



THE BLOGS-BRANDS TIE : REVIEW OF THE MAIN SUCCESS KEYS

Maryem Trabelsi

Assistant Professor in Marketing, Jouf University, College of Business, Saudi Arabia

meriem.trabelsi55@yahoo.com

Abstract

Nowadays Internet has become the revolutionary invention the most adopted by people and companies around the world. No one can ignore its importance in our lives and in the brands' lives too. Blogs are among the social media tools the most used by brands for their unique characteristics starting from useful information to continuous interactivity. Despite its incontestable value, the success factors of the blog-brand relationship is still blurry and there is no consensus in the marketing literature about them. In this article, we expose the main success keys that were scattered among various research articles. Researchers do admit that the most important success key is to make the first visit unforgettable, pleasant and interesting. A visit that generates others in the future, a visit that exposes the high credibility of the corporate blog and the brand too, a visit where the messages are taken into consideration even the negative ones but till today the effective management of the blogs is not well studied which make some marketing managers skeptical concerning the adoption of this social media.

Keywords: blog-brand relationship, perceived credibility, customization, interactivity, experience

INTRODUCTION

According to Muller et Chandon (2002), embarking on the cyberworld is likened to "a perilous adventure" whose consequences are unpredictable ranging from "The modification of associations" founding the essence of the brand until the deterioration of its fundamental attributes. Supporting this thesis, Mellet (2009) argues that new social media "suggest new opportunities, but also new threats" (p270) and, Razorfish (2009) adds that "digital is not only a space to build a mark but also to destroy it". Opinion supported by Stenger and Coutant (2010,



p 210) who postulate that these social media are in fact "an issue representing opportunities and risks".

This dichotomous vision is due on the one hand to the absence of reliable techniques capable of measuring the direct impact of this adventure on the image of the brand and the consumer-brand relationship and on the other hand to the uncertainty as to the possibility of transposing classic brand management strategies and their effectiveness in the digital world.

Regarding blogs, opinions are also too mixed as to their contributions to brands. Indeed, while some (Berkley 2007 ; Muller 2000 ; Muller et Chandon 2002 ; Khan 2009...) see them as a gold mine for them and an unrivaled opportunity for promotion, sharing of information and experiences and communication with customers, others see them as a real danger and a very hazardous adventure; on the one hand because certain aspects of the brand cannot be transposed to the cyber world which could suddenly deteriorate its image, and on the other hand in blogs where freedom of expression reigns, information is difficult to manage and to filter and hence negative feedback is capable of influencing the perception of other bloggers (Sealy 1999, Sinha 2000, Degeratu et al 2000 ; Chen 2001 ; Bernes et Mattsson 2008 ; Eberle 2010) and jeopardize the brand's history and offline success.

This uncertainty as to the effects of blogs and other web 2.0 tools as well as this lack of credible techniques and strategies keeps increasing day by day to the point of causing several researchers, including Henaff (2009, p5) to question themselves on the real advantage of this media and its possible contribution and if it is a "myth or reality for companies?". This precariousness of reliable data, also justifying and accentuating the anxiety and hesitation of brand managers, has prompted several academicians and practitioners to look into the analysis of the successful digital experiences of certain brands in order to bring out the factors success on the Internet and to identify "good practices" (Andrée, 2011) and thus help these marketing managers to make good use of this medium (Parise and Guinan 2008). This growing interest is justified in a way by the uniqueness of blogs in terms of degree of interactivity, transparency and perceived credibility but above all their undeniable success in other fields such as politics and journalism and the deep will and desire to transpose this success with brands.

In this paper, the adequate measures that should be undertaken in order to make the blogolistic experience of brands a real success, to have a correct use of this tool in terms of brand promotion and creation of a deep consumer-brand relationship will be exposed.

SUCCESS KEYS OF THE BLOGS-BRAND RELATIONSHIP

1- Regeneration of the revisit: a step towards the success of the blog

For the proponents of the existence of a positive impact of the use of different social media on brands, they present a beautiful number of criteria determining the success of the social media-brand relationship and especially blog-brand. Indeed and given that the purpose of the marketing blog is to promote the brand and help it to create a certain closeness and emotional relationship with its fans, the regeneration of the revisit (Suphellen and Nysveers, 2001; Florès et al, 2010) is considered a sine qua none condition for achieving this dual objective. And as it is also commonly known that there is never a second chance to have the first impression, the brand blog is called to increase the participation rate of visitors and this by maximizing their satisfaction during the first digital encounter with the brand. According to several researchers, this satisfaction is conditioned by the creation of an enriching, entertaining and memorable experience in a space with high interactivity. It is in fact an experience which must be on one side very useful and with a strong informational contribution. Indeed, as the first objective of the visit is to acquire information that is non-existent or difficult to have in the real world and as the role of blogs is not to “relay to relay” (Andrée, 2011, p5), the content should provide detailed and relevant information for the readership (Khan 2009, Meadous-Klue 2008). On the other side, this virtual experience must be sufficiently entertaining, full of life and active (Faust and Hausholds, 2009; Jones 2011; Eberle 2010; Bernes and Mattsson 2008; Silva and Alwi 2008) to the point that it helps these participants to thrive and escape the routine and stress of everyday life and thus to come closer to the brand and other fan-visitors.

2- Creating an enriching and entertaining experience

According to this stream of studies, an experience that is perceived as useful and entertaining has a high potentiel of brand image and brand reputation improvement (Muller 2000 ; Shanker et al 2000 ; Chang et al 2002 ; Florès et al, 2010 ; Eberle 2010 ; Da Silva et Alwi 2008). In addition, it positively influences the intention to purchase online and offline (Van Der Heyden and Verhager, 2004), generates positive and constructive word-of-mouth (Faust and Hausholds, 2009) and serves to create a certain affinity relationship between the brand and its fans (Meadous-Klue, 2008) but above all it increases the perceived reliability of the blog (Da Silva and Alwi, 2008). In a similar vein, Debos (2008) argues that the growing use of the various tools of the Internet reflects the increased expectation of the consumer and its relentless demand for conviviality, emotional and relational imminence with the brand, which requires from the latter *“the integration of a certain humanity, an emotional and affective presence, the creation of a*

feeling of closeness, familiarity between the sites of connection and their users, as well as real assistance in its daily use” (p7).

Supporting this view, Florès et al (2010) argue that in the cyber world, brands managers can only “hope for positive returns” to their brands by admitting that they are only “composed of a rich set of sensory experiences” and are perceived only in this way. This means that marketing managers must take into consideration the hedonic objective sought by the blog visit and allocate the necessary resources in terms of time, energy and creativity to create a satisfactory experience, informational and pleasant able to generate revisit.

The brand must therefore help the consumer-blogger feel free, well-informed, and fulfilled during his visit through the creation of an emotionally charged blogolistic atmosphere (Hirshman and Holbrook, 1982). This visit should be engraved in the memory of the consumer, it should be seen as a pleasant, preferable and breathtaking experience giving rise to further visits and triggering a process of word-of-mouth. This experience must also increase his involvement, his commitment and stimulate the desire to return. An involvement considered according to Yao (2008) as “*the vital factor in the success of corporate blogs*” (p32) which have put in the first place a strong informational aspect.

3- Creating an interactive atmosphere

However, the creation of an entertaining and useful experience does not alone guarantee the regeneration of the revisit. Some researchers note that interactivity also plays an important and indisputable role in the desire for future participation and therefore in the achievement of the promotional and relational objectives of the blogolistic adventure of the brand. According to these researchers (Reigner 2007; Simmons 2007; MCGOWN 2000, etc.), a high level of interactivity facilitates the development of strong brands, enable them to build long-lasting relationships with their consumers and personalize their online promotion and communication strategies. According to Wu (1999), “*the uniqueness of the web lies in its interactivity*”, as a result of this, a brand that wants to survive in a volatile world, fierce competition from chameleons and consumers, it must increase the degree of informational and experiential exchange on its blog. It must also recognize that the Internet through its various social media channels is a weapon against loneliness (Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999) and a place for meeting and relationships’ creation. In social media and unlike the real world, consumers are ready to hear, interact and connect with the brand. This availability and enthusiasm must be well exploited on the blog through the creation of constructive and beneficial interactivity based on the brand’s distinctive values. The recommended interactivity is much more complex than mere conversations between the brand and its fans, it is in fact a strategic interactivity where these

conversations must be intelligently and discreetly oriented towards the achievement of the aforementioned objectives.

As the differentiation of the goods and services of a brand is needed in the real world, its success and its sustainability online are based on the active and interactive participation of the consumer, interactivity is achieved via “consumer engagement in the creation, circulation and dissemination of messages” (Singh et al 2008, p282). In this sense, these researchers call on brands to see interactivity as a source of consumer commitment, an engagement that should be well managed and taken into consideration by the company. A company that admits the equality rule highlighted by Consoli and Musso (2010) in this quote “markets are conversations or dialogues between equals” (p324).

Apart from its regenerative power of revisiting, the engaging and strategic interactivity increases the credibility of the messages, creates or consolidates «the feeling of embedding» which therefore has a positive impact on all dimensions of the brand-equity (Wu 1999; Eberle 2010).

4- The harmony between the brand's image and that of its blog

Aside from the need to create a memorable, funny, highly interactive experience and generate future visits, some researchers focus on another success factor of the blog-brand relationship is the congruence between the brand's image and that of its blog. According to Gzerwinski et al (2011), the complementarity between the off and on activities of the brand is essential for its success on the web regardless which social media is chosen. Indeed, these authors argue that *“marketing activities aimed at creating strong brand value in the cyber world must complement, rather than substitute those aimed at creating value in the real world”* (p18). In other words, the closer the perceived distance between the real and the virtual, the more the brand is able to gain in terms of value and image.

Insisting on the importance of this complementarity and the need for an active off-on synergy, Muller (2000) argues that the digital interface that sets itself the objective of improving the various dimensions of brand-equity must insert itself in “the territory of the brand”. The blog must be both created and managed “in the continuity of the branding strategy”. According to these researchers, the more a fit or harmony exists between the perceived image of the brand and that of its digital space, the more there is a high chance of transferring the offline relational and communicational success to the digital world. De Chernatony (2001), who also insists on transferring the essence of the brand into the net, went further in his analysis of the effects of this fact by stating that a perceived discrepancy between the image off and the brand gives rise

to what he calls a “schizophrenic brand” perceived as immature, unprofessional, unworthy of trust and experiencing an identity crisis.

According to this author, this gap in image makes consumers “confused, lost or worried what leads them to leave this digital space” (p12). Such a perceived incompatibility certainly causes the visitor’s dissatisfaction, then his departure, but above all a breach of the brand’s value on and even offline and a negative word-of-mouth (Berness and Mattsson, 2008). Khan (2010) who views blogs as a digital form of word-of-mouth specifies that unlike the real world where a dissatisfied consumer is expected to inform 10 others, on the web, this same consumer is able to spread his negative message to thousands of people. According to this author, brand managers need to “understand and define” their brands before engaging in blogosphere and the Internet in general in order to avoid the risks associated with a bad fit (Neti, 2010).

In summary, Faust and Hausholdes (2003) call for the digital space of the brand to be created so that it “reflects its history, philosophy and vision” (p51) and “adds value”. Like its website, the blog must have an appropriate design respecting the image of the company and its culture. (De Sousa, 2007).

5- Listening and good management of comments

Since Internet marketing is still in its infancy, it is marked by the lack of consensus on its characteristics, its potential and especially the success factors of brands on the web. While several researchers and as it has been advanced earlier in this paper insist on the regeneration of the revisit. A revisit based on the increase of strategic and engaging interactivity, the creation of a satisfying, useful and entertaining experience and the fit between the brand’s image and that of its blog. Others highlight new success keys namely listening, ongoing feedback management and visitors' engagement. According to this stream of research and in order to succeed in its blogolistic experience, the brand must listen well to its consumers, analyze their comments and opinions but above all take into consideration these opinions, complaints and suggestions in the adjustment and improvement of its products. This should be indeed a constructive listening (Nail, 2009) showing an acceptance of establishing a partnership relationship with customers. In fact, marketers who have seen their brands succeed in the blogosphere have developed an innovative mindset based on the deliberate and benevolent transfer of some of their power to design, promote, communicate and adjust to their consumers-bloggers and, therefore, listening has generated concrete actions.

According to Singh et al (2008), real-time listening and response reflects the brand’s interest in its fans as well as its expertise which avoids negative advertising and its spread on the web.

6- Increasing perceived credibility

From another angle, research has highlighted the importance of perceived credibility in the success of the blogging-brands relationship. An article titled “Get real and prosper”, Faust and Householder (2009) noted that the more authentic, credible and honest the brand is perceived, the more likely its blog will be revisited and the more positive effects on its image and relationship with consumers are expected. Being seen as real helps the brand succeed online and become “a source of pride in the eyes of its fans” and a topic that they prefer to discuss with their friends and family.

Supporting the same idea, Dobele et al (2005) argue that the success of blogs is certainly in creating entertaining and well-targeted content but above all the latter should be published by a credible and reliable source as in the case of GM where the responsibilities of publishing, managing feedback and interacting with fans are assumed by the Vice President Bob Lutz.

Several researchers (Khan 2009; Parise and Guinan 2008; Chu and Kamel 2010, etc.) also state that the reliability of the messages, the strength of the arguments presented, the perceived spontaneity of the blog's voice as well as the degree of truth of the published stories all do influence the attitude towards the brand. Stressing the importance of this factor, Neti (2010) argues that online success is the synonym of creating a climate of trust and goodwill. In order to properly present this point, Jones (2011) recommends that brands should “be honest, sincere, real, spontaneous and natural” and “avoid ornate and overly rhetorical style” when creating content.

7- The customization of messages

The perceived strong credibility of the corporate blog is not only the result of the spontaneity of the author, the strength of his arguments and his answers as well as the regular management of the messages but above all the flexibility of his speech and his customized character. On the web, thousands of blogs and digital spaces of the brand are created every day and disappear after a short period, which accentuates the alienation of consumers-Internet users and the feeling of being manipulated and exploited by the brand. This feeling resulting from the volatile nature of the net must be compensated according to Debois (2008) by the customization of the messages and the offer. In the blogosphere, the brand that wants to succeed and build a long-lasting relationship with its customers must apply one-to-one marketing techniques and treat each consumer as if he was the one and only fan (Lehu, 1996; Ibeh et al 2005; Muller 2000). In order to develop a customized speech, the brand must understand and analyze the quality of the visit(s), it must focus on the small details of this participation (Simmons, 2007).

Da Silva and Alwi (2008) argue that messages' customization has a positive and significant effect on the brand image, satisfaction, loyalty and brand personality. To this, Berness and Mattsson (2008) add that well-targeted messages help in the development of a strong and sustainable relationship between the consumer and the brand.

CONCLUSION

As it can be easily noticed, the proliferation of recent studies on the success factors of the blog-brand relationship did not generate an integrative model taking into consideration all the aspects likely to lead on board the blogolistic adventure of brands. The difficulty of classifying these factors is also another problem in the field. This has led some researchers (Muller 2000; Khan 2009; Debois 2008; Gzerwinski et al 2011) to assert that success depends on the implementation of a strategy based on a synergistic balance between all the factors mentioned above. In this sense, Forrester (1999) points out that the name of the brand does not guarantee the repeated visit of its digital space, but rather it is necessary to know a good balance between design, hedonic aspects, useful content and strategic and engaging interactivity.

Khan (2009) adds that the brand must give equal importance to the offered experience, the word of mouth, the interaction, the increased perceived credibility, the authenticity, the choice of the voice of the blog as well as the analysis of negative feedback. It must also properly train its staff and allocate the necessary resources to achieve these ends (Singh et al, 2008).

In short, the elements of success of the blogging-brands relationship are still little palpable and subject to controversies ranging from the facilitation of use to the customization of content. The analysis of the literature in the field reveals the lack of consensus on the most salient keys to success as well as on the priority elements to be considered by the brand if it wishes to engage in the blogosphere.

Further studies may shed light on the analysis of the success stories of the brands that have adopted blogs as a social media platform. Those stories will have the ability to expose the effective strategies and how to manage blogs in order to add to the brand equity and improve the brand perceived personality. Future studies may also focus on the importance of content management in the blogs since like all the social media, it is impossible to have a total control on what is written but through interviews with brand managers, it will be possible to know how to deal with this so called « the threat of the net ». Future studies may also focus on the « Virtual community » that is created within brands' blogs, its power, its roles in content management, its participation in the development of the brand marketing strategy in general.

REFERENCES

- Andrée (2011): « Etude sur les relations entre les marques et les blogueurs : les marques ont-elles enfin trouvé la méthode idéale pour tisser des liens avec la blogosphère ? ». Étude réalisée par l'agence Vecteur d'Image en Aout 2011. Pp 1-12
- Barnes, S., and Mattsson, J. (2008): "Brand value in virtual worlds: an axiological approach". Journal of Electronic Commerce Research. Vol 9.N°3.
- Bouhlef, O., Mzoughi, N., Ghachem, M. S., & Negra, A. (2010): "Online purchase intention: understanding the blogosphere effect". International Journal of e-Business Management. Vol4.N°2. P 37.
- Bernard G. & Jallat F. (2001), "Blair Witch, Hotmail et le marketing viral", L'expansion Management Review, N°100
- Bernoff J and Li C (2008): "Harnessing the power of the oh social web". Mit Sloan management review. Vol 49. N°3. Pp 35-42.
- Beuker and Abbing (2010): « Two faces of social media: brand communication and brand research ». Design management review. Vol 21. Issue 1. Pp 54-60.
- Cho (2006): « Interpersonal communication between brands and consumers: A self-presentation study of corporate blogs ». Research paper at the University of Minnesota. School of Journalism and mass communication. Pp 1-13
- Chua, A. P. H., Deans, K. R., and Parker, C. M. (2009) : "Exploring the types of SMEs which could use blogs as a marketing tool: a proposed future research agenda". Australasian Journal of Information Systems. Vol 16. N°1.
- Dwyer, P. (2007) "Building Trust with Corporate Blogs", 1st International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, 26-28 March, Boulder, Colorado, USA.
- Faust, W., & Householder, L. (2009): "Get real and prosper: Why social media demands authentic brands". Design Management Review. Vol 20. N°1. pp 45-51
- Farrell, H., and Drezner, D. W. (2008): "The power and politics of blogs". Public Choice. Vol 134. N°1-2.pp 15-30
- Fieseler, C., Fleck, M., & Meckel, M. (2010): "Corporate social responsibility in the blogosphere". Journal of Business Ethics. Vol 91. N°4. pp 599-614.
- Gardner, S. (2005). Buzz marketing with blogs for dummies. John Wiley & Sons.
- Guïtoo (2007): "Blogs et publicité". Communication publiée sur « pixeltravelling.free.fr/travaux-ejcm/.../pdf/blog-marque.pdf »
- Herring, S. C., Scheidt, L. A., Kouper, I., & Wright, E. (2007): "Longitudinal content analysis of blogs: 2003-2004". Blogging, citizenship, and the future of media. pp 3-20.
- Hill, J. (2005): "The voice of the blog: the attitudes and experiences of small business bloggers using blogs as a marketing and communications tool". Unpublished dissertation, University of Liverpool. Retrieved from <http://jeffreyhill.typepad.com/voiceblog/files/MBADissertation.pdf>.
- Herring et al (2005): "Weblogs as a bridging genre". Information, technology and people. Vol 18. N°2. Pp 142-171
- Henaff (2009): "Les blogs: nouveau dispositif éditorial générateur de liens sociaux sur Internet ». Papier de recherche publié dans « Documents numériques et société ». Version 1 ; pp 1-14
- Khan (2009): "Brand management using social media". Master thesis. Simon Fraser University.
- Li and Chignell (2010): « Birds of a feather: how personality influences blog writing and reading ». International journal of human-computer studies. Vol 68. Pp589-602.
- Mellet (2009) : « Aux sources du marketing viral ». Papier de recherche. Réseaux n°157-158. Pp 268-292
- Muller et Chandon (2002) : « L'impact de la visite du site Internet sur la personnalité de la marque ». Papier de recherche n°646. Centre d'études et de recherche sur les organisations et la gestion. Pp 1-28
- Muller (2000) : « Les effets de la visite du site Internet sur le capital-marque ». Papier de recherche n°590. Pp1-49.
- Neti. S (2011): "Social media and its role in marketing". International journal of enterprise computing and business systems. Vol1. Issue2. Pp1-15.
- Ng, J-Y. & Matanda, M. (2009): The role of citizenship behaviour in e-service quality delivery in blog retailing. Paper presented at ANZMAC.
- Negra et al (2008): « L'impact de l'attitude du consommateur à l'égard des blogs et des marques sur l'intention d'achat : Facteurs explicatifs » Papier de recherche

Shen, W., Maceli, K. M., Zhao, Y., Baack, D. W., & Bacon, D. R. (2014): "The impact of gender and national culture on electronic word of mouth communication". Patrick D. Fountain. p145.

Sheidt and Wright (2006): "Common visual design elements of blogs". Communication for the Indiana University at Bloomington. Pp 1-16

Stenger et Coutant (2010) : « Les réseaux sociaux numériques :des discours de promotion à la définition d'un objet et d'une méthodologie de recherche ». Journal of language and communication studies. N°44. Pp 209-228.

Smudde, P. M. (2005): "Blogging, ethics and public relations: A proactive and dialogic approach". Public Relations Quarterly. Vol 50. N°3.p 34.

Stenger et Coutant (2010) : « Les réseaux sociaux numériques : des discours de promotion à la définition d'un objet et d'une méthodologie de recherche ». Journal of language and communication studies. N°44. Pp 209-228..

Singh et al (2008): "Blogging: A new play in your marketing game plan". Business Horizons. Vol 51. Pp 281-292

Tricas et al (2004): « Revisiting the spanish blogosphere ». Research paper. Pp1-7

Pinault (2004): "Caractéristiques de blogs". Article publié sur www.philippepinault.com

Verma (2010) : « Social media strategy for brand building for co-operatives in India: The role of blogs". International Journal for co-operative management. Vol5. N°1. Pp 69-73

Wyld, D. C. (2008): "Management 2.0: a primer on blogging for executives". Management Research News. Vol 31. N°6. pp 448-483.