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Building Wine Brand Communities with the Use of Social Media: A Conceptual Model

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Abstract

Purpose: This contribution to the wine marketing literature explores how marketers can use social media to build brand community, specifically we explore brand characteristics, relational factors, and community characteristics that influence brand community.

Design/methodology/approach: Theoretical model that in future research will be tested using structural equations modelling.

Findings: To build brand community the brand must be perceived as competent as consumers will want to identify with a brand. Brand characteristics, brand identification, relational factors and community characteristics are considered.

Practical implications: The wine industry has new, low-cost ways to build brand community.

Key words: Social Media, Brand Community, Brand Identification, Facebook

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally marketers used advertising to inform and persuade consumers. As the emphasis shifted to relationship marketing, marketers worked to build connections with customers through event sponsorship and hosting events that facilitated brand community. We argue that the next step in this progression is the use of social media to build brand community. There is a strong emphasis in the marketplace today on the importance of social media. A recent Ad Age study finds that consumers today are more likely to be influenced by someone in their social network than a celebrity in an advertisement (Daboll, 2011). Today's consumers are informed, time-compressed, and difficult to impress. So companies need to have a strong brand first, then relational factors can be used to enhance building a relationship. 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 the use of social media to build brand communities (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002). Social media is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with others through technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the digital plotting of people's social connections (Facebook 2011a).

A 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, the relevance of the reference group, the frequency of their interactions, and the relevance of the message all influence identification with others and the brand, hence the brand community.

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. Social media offers this opportunity. This is timely as consumers continue to adopt social media in astounding numbers. The most influential form of social media is Facebook. Facebook lists their active user base at over 500 million users of whom over half log on daily. The average user has 130 friends, and participants spend over 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook (Facebook 2011b).

In the specific case of wine, as many wineries strive to grow wine clubs we ask, how can social media be used to build brand communities for 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. 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 brand identification. Once consumers identify with a wine brand, they will have brand experiences and can be exposed

to social media about the brand. The relevance of the reference group, the number of interactions, and the relevance of the message will influence identification with owners and identity importance, which in turn build brand community. We will develop how identification with the winery leads to brand community.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a model based on brand characteristics, relational factors, and community characteristics that will inform those in the wine industry and in academic wine research as to the necessary steps to use social media 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 (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander et al. 2002). We build upon this research and bring in social media to build our model.

2. WINERY BRAND CHARACTERISTICS

2.1. 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). Evaluation of these actions communicates 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 perceives distinctiveness compared to other wineries, this distinctiveness increases the extent to which consumers identify with the winery. As consumers discover the salient characteristics that distinguish a winery 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).

2.2. Reputation

A solid reputation is the stepping stone to building loyal consumers (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), 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 objective quality to consumers. 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. Furthermore, with the introduction of social media, consumers may now follow wine aficionados.

2.3. Quality

If consumers are 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 the key to the affective attachment a visitor develops towards a winery (Dodd and Bigotte, 1997). Quality will lead the consumers 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.

3. RELATIONAL FACTORS

3.1. Brand identification

Identification is a form of psychological bonding between individuals and brands (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 1995). Brands 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). 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). Brand identification means consumers will be open to brand experiences and social media exposure.

From the bottle and the label design, the entire package is intended to convey the brand's personality. The name and logo reflect the winery's identity. The goal is to get consumers to identify with brand and winery. Identification with the personality is linked to purchase intent (Boudreaux and Palmer, 2007).

3.2. Brand Experiences

The binding factor in relationships between people and brands is affect. When consumers identify with a brand, they will desire to have experiences with the brand. In the context of wine, this may mean drinking the wine, touring the winery, attending various events. There is empirical evidence that visitation to wineries can help reinforce brand loyalty (Mitchell & Hall, 2004). This is especially relevant to wine festivals or events sponsored by the winery; attendance is an indication of desire to experience the brand.

Brand identification leads one to enact the identity through consumption experiences where the brand is consumed (Laverie, Kleine and Kleine, 2002). This is especially relevant to wine club members. In a way, signing up for a wine club membership is a signal of identification

with the brand and the desire to experience the brand. Consumers who have positive experiences with the winery and its wines are also likely to pay attention to social media updates related to the brand.

3.3. Social Media Exposure

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. Social media is a way for consumers who share an identity to connect through technology and to expand their social network related to a brand (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

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. When consumers identify with a brand they are likely to be exposed to social media about the brand. Establishing brand identification means that there is an emotional link that ties the consumer to the brand (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Within the proposed research, Facebook will be presented as the exemplar for social media interactions because of its rich infrastructure and variety of communication types. Branded “Fan Pages” epitomize the core of a brand’s presence on Facebook. This page type allows the brand to have a community ‘home’ and a forum for consumer discussions. Consumers typically show support for brands on Facebook by selecting the “Like” button, and using this feature adds the brand to the user’s profile as a favorite. This action is common amongst users: the average Facebook participant becomes a fan of 4 pages a month, and prior to the recent expansion of the ‘like’ functionality, 20 million additional pages were liked (become a fan) daily (Facebook 2010g). Also fundamental to the Facebook experience is the News Feed, which features status updates from a user’s friends and updates from brands consumers follow, and specific user-generated activity types (e.g., becoming a fan of a brand’s page or writing on a brand’s wall) will show up on that user’s wall (a message board-like feature that displays a social media participant’s activity on the site and public notes left by friends) (Facebook 2011c).

3.3.1. Brand Updates

A promotional update acts as the most obvious form of brand activity within social media. The user’s News Feed broadcasts these updates, typically shared by brands to provide a tactical or promotional message to the fan base. Facebook allows brand fans to provide immediate feedback to the brand through comments or a “like” option. Additionally, a share feature allows participants to retransmit a brand’s updates, along with any comments, to their followers via the News Feed, assuming that their followers have not filtered out the participant’s updates (Facebook 2011d). Wine marketers are using Facebook to offer brand updates and to enable consumers to interact and to discuss the wine. These updates need to occur frequently.

3.3.2. Customer Service Interactions

A second type of brand communication centers on engaging in customer service-related interactions within social media. Not every brand will monitor and reply to fan comments left on a brand page, but some brands proactively respond and provide feedback to positive and negative visitor comments. In the case of positive feedback, brands may thank the customer

for their support and attempt to reinforce that customer's purchase decision; in the case of negative feedback, brands may try to resolve a customer issue. By participating in the brand dialogue, the winery can provide a cohesive message and can respond to a call to action when needed. The interactions can be used to listen to customer, improve service, and develop new products and to tailor offerings (Board 2011).

3.3.3. Brand Endorsements (*Friends Become Fans, Suggestions*)

Another, more personal, brand exposure occurs when friends like (or become a fan of) a particular brand. Liking a page will add the brand into the "Pages" section of a Facebook user's profile page, and Facebook broadcasts this brand endorsement via the News Feed to the user's friends while simultaneously appending the user's "Recent Activity." The Page Suggestion feature represents a related but more direct route of brand endorsement. On each Facebook brand fan page, an option is provided to "Suggest to Friends". When a user suggests a page, it places a notification on their friend's main page, which leads to a list of currently suggested pages as recommended by friends. The friend has the option to accept (which makes them a Fan of the page in question) or ignore the request. Facebook also provides suggestions of pages based on an algorithm determined by the user's connections that are also a fan of that particular brand page (Facebook 2011e). Certainly, wineries could use national or local endorsers to promote the brand.

3.3.4. Display Ads

The next type of brand/consumer social media exposure represents paid social media advertising: the banner advertisement. For owners of a branded fan page, a link for "Promote with an Ad" leads to these display opportunities, paid through CPC (Cost per Click) or CPM (Cost by Impressions). Ads are created within the online advertising module, and rich targeting opportunities are available. Brands may tailor ads targeted with exacting precision to users based on demographics or and/or key features of their social network (Facebook 2011a). This ability to tailor effectively can be especially beneficial to smaller wineries that do not have a large promotions budget.

3.3.5. Syndicated content (*Mobile Social Networks and Liked Content*)

The final type of content relevant to this review originates outside of the Facebook ecosystem: externally "liked" content and mobile social network updates. In the case of Facebook's recent expansion of the "like" functionality, content endorsed on other sites receives syndication within a user's news updates (Shiels 2010; Zuckerberg 2010). Similarly, syndication of a mobile social network 'check-in' on services such as Foursquare or Gowalla signals to Facebook that the user has visited a specific location or merchant (Foursquare 2010). Both these third party update types allow social media participants to influence their network through by sharing additional brand-related content not found within Facebook. Wine festivals or tasting rooms would be an ideal place to enact this strategy.

An emerging way that brands can interact with their fans is through Facebook Places. This service is accessed via Facebook's mobile application on smartphones such as the iPhone, Android, or Blackberry (Facebook 2011a). Based on the user's geographic location, they can "check in" to nearby locations. Because checking-in requires a physical location, Facebook Places would work best for wine businesses with retail locations such as wine bars or wineries. By checking in at a location, Facebook mobile users can share their location with their Facebook friends (Facebook 2011h). These check-ins show up in the Facebook Places

section of the mobile application, appear in newsfeeds, and displays on the user's wall. The user can also tag their friends as being with them, which means that a single user can include an entire group of friends on a single check-in and take advantage of deals.

3.4. Relevance of the Reference Group

We hypothesize that the relevance of the reference group will be an important factor when considering how these interactions influence identification with other owners and identity importance. In the social network ties can range from weak to strong, we argue that to significantly influence behavior reference groups must be relevant. If a social media exposure occurs with a friend or a member of a relevant reference group, the rate of identification will be higher than if the reference group is not relevant. Relevant wine reference group interactions will positively influence identifications with owners and identity importance.

3.5. Number of Interactions

Brand experiences and social media exposure influence the number of interactions. The size of the network increases the effects, but only to a point. When the network becomes too big, consumers are overloaded. Research suggests the optimal size of the network is 150 people (Dunbar 2010). We hypothesize that the number of meaningful interactions is positively related to identification with owners and identity importance (Laverie et al., 2002).

3.6. Relevance of the Message

The relevance of the message is very important. When a message is relevant, and the delivery is passionate enough, that relevance leads to resonance, which can actually create mass influence. Social media tools offer new ways for brands to increase perceived relevance with consumers. The relevance of the message has self-definitional implications (Laverie et al., 2002). The relevance of social media is the degree to which an individual has consumed media perceived as identity relevant. A history of consuming identity-relevant media enables the identity and provides behavioral evidence that informs self-attributions about identity importance. Thus, we hypothesize that consumption of relevant messages in the social media will positively influence identification with other owners and enhance identity importance. In the wine social network, live and authentic messages are important.

4. 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.

4.1. 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 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 brand is experienced and the sense of community is being developed.

The other powerful way to foster these interactions is through social media. By using social media wineries can use brand updates, interact with customers, offer brand endorsements and use display ads. The relevance of the reference group, the number of interactions and the relevance of the message are important for wineries to manage. Careful management of this will lead to a social network where consumers identify with each other. This form of community can be powerful in building brand community.

4.2. Identity Salience

Identities vary in their importance to the global self. Identity importance is the significance of a role identity to the overall self-concept. Importance is the single most essential predictor of sustained role-related behaviors (Laverie et al., 2002). What leads to higher identity importance? Identity theory emphasizes how self-definition arises. Consistent with the symbolic interactionist view that self-definition derives not from the larger social structure but from microstructural social communication discourses with which an individual has direct and recurring contact (Laverie et al., 2002). Hence, the relevance of the reference group, the number of interactions and the relevance of the message influence identification with others and identity importance. Social relationships that individuals form during related to their identity, especially if numerous, fuel self-attributions of identity importance and identification with others.

4.3. Brand Community

Consumers interact with each others through social media. 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 consumers.

When consumers interact in a community, there are interactions and shared feelings that lead to identification with others in the community. Consumers learn to identify with the brand through brand characteristics and relational factors. Identification with the brand and owners is positively related to brand community. This can be a powerful force for a winery and one that can influence sales positively over a long period of time.

5. 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 based on brand experiences and social media exposure (Fournier and Lee, 2008). Understanding the importance of managing relevance of the reference group, number of interactions, and relevance of the message is the key to using social media to develop identification with others and identity importance. High levels of identification with others and identity importance help to fuel brand community, which can be very powerful. We argue that it is very important for wine marketers and businesspeople to focus on brand communities. Given the rapid pace of growth intra-group

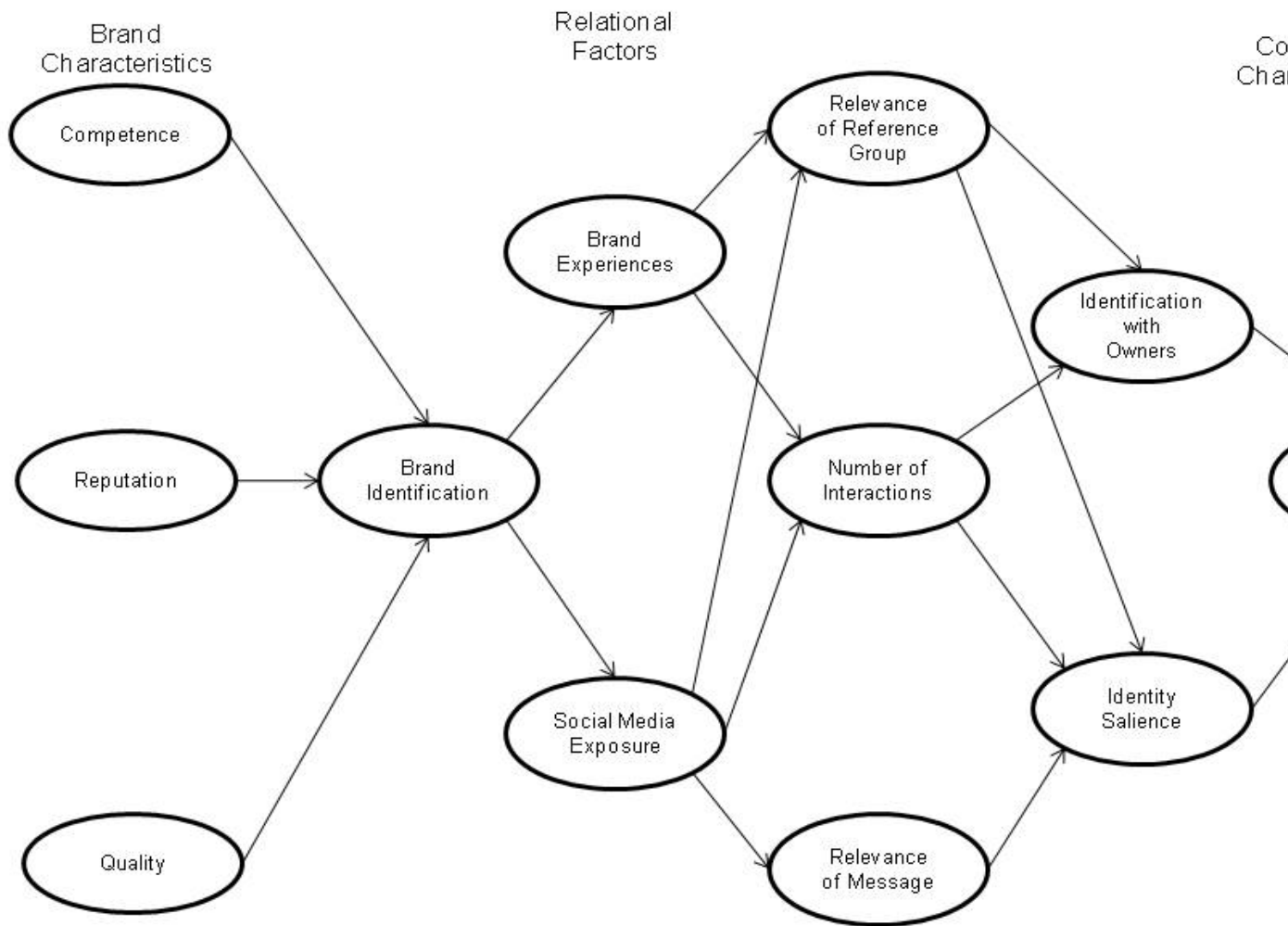
communication, companies have two choices: pay attention to brand communities or be overpowered by them. Wineries who want to control their brand community and use this to enhance their customer base who have identity importance with the brand are offered a theoretical road map in the article. By paying attention to brand experiences and social media exposure wine marketers can offer interactions that have an important influence on their customers. For these interactions to achieve desired results the wine marketer must consider the relevance of the reference group, the number of interactions, and the relevance of the message. If these relational factors are handled well the wine marketer ends up with a consumer who highly identifies with the winery and the owner. The result of this is a strong brand community. Many argue that a strong brand community is much more effective in building a brand than any campaign.

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Figure 1
Brand Community Building with the Use of Social Media



Note: All paths are expected to have positive relationships