Blog Marketing – A Literature Review

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Abstract

A blog is an Educative forum printed on the Cyberspace affixing posts. This paper aims to review the literature on Advertising Strategies in Blog Marketing. The paper's main focus is on the Conceptual understanding of Blogs, the trustworthiness of Blogs and Blog Culture. It is observed from the literature that frequently updated personal web journals can dramatically help small and large companies communicate their product messages effectively and efficiently. Literature in the area of E-Word of Mouth reveals that the trust in other Constructs of Blog advertising has taken a back seat. In a digitized world, customers rely upon the information from blogs and it is proving to be trustworthy. Micro-blogging, Covert and Overt Marketing sets the think tank open for the reader. Also, blog marketing is complex as its output lies in the hands of consumers and their reactions.

1.0   Introduction to Blog

Traditionally blog is viewed as content developed by a professional blogger. It can be a website comprising of blog posts on various subjects or topics and are sorted in reverse chronological order" (Wright, 2005). The emergence of the internet gave birth to the term Weblog in the late 1990s, when people started sharing information with others. Kahn & Keller (2004) described the blog as a "hypertextual weblogs which people use for new forms of journaling, self-publishing, and media or news-critique." However, these definitions point out the individualistic nature of blogs and do not reflect the commercial aspects of blogging which is a significant attribute of blogs. Microsoft has covered this aspect and presented a comprehensive definition to blogs - "frequently updated personal web journals that can dramatically help small and large companies communicate their product messages." The view of Microsoft just gave a commercial angle to blogs in the contemporary world. Hence a blog can be from an individual with or without commercial intent, or it can be from companies where the sole objective is to spread the word about their offerings.

A typical blog can take any form. It could contain an opinion, information, or knowledge (Corcoran, Marsden, Zorbach, & Röthlingshöfer, 2006), which may be derived from primary or secondary sources. Such blogs reflect the interests and attitudes of bloggers. These blogs can be published as individuals post over the internet or on a collaborative website (Gillett, 2007). The ease of publication of blogs has become a trend nowadays as there are no restrictions coupled with much less cost than other means (Yang, 2011). Blogs' ease and cost-efficient nature have popularised them as a marketing communication tool for organizations to interact with their target audience(Wright, 2005). It also

lifts the restriction of accessibility and is available all over the globe once published. Moreover, the website of any company is static in nature, most of the time, the pages do not get frequent updates, but the blog section, on the other hand, keeps the website alive and interactive with constant updates.

Blogs posted online are considered a trusted source of information (Chu & Kamal, 2008), especially when they are personal in nature and has the capability of an engaging audience (Huang & Lin, 2009; Zhu& Tan, 2007). The engagement power of blogs has led blogging to become a source of a social network comprising individuals posting content over the internet (Hu et al., 2011). The network further helps in spreading the message, brings in transparency, offers two-way interaction and adds human faces to the digital medium of exchange (Hu et al., 2011). Blogs are getting innovated with time, people who write blogs are not just writing passive articles but now they are adding value by providing functional utility in possible dimensions of their subjects. The exchange of thoughts encouraged writers to seek the feedback of their readers (Bulters, 2006).

2.0 Blog Culture

The culture of blog writing is thriving like anything. Many marketing organizations and others have already started to take full advantage of blogs. They encourage independent and hired bloggers to write and discuss more their products and services. However, at the initial stages, the blogging community has shown some resistance to the use of blogs as a commercial tool (Corcoran et al., 2006) but the results gained through it now override the opinion expressed by blogging communities. The concern was actually on the authentication part of blogs which might get diluted due to commercialization. Still, the goal of a commercial blog is to add valuable information while disclosing the identity and personal information of the writer (Hu et al., 2011). Hence, the essence of blogging has been kept intact, and now people are exploring new ways to utilize blogs for their businesses. Witnessing the same, Google has already developed a mechanism to identify the originality of the blog and attached its AdSense service to every blog.

3.0 Blog – User-Friendly Tool

Companies have discovered online blogs instrumental in developing bonds and relationships with customers. They can seek information about customers and grab their attention (Cheung and Thadani, 2012; Zhang et al., 2014). Blogs sponsored by companies provide information to consumers when consumers look for the same online and thus satisfy them (Pan and Chiou, 2011; Yang, 2013). The exciting aspect of a blog being used as an advertising tool is that the results, reach or effectiveness of any blog can be measured. The number of likes, shares, comments and suggestions provide length and breadth of measuring the effectiveness of the blog. With the activities done on the consumer end, it adds another dimension of interaction to any blog. Now, marketers can get in touch with their prospects in such a way that a consumer is also interested. Unlike other means, which are pushier in nature and at times irritate consumers or do not produce desired results.

The use of blogs as a marketing tool has also been encouraged because of the trust factor involved. The 360-degree presence of advertisements has increased the skepticism about them (Ashley and

Leonard, 2009; Rotfeld, 2008). Consumers are often found to avoid 24*7 advertising. Even the usage of social media as a marketing tool has limitations to it. Companies and brands have always tried their best to follow consumers wherever they go. Nowadays, consumers are spending much of their time on social media; hence brands are following the same (Barger and Labrecque, 2013; Liljander et al. 2014). But it is interesting to note that the orientation of consumers and orientation of brands are different when they use social media. Marketers or companies focus on their commercials as ultimate objectives, whereas consumers are there to socialize with others (Heinonen, 2011; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2006). The mismatch between the objectives has raised the eyebrows of experts. At the same time, it poses a question to marketers whether they should continue to increase their money spent on social media or may employ some other alternatives as well?

4.0   E-Word of Mouth Blogging

As per the study, Trust in Advertising done by Nielson, it was found that the majority of consumers trust the opinions shared by their close associates and companions at first place followed by the opinions shared online by consumers, also known as E-Word of Mouth (E-WoM). The trust in other forms of advertising has taken a back seat. When shared with their social groups, consumers' opinion is known as word of mouth (WoM). When shared with a larger interested audience via the internet, the opinion is known as E-WoM. If E-WoM is found to be credible, it is adopted by the customers in decision-making (Cheung et al., 2009). Blogs can be an extended form of E-WoM (Osman et al., 2009; Hu et al., 2011) when individuals write and post about their experiences with no commercial orientation. Consumers take the help of the internet to express themselves after consuming a product or a service on a blog (Hsu et al., 2013).

According to the report published by myYearbook (Wegert, 2010), 80% of customers seek other's opinions over the internet and 74% of those are influenced by those suggestions. Hence online opinion of individuals in blogs has become a critical part before the purchase decision. Nowadays and in the future online transactions will only increase with minimum face-to-face interactions. In a digitized world, customers rely upon the information from blogs and it is proving to be trustworthy (Hsu et al., 2013; Johnson and Kaye, 2009).

Several brands, companies, and marketers are getting attracted to marketing through blogs because if an increase in the number of readers, its influence over the readers provides a way to handle concerns generated by customers or readers in the form of comments (Magnini, 2011). Blogs are bringing customers and companies on the same page as the objective of both of them is mutually beneficial (Palmer and Koenig-Lewis, 2009). Hence it is an art how to utilize the power of blogs for mutual benefits at both ends. Companies and brands need to create a fine balance when posting blogs online about their products or services, so they should not be perceived as pushier. Any unwanted, exaggerated, or tall claims should be avoided and try to keep it simple but attractive in addressing what customers want from a blog. When consumers post their reviews in the form of blogs, brands should try to keep track and utilize it to form a platform to interact with their users. Prompt but cautious interaction can help in the overall marketing efforts.

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Although customers may not prefer brand interaction there in the age of social media, brands can't afford to lose their prospective audience for long. Microblogging is a concept and a new form of a blog (Jansen et al., 2009) that can be effective in the "attention economy" (Davenport & Beck, 2001) on social media, where brands constantly try to steal the attention of customers. Microblogging is an effective platform where brands, consumers and customers can express their thoughts, interests and opinions in short posts as microblogs (Jansen et al., 2009). Microblogs are crisp, short and summarised in nature and can be shared quickly via messages, emails, WhatsApp, etc. Twitter has been an excellent platform and has become a synonym for microblogging on various topics. Global Brands have also recognized the strength of short blogs. They are increasingly sharing their updates on what's happening around them. Microblogs help brands keep the buzz alive for a more extended period and attempt to create a relationship thread.

5.0 Blog Constructs

Blog marketing takes place with product recommendations in the blog's content. Readers and customers trust and buy the authenticated suggestions mentioned in blogs. The guidance in blogs can be both hidden and explicit. However, when it is hidden, it may attract a negative effect on customers (Magnini, 2011). The suggestions are hidden or explicit in a blog that is individual is fine. Still, when readers or customers discover companies and brands sponsor the suggestions, it can be the worst gamble of marketing efforts (Campbell et al., 2013; Colliander and Erlandsson, 2015). Brands and companies should keep in mind that customers trust blogs independent of their interests (Johnson and Kaye, 2004). Hence, brands can leverage the power of blogs by encouraging their consumers to write actual reviews about their products or services. Once a blog is posted, in the future, those blogs can be used as platforms to develop engagement and interaction with existing consumers and prospective customers. Any negative statement should be taken care of with humbleness and the reply must reflect the concerned minds about the problem in companies. However, blog marketing is complex as its output lies in the hands of consumers and their reactions.

There are two Constructs of blog marketing: 1) Covert Marketing and 2) Overt Marketing. Covert blog marketing, as the name suggests, is hidden or masked blog marketing from companies and brands where the readers are not able to identify the sponsor of blog content (Petty and Andrews, 2008). It is worth noting that consumers nowadays are well informed and have a number of resources at their disposal. Many times, customers or readers can track the sponsor's involvement in the blog's content, which nullifies the objective of being an influencer in decision making. Consumers or readers of blogs are getting advanced; they raise their eyebrows at blogs that directly or indirectly recommend any brands even when they are not sponsored, resting on the fact that popular blogs have some commercial backings. Covert advertising should be avoided as it can take the form of intentional deception, which is unethical and not appreciated by customers. However, a mild covert blog marketing, where the blogger's identity and sponsorship are disclosed indirectly but serve its purpose successfully by not imposing or recommending something explicitly, is what consumers have been ok with. It is not deceptive, as readers know the DNA behind the blog and its possible purpose.

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On the other hand, overt blog marketing has received mixed responses. Over blog, marketing does not hold any adverse effect on consumer behaviour. When consumers discover the sponsor of blog content before any recommendation is made, it is welcomed by consumers. Still, when the sponsorship is disclosed after the request, it might negatively affect (Campbell et al., 2013). In cases where an individual blogger is paid to spread good words on behalf of brands, it may not affect the brand's attitude but may negatively affect the blogger's credibility. Hence, brands and companies or marketing managers must play their cards right. Once it is over the internet, it becomes difficult to control the direction of engagements.

6.0   Synthesis

It is safe to say that marketers and brands have identified the strength of marketing done via blog content. It has also been a cost-effective method compared to traditional advertising, hence better suits start-ups and small businesses. It is safe to interpret that Blog marketing is on-demand marketing. The content would be visible and speak to only those customers or readers who have searched for similar content. Relevancy is the key to Blog Marketing. Brand managers should keep in mind that content developed should not break the principle of relevance.

The effect of blog marketing cannot be controlled. Be it Covert or Overt Marketing, consumers perceive as per their understanding; however, brand managers can always pay extra attention while developing the content as consumers nowadays are well informed in all senses. The new-age blogging, Micro-blogs are much more convenient as there is limited content. Customers have always preferred crisp information which is easy to interpret. Companies can take advantage of micro-blogs by efficient and regular sharing of content in the form of news, announcements, promotions, teasers, etc. The world of the internet has always been full of opportunities and threats. Blogs have opened a new window of experiments and healthy engagements with the target audience. It is up to one's mind to play along and get the most out of it.

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