

Exploring the Impact of Social Media Practices on Wine Sales in U.S. Wineries

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Purpose: To investigate the impact of social media practices on wine sales in U.S. wineries as perceived by winery owners and general managers.

Design/methodology/approach: Online survey research methodology involving a sample of 375 U.S. wineries. MS Excel software was used to analyze data, including descriptive statistics and ANOVAs.

Findings: Results illustrate that 87% of wineries in the sample report a perceived increase in wine sales due to social media practices. The use of multiple social media platforms, rather than just a couple, is statistically significant with reported increases in wine sales.

Practical implications: Wine marketers in the U.S. should consider adopting social media to the marketing mix, especially for smaller wineries. The results suggest to start with Facebook and to insure the winery owner responds to consumer comments on TripAdvisor and Yelp.

KEY WORDS: Wine, Social Media, Revenues, Wine Sales

The concept of *social media* entered the realm of business and industry in the mid 2000's, and since that time has created much interest and controversy as a new means of advertising products and services. Defined as user generated content delivered via the web and mobile based technologies, social media allows users to communicate, discuss, recommend, co-create, and modify content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Common applications include Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia, Pinterest, and a myriad of mobile apps for smart phones.

Since its inception, various industries have adopted social media, but there have been conflicting reports regarding the return-on-investment of using these new tools. One such industry is wine, which has a high level of confusion for consumers due to more than 10,000 labels on the market (Mondavi, 2008). As a result of this, wine consumers are more apt to rely on experts and friends to help them determine which wine to purchase (Gergaud and Chossat, 2003). In the past, they consulted books, magazines and newsletters, but increasingly they use social media to seek advice from friends and acquaintances, thereby reducing the risk of dissatisfying wine purchases (Leigon, 2011; Laverie et al., 2011; Wilson/Quinton, 2012). Indeed, statistics from Google search engines show that wine is one of the keywords that appear at a higher level than many other consumer products (Rosenberg, 2011).

Despite the fact that consumers use social media for wine related conversations, the U.S. wine industry has questioned whether the implementation of social media strategies has a significant impact on wine sales. Though some wineries have created positions and even a department to incorporate social media as part of their marketing and public relations efforts, others are doubtful. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to investigate which social media practices are perceived to have an impact on wine sales in U.S. wineries.

The research presented in this paper is both one part of a multinational collaborative study on the use of social media by wineries around the world and an extension of that research by examining how winery owners or general managers in the U.S. perceive that their use of social

media impacts sales. Well-known issues with unverified self-reported data limit the strength of any conclusions we may draw from the data; nonetheless, the findings provide interesting insight into an area of increasing importance to wineries.

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

1.1 Examples of Social Media

Some of the more common types of social media include:

- ✓ *Social Networking Sites*: where consumers create profiles, share information, and interact with friends and colleagues. Such sites include Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Pitt et al., 2011). Today Facebook is the largest social networking site with over 1 billion active users (Yung-Hui, 2012), whereas in China common social media platforms include Weibo and WeChat.
- ✓ *Blogs* (abbreviation of “web-logs”): sites where users can write short articles or opinion pieces (Thach, 2008).
- ✓ *Online Photos*: sites where consumers can share photos. Examples include Pinterest, Flickr, and Yahoo Images (Pitt et al., 2011).
- ✓ *VLOGS* (online videos): Websites such as YouTube allow users to share and store videos (Pitt et al., 2011, Thach, 2008).
- ✓ *Mobile*: the ability to access online information on a mobile device, such as a smart phone. Mobile also includes geographic tracking so users can find wineries and other business within their vicinity or “check in” to let their friends know where they are (Walton, 2012). Foursquare and Foodspotting are examples of apps which function in this way.

1.2 Social Media Research in the Wine Industry

There have been several studies exploring social media practices in the wine industry. One of the earliest (Thach, 2008) analyzed Web 2.0 practices of 208 U.S. wineries and found that although 61% had online shopping for consumers, only 11% were using vlogs (video) and 2% using blogs, with a main purpose of increasing brand awareness. At that time use of social network sites such as Facebook were not yet common on winery websites. When a similar study of 324 wineries in Germany was conducted in 2011 (Szolnoki & Taits), 50% reported using social media, with Facebook as the lead platform.

More recently Alonso et al. (2013) conducted a study of wineries in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Spain, Italy, South Africa, and the U.S., and discovered that 35% reported using social media. Of those, the number one reason was to communicate with customers about events at the winery. The second top reason was to promote and market wines.

Other studies describe how social media can be useful to wineries. Leigon (2011) suggests that social media assists with wine sales because word of mouth is so effective amongst wine consumers. Wilson & Quinton (2012) found that the socialization aspect of social media was a good fit with wine, as it allowed consumers to exchange information and encourage others to try different wines. This supports Lockshin and Corsi’s study (2012) which identified personal recommendations as one of three important influencers in purchasing wine.

Recent statistics on wine and social media show a marked increase in usage. Newman (2010) found that 700,000 people view wine-related videos every month, that there are over 7,000 wine tweets per day, and that there are more than 300 iPhone apps for wine. It is estimated

that 90% of wine drinkers use Facebook 6.2 hours per week (Breslin, 2013), and Google Analytics (2012) shows that wineries are the third most popular subject on Pinterest. The number of wine blogs is now estimated to be around 1,300 (Doyle et al. 2012).

2.3 Examples of Social Media Generating Wine Sales

Though both small and large wineries around the world are known to be using social media strategies, there are only a few documented success stories showing increased wine sales. One of the most well-known is the case of Murphy-Goode Winery, which managed with a 6-month social media strategy to obtain 880 million media displays, leading to a 130% growth in sales revenue and a 70% rise in tasting traffic (Kakaviatos, 2011).

Another example is Pacific Rim Winery located in Oregon, USA, which invested almost \$10,000 in a social media campaign in 2010 with the objective to educate consumers about the Riesling grape (Emerson, 2012). They created an online book which was available for free if consumers “liked” their Facebook page. In addition, consumers were invited to participate in a contest describing why they loved Riesling. Results showed that the campaign achieved a 15% increase in revenue by driving more than 7,000 consumers to the Pacific Rim website (Moore, 2012).

Stormhoeck, a small winery in South Africa also demonstrated an increase in revenue due to a social media campaign when they hired a blogger to write about their wines (Resnick, 2008). They also encouraged other bloggers around the world to write about the brand by shipping a free bottle of wine to them, and inviting bloggers to attend 100 dinners they organized. Results showed an increase in sales from 50,000 cases a year to 300,000.

Another more recent example is Constellation wine corporation’s use of social media. As one of the largest wine companies in the world, they established a new digital marketing division as part of their global marketing efforts, and over the last few years they have strategically placed their wines brands on different social media platforms. For example, they now have 27 brands on Facebook alone, and have received 1.5 million “likes” which they equate to a \$17 million increase in incremental retail value (Breslin, 2013). In addition they have implemented many online promotions and mobile coupons. For example, they recently conducted an email promotion for their Woodbridge brand and grew retail sales by 127%. They also placed an ad on the app “Hello Vino” which caused 13,000 consumers to include Constellation brand wines on their shopping lists. The cost of the ad was \$70,000, but they achieved in \$876,000 in retail value, creating a positive return on investment.

2. METHODOLOGY

An online quantitative survey was used to measure social media practices, perceived impact of practices on wine sales, and winery demographics. The survey was originally developed by Geisenheim University and was modified to include questions on wine sales. It included a total of 25 questions using standard 5-point Likert-type scales, simple rating questions, and short answer.

In order to measure wine sales, respondents were asked their perceptions on the following question: “In general, how much impact do you believe your social media efforts have on wine sales?” Possible answers could be: 0%, 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, 25%, 30%, 35%, 40%, 45%, 50%, More than 50%.

The survey was beta-tested, and minor revisions were made. It was launched on Survey Monkey for a period of 3 weeks in November of 2013. An email with a link to the survey was sent to the owner or general manager of each of the 7240 wineries in the *Wines & Vines Database*, requesting that they complete the survey to support wine business research in the USA. Two follow-up emails were also sent to encourage a higher response rate.

A total of 438 responses were received (6% response rate), but some had to be discarded due to lack of completion; the final sample for analysis was 375 surveys. For the ANOVA analyses, 14 additional wineries were removed from the sample because they indicated no use of social media and said that social media had no impact on their sales. The data was analyzed using the statistical functions of Excel, including descriptive statistics and ANOVAs. The descriptive statistics divided the survey responses into four categories: No Impact on Wine Sales (0%), Low Impact on Wine Sales (5% - 10%), Moderate Impact on Wine Sales (>10% - <30%), and High Impact on Wine Sales (30% and above). The ANOVA analyses investigated the extent to which different factors influenced the perceived impact on wine sales. The first factor we investigated was the intensity of social media use based on the number of different social media platforms used. The second factor we investigated was whether or not the people who maintain the social media accounts are paid to do so.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Demographics of Survey Respondents

Of the 375 wineries that completed the survey, 235 (62.7%) were from California. The other 140 wineries (37.3%) represent a total of 35 states. Respondents listed over 110 different regions or AVA's other than the state. The case volume of the respondents ranged from 4 to 4 million cases per year, with an average of just under 41,100 cases. A number of respondents own no vineyards, and the most acres reported as owned as 6,500. The average number of vineyard acres owned was 121.4 among all respondents and 165.5 among those who own vineyards.

3.2 Perceived Impact of Social Media Practices on Wine Sales

The data was sorted into four categories of wineries based on perceived impact of social media practices on wine sales: (1) No Impact on Wine Sales (0%) = 48 Wineries; (2) Low Impact on Wine Sales (5% - 10%) = 153 Wineries; (3) Moderate Impact on Wine Sales (>10% - <30%) = 107 Wineries; and (4) High Impact on Wine Sales (30% and above) = 67. A frequency count was then used to analyze nine common social media practices in the U.S. wine market (Table 1).

Results show that Facebook seems to be the gateway into social media for most wineries. Very few wineries that did not use Facebook used any other social media platform. Still, no specific platform seems to offer an advantage in impacting wine sales. As discussed in section 3.3, the impact of social media on wine sales is driven more by being on multiple platforms. These data suggest, however, that one form of social media engagement that may be important to driving wine sales is monitoring and responding to customer review sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp.

Table 1: Use of Social Media by Four Categories of Impact on Wine Sales

	Impact on Wine Sales			
	None	Low (5% - 10%)	Moderate (15% - 25%)	High (30% +)
(N =)	48	153	107	67
Major Social Media Practices				
Using Facebook	67%	95%	96%	99%
Twitter	35%	60%	72%	78%
Online Videos	13%	39%	37%	51%
Blogs	15%	19%	25%	34%
Reading Blogs	21%	42%	40%	52%
Writing Comments	13%	10%	21%	24%
Use Google +	4%	13%	21%	25%
Online Photos, e.g. Instagram	9%	27%	38%	49%
Monitor/Respond to Tripadvisor/Yelp	21%	47%	47%	60%

The analysis also looked at the purpose of using social media within the four categories of wineries (Table 2). Not surprisingly, wineries that do not have a clear idea of what purposes are served by using social media are less likely to see a strong impact on their wine sales. Beyond that, more research is needed to determine the benefit to wineries of having clear defined objectives for the use of social media or whether wineries benefit more from using social media to pursue multiple objectives.

Table 2: Goals for Social Media by Four Categories of Wine

	Impact on Wine Sales			
	None	Low (5% - 10%)	Moderate (15% - 25%)	High (30% +)
(N =)	48	153	107	67
Reasons to Use Social Media				
Consumer service	19%	48%	64%	60%
Getting new consumers	48%	75%	88%	93%
Advertisement for my winery	40%	69%	82%	93%
Information about events	48%	72%	89%	90%
Information about wine tasting	29%	50%	68%	73%
Public relation	38%	65%	80%	85%
Communication with consumers	46%	82%	88%	94%
Communication with other wineries/companies	19%	29%	33%	55%
It is not exactly defined	38%	5%	3%	3%

A third analysis examined who was managing social media efforts within the winery (Table 3). The good news for winery owners is that the effectiveness of using social media does not seem to depend on expertise in that field. The bad news is that social media seems to be most effective when the owner is the one responsible for maintaining the social media accounts and keeping the information current. Benefiting from social media requires an investment of time, and often it is the owner's time that has the greatest impact on wine sales.

Table 3: Who’s Doing Social Media by Four Categories of Impact on Wine Sales

	Impact on Wine Sales			
	None	Low (5% - 10%)	Moderate (15% - 25%)	High (30% +)
(N =)	48	153	107	67
Myself	25%	42%	52%	52%
Family Member	9%	8%	13%	9%
Friend Not Paid	4%	1%	1%	0%
Friend Paid	4%	1%	2%	2%
Employee	25%	41%	30%	31%
External paid	2%	2%	2%	4%
Not yet started	31%	5%	0%	2%

3.3 Factors Influencing Impact of Social Media Practices on Wine Sales

The data was also analyzed using an ANOVA. Here we examined three factors that seemed to have the potential to influence the impact that social media practices have on wine sales. For the dependent variable we used the reported impact of social media use on wine sales. Survey respondents could choose between 0% and 50% in five percentage-point increments or choose “more than 50%.” For purposes of the ANOVA analysis, we replaced “More than 50%” with 55% for the six wineries out of 361 respondents (6%) to choose that response.

The first analysis was to see if wineries benefit from taking a diversified approach to using social media rather than focus on one or two platforms. We divided the sample into three groups based on how many social media platforms they reported using: wineries using no more than two platforms (30% of the wineries), wineries using three to five platforms (45% of the wineries), and wineries reporting to use six or more platforms (25% of the wineries). Results (Table 4) show wineries that use more social media platforms tend to experience a greater impact on wine sales from their use of social media.

Table 4: Impact of Use of Multiple Social Media Platforms on Wine Sales

SUMMARY						
<i>Number of Platforms</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average*</i>	<i>Variance</i>		
Two or Fewer	107	13.65	0.12757	0.016898		
Three to Five	164	28.25	0.172256	0.019793		
Six or More	90	19.4	0.215556	0.030092		
ANOVA						
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	0.380231	2	0.190115	8.84412	0.000178	3.020941
Within Groups	7.695656	358	0.021496			
Total	8.075886	360				

* Average expressed in decimal places rather than as a percentage

Another factor that could influence the impact of social media on wine sales is the expertise or experience of the person in charge of maintaining the social media program. As a proxy for expertise, we divided the wineries into two groups based on whether the person in charge of

maintaining social media was paid to carry out that task (41% of the wineries) or was either the winery owner or an unpaid person such as a friend or family member (59% of the wineries).

The ANOVA analysis perhaps hints that unpaid social media has a stronger influence on wine sales but does not produce statistically significant results.¹ Since social media platforms are designed to be easy to use, perhaps a combination of passion for the task and time devoted to it have a greater impact on wine sales, and both of those could possibly be lower from a person being paid to maintain the social media.

Finally, we looked at whether the size of the winery, measured by case volume, influenced the impact of social media on wine sales. The data in our sample indicate that a winery’s case volume does not play a factor in determining the impact of social media marketing, except for larger wineries where the impact of social media marketing is less. When we define a large winery as having annual production of 50,000 cases or more, the difference between the large and not as large wineries is significant at the .10 level. When the annual case production for a large winery is defined as 100,000 or more, the results are significant at the .05 level as indicated by the ANOVA analysis below.

Table 5: Impact of Winery Size on Perceived Wine Sales from Social Media

SUMMARY						
<i>Groups</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Sum</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Variance</i>		
100K+ cases	27	2.9	0.107407	0.008597		
Under 100K cases	332	57.95	0.174548	0.02327		
ANOVA						
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>F crit</i>
Between Groups	0.112559	1	0.112559	5.069873	0.024953	3.867638
Within Groups	7.925951	357	0.022202			
Total	8.03851	358				

4. DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH & LIMITATIONS

The results of this research provide several implications for wine marketers and researchers. Of the 375 wineries which responded to the survey, at least 87% indicated perceived impact on wine sales due to social media efforts, with at least 18% of these attributing an increase in wine sales of 30% or more due to social media. This suggests, that in the U.S. market, social media is having an impact on wine sales. This implies that marketing professionals consider adopting at least some social media practices into their marketing mix. At the same time, one limitation of this study is the measurement of perceived wine sales rather than actual sales data, therefore additional research in this area is warranted.

In terms of social media practices that appear to be most beneficial, Facebook was identified as the “gateway” platform, but those who used multiple platforms seemed to gain the most

¹ The average was 0.181884 for wineries where social media maintenance was the responsibility of the owner or someone who was not paid for the task and 0.157292 for wineries that hired someone to be responsible for social media maintenance; the p-value was .0129.

advantage in terms of an increase in wine sales. Furthermore, wineries responding to consumers who posted comments on Tripadvisor and Yelp were some of those who reported the highest revenues. This indicates that wine marketing professionals need to utilize multiple platforms, and pay special attention to feedback from consumers in online forums. Other hospitality based industries such as hotels and restaurants frequently respond to customer comments on Tripadvisor and Yelp, and it appears that it may be beneficial for wineries to follow suit. Again this could be a fertile area for additional research in wine marketing.

One of the most intriguing results of this research is that of staffing the social media functions. Those wineries reporting higher wine sales indicated the owner was managing most of the social media efforts. Though this means more work on the part of the owner, it does indicate that customers do want to interface with someone who is close to the business. This also supports other research showing that customers crave authenticity in their social media interactions (Olsen & Hermsmeyer, 2008). Furthermore, though the ANOVA did not conclusively prove this, the results indicates that smaller wineries may be able to participate in social media arenas and respond to customers more quickly than larger wineries. Though one of the limitations of this study was such a diverse range of winery sizes (4 to 4 million cases), this suggestion of “smaller and more responsive” is a useful topic of future research. It implies to wine marketers that there may be a potential advantage in using social media for small wineries with relatively unknown brands.

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