in wine blogs, and the amount of wine brands and advertising included. Results show that there are 9 major categories of wine blogs, with the most common being reviews and ratings of wines by consumer bloggers. In addition, 813 wine brands and 450 advertisements were found in the analysis. Implications indicate that wine businesses should pay closer attention to what is being said about their brand on blogs, and also begin or enhance efforts to work in partnership with bloggers as part of their public relations strategy.

Topic Areas: Wine Blogs; Wine media and public relations; Relationship marketing; Wine 2.0

Introduction

In the past ten years, the number of wine blogs has grown from 1 to over 700 (Yarrow, 2009). Wine blogs are interactive websites established by a blogger or group of bloggers who write about wine. Topics may include wine reviews, basic information on wine, wine regions, or any other wine-related topic that interests the individual blogger. The advent of wine blogs is competing with traditional wine media publications to such an extent that some large wineries have established positions within their marketing/public relations functions to monitor blogs, vlogs, and other online social media sites (Malm, 2009).

Since the phenomenon of wine blogs is relatively new, there has been very little research on how they are composed, what they offer, and how they describe wine brands. With this in mind, a research study was designed to determine what type of content is being discussed in English language wine blogs, as well as to identify the number and frequency of wine brand names and amount of advertising on the blogs.

Review of the Literature

According to Olsen & Hershmeyer (2008), a wine blog is one of the tools used for Wine 2.0., which can be defined as using the Internet to engage with wine consumers in a time and manner of their choosing. Other tools include social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space; vlogs which are online videos available via sites such as YouTube and Viddler; and message boards such as WineSearcher.com.

Anyone with access to the Internet can set up a free blog by using software such as *wordpress.com* or *blogspot.com*. Therefore, wine blogs are established by individual wine enthusiasts, wine writers, wineries, wine businesses, and any individual who is interested in publishing their opinion about wine. According to Yarrow (2009) there are currently more than 570 wine blogs in English. In addition, there are a more than 170 wine blogs in other languages, including Italian, French, Catalan, Czech, German, Spanish, Dutch, Japanese, Chinese, Portuguese, Hungarian, Norwegian, and Indonesian.

Wine blogs are not monitored and there are no official guidelines or rules regarding what can be published – therefore, there are many diverse opinions about wines and wine brands. Because of this some bloggers may write either positive or negative reviews about wine that can help or hinder wine sales. This can be a public relations issue for wineries, as some of the more popular wine blogs have thousands of followers. According to Yarrow (2008), a few of the larger wine blogs attract more than 40,000 hits per month. Examples of some of the popular consumer created blogs include Fermentation.com; vinography.com and pinotblogger.com.

In terms of the research literature related to wine blogs, Internet marketing and e-commerce studies provide the most linkage. Leskovec (2007) determined that there are certain product categories on the web which require more information for people to make a purchase, and therefore Internet based recommendations are helpful. Wine fits this category -- suggesting wine blogs may be useful for some consumers to make wine selections. Kozinets (1999) found that there are viral communities of consumers on the Internet which are quite active in communicating about their purchase experiences. Related to this concept, Andersen (2005) researched online relationship marketing and the development of web "brand communities," and discovered they can be helpful when users have an interest in a certain brand. This suggests that wine blogs established by wineries can take advantage of this type of online relationship marketing with their wine club and mailing list members.

One study that analyzed blogs found that there are chatter topics and spike topics when certain subjects of interest arise (Gruhl, 2004) -- suggesting that wine blogs that focus on "hot" topics may attract more readers. Likewise, if an Internet user finds a topic of interest, they are more

likely to forward onto friends. At the same time other research shows that only certain types of consumers forward on emails and other online content (Phelps et al, 2004). This suggests that wine bloggers need to target a specific segment of reader. However, at this point, there have been no scientific studies on the type of consumer who reads and interacts with wine blogs

Consumer trust online is also an important issue. Though wine blogs generally do not sell wine, they recommend wine brands for purchase. Luo (2002) identifies characteristic-based trust as dealing with online communities, and takes time to develop. Therefore as readers develop a trusting relationship with the wine blogger recommendations, then they are more apt to continue to read the blog and encourage others to read it. Online trust issues with financial security and website functionality are also important (Bruwer & Wood, 2005.)

Because of the growth of blogs and other social networking media, marketing experts (Johnson, 2001; Watts et al, 2008; Poulos, 2008) recommend that the corporate communications or PR function pay attention to online interactions and monitor what is said about brands. If the feedback is negative, it is recommended that a wine business respond to consumers in a positive and friendly fashion (Olsen & Hermsmeyer, 2008; Poulos, 2008; Malm, 2009).

In general, the wine industry has been slower than other industries to adopt online applications, but they have made progress in the past few years (Gebauer & Ginsburg, 2003; Quinton & Harridge-March, 2003; Thach & Eaton, 2001; Bruwer & Wood, 2005). This suggests that paying attention to the growth of wine blogs and other Wine 2.0 components would be useful for maintaining and enhancing winery relationship marketing and public relations efforts.

Methodology

In order to achieve the research objective, a content analysis of English-language wine blogs was performed. *The Complete of Wine Blogs* (Yarrow, 2009), available at www.vinography.com was utilized as the source for a random sample. From this, all of the English language blogs were downloaded into an Excel file and sorted alphabetically. This resulted in 576 blogs.

The list was then given to trained student researchers who were asked to randomly analyze the blogs using a decision rule of selecting a minimum of 10 blogs per alpha letter. If there were fewer than 10 blogs under one alpha-letter, the researchers selected an additional blog from the next alpha-letter for a total of 260 blogs analyzed in the list. Blogs which were no longer active or had broken links were discarded. In addition, wine retailer blogs were excluded. This resulted in 222 wine blogs in the final sample.

The content analysis phase included analyzing the front page of each blog (not to include archived or older articles) to capture information regarding three areas: 1) a brief description of the blog intent/purpose; 2) wine brands mentioned; and 3) whether or not advertising was used on the blog. The name of the wine blog and URL data was also captured. This information was documented in a table and then a coding system was applied to identify major thematic categories of the blogs. Next a frequency count of wine brands and ads was performed to provide simple descriptive statistics.
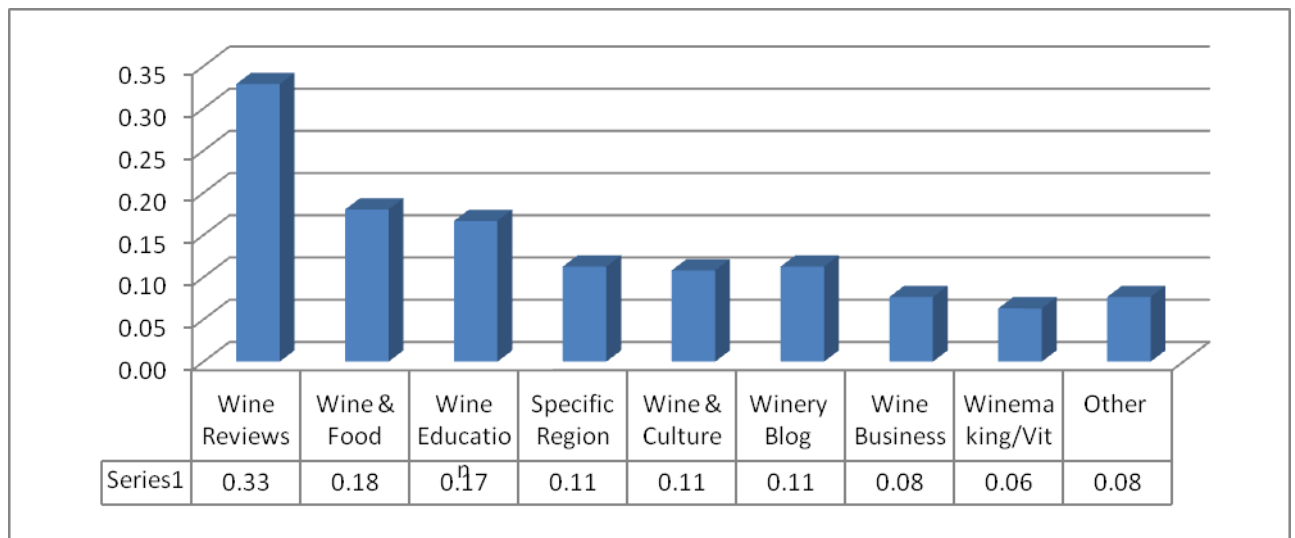
Results

The content analysis showed that there are several different types of wine blogs on the Internet with different purposes as illustrated in Chart 1. Each blog was analyzed to determine its main intent, but in some cases, there were multiple purposes. The thematic analysis resulted in 9 major types of wine blogs.

The most common type of blog was a "review of wines" at 33% of the sample. The majority of these were from an individual blogger who tasted and wrote a review of the wine – often including a rating from the standard 100 or 20 point wine rating scales. The second most common category was "wine and food (18%)," in which the blogger provided opinions on the best food to

match with specific wines. Often these blogs included recipes, as well as information on restaurants and where to buy the recommended wine.

Chart 1: Categories of Wine Blogs by Percentage

	Wine Reviews	Wine & Food	Wine Educatio n	Specific Region	Wine & Culture	Winery Blog	Wine Business	Winema king/Vit	Other
Series1	0.33	0.18	0.17	0.11	0.11	0.11	0.08	0.06	0.08

Another popular blog category was "wine education (17%)," in which the writer attempted to educate the reader on a specific wine topic. This could include wine regions, wine styles, how to taste wine and related topics. If the blog described how to make wine, winemaking techniques, or working in the vineyard, then it was placed in a separate category on "Winemaking & Viticulture," which comprised 6% of the sample.

Three categories each made up 11% of the sample. The first was a type of blog which focused on a "Specific Region." These ranged from a spotlight on a specific city, state, wine region, to a country. Examples included Washington D.C., New Orleans, San Francisco, Paris, Seattle, Washington State, Oregon, California, and Britain. In these types of region specific blogs, there was generally an emphasis on wine shops and/or wineries available in these areas, as well as restaurants.

Related to this was another category of "Wine & Culture" blogs which an emphasized the connection between wine and art, music, poetry, literature and unique wine events. An example was how to match wine to specific music. Finally, the category of "Winery Blog" also comprised 11% of the sample. This title was applied to any blog that was produced by a winery and part of their website. In almost every case these types of blogs are devoted to talking about what is occurring at the winery in terms of weather, harvest, winemaking, events, and tasting notes.

"Wine Business" topics comprised 8% of the sample, and described wine finance, marketing, distribution, legal, technology, and other business issues regarding the wine industry. A final category called "Other" was created for the 8% of the sample that was very unique and didn't fit comfortably into the other 8 categories. Example included "wine & hiking; wine & politics; wine under $20; and an emphasis on a specific grape, such as shiraz." Wine retailer blogs were excluded from the sample, because they are rather rare and have as their main intent to sell or push wine.

Number of Wine Brands & Ads Listed on Blogs

In terms of the content analysis of wine brands, a frequency count of the first page of all 222 wine blogs resulted in 813 different wine brands (see Table 1). The list was then sorted to determine which wine brands were listed on the blogs most frequently. From the list of 813 brands listed, only three brands were cited 4 or more times on different blogs: Kendall-Jackson (5 times) and Ridge and Penfolds 4 times. Seven brands were each listed 3 times: Ironhorse, Liberty School, Rancho Zabaco,

Ravenswood, Sterling, Twisted Oak, and Fat Bastard. An additional 59 brands were each listed twice – with most being well-known popular brands such as Gallo or luxury brands such as Chateau Margaux. The content analysis of wine brands on the blogs also showed that many small unknown wine brands were described, as well as international brands from around the world.

In terms of advertising, 105, or 47%, of the 222 wine blogs included advertising. Some of these were simple ads provided by Google, but others were sophisticated winery, food, and wine product ads. Wine bloggers generally make a small amount of revenue through advertising, with professional bloggers able to supplement their income by $20,000 - $30,000 per year with blog advertising (Yarrow, 2008).

Of the 105 blogs which included advertising, some listed only 1 or 2 ads, whereas others listed up to 11. The total number of ads on the 105 blogs was 451.

Table 1: Content Analysis Results for 222 Wine Blogs

Blog Category	Frequency
Different Types of Blogs	9
Number of Wine Brands Listed	813
Number of Blogs with Advertisements	105
Number of Advertisements on Blogs	451

Discussion

The results of this study illustrate the varying types of wine blogs available to consumers on the Internet, with the most predominant type of blog providing author-generated wine reviews and rating. This is obviously a new wine media source for consumers to consult regarding which wines to purchase. Though not yet receiving the kind of power and prestige of the major wine writers, such as Robert Parker, Jancis Robinson and James Laube, nevertheless consumer generated wine reviews are growing. This begs the question of what the future will hold in terms of traditional wine reviews, and opens the door for diverse opinions from informed wine consumers around the world who elect to post their reviews on a blog. It also suggests that winery public relations media should pay more attention to what is written about their brands on wine blogs, and to create positive relationships with wine bloggers.

In addition, this study shows that there are various types of wine blogs that provide useful information ranging from educational to entertainment. Though there are currently no standards or guidelines for publishing wine blogs, they appear to be self-governing in that others will not view or recommend the blog unless it has interesting content. Furthermore, even though there are currently more than 700 wine blogs around the world and the number is growing (Yarrow, 2009), there still appears to be ample opportunity for more wine blogs on different regions of the world and new wine topics. This study also highlights the fact that only 11% of the sample were winery blogs. This suggests an opening for wineries to expand in this arena.

The study also illustrates that many wine brands are being discussed in wine blogs – and not just well-known brands. Indeed, many of the brands described are from small unknown wineries and regions, which suggests cultivating wine bloggers may be a useful public relations activity for small wineries which do not have well-developed brands, and for new wine regions that haven't received much attention in the popular press. The challenge here it to determine which wine blogs receive the most readership, and this data is hard to collect unless the blogmaster is willing to provide it.

Finally, this study looked at the number of advertisements on wine blogs, which are a source of revenue for the blogger. In this case, 47% of the sample included at least 1 advertisement. Some of the larger more popular blogs included up to 11 – with a few being advertisements from wineries. It is interesting to note that some bloggers believe it is unethical to post ads from wineries they

review, while as others do not feel this way (Wark, 2008). It may be useful for wineries to investigate the return-on-investment of purchasing ads on more popular wine blogs.

Conclusion – Limitations & Future Research

In conclusion, this paper presents a content analysis of 222 wine blogs and provides the first categorization system for this new type of wine media. Limitations include a focus on English only wine blogs, and the fact that the analysis only included the front page of the blog and does not extend to archived or older articles. Furthermore this analysis doesn't include information on how many consumers read the various blogs, blog dynamics, and if blog activity leads to a change in behavior. These limitations present opportunities for future research in wine blogs written in other languages; more in-depth analyses of blogs; and data collection from wine blogmasters on the number of monthly hits to the site, as well as the type of consumers which read their blog.

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