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Conversion of Customer Experience and Its Impact on Brand Community – the Thermomix Analytical Model

Summary

For many years brand communities have been the subject of interest of brand creators. The main reason for it is the fact that they are a very important source of information about the brand both for companies and customers. This article examines the processes that contribute to the origins of creation of brand communities. This article aims to verify whether transcendent customers' experience with the brand and the conversion of customer experience leads to transformation thereof, the result of which is co-creation of a brand community. The marketing implications for managers were shown as related to brand managing at the stage of communities' formation.

Key words: brand community, customer experience, conversion of experience, relations between customers, identification with brand, transcendence.

JEL codes: M31

Introduction

In a highly competitive market, many marketers believe that facilitating the creation of brand community (BC) is both a profitable and an efficient way to attract new and keep existing customers (Algesheimer, Dholakia, Hermann 2005).

Brands are in fact crucial in building consumer relationships and in ensuring long-term business success. Marketing managers are becoming increasingly interested in brand capital management as a means to build long-term relationships with consumers (Fournier 1998; Aaker, Fournier, Brasel 2004). This is due to the fact that in a world that provides many incentives and information, consumers are quite skeptical about brands.Classical messages promoting a brand have lost their importance. This means that both the area associated with consumer's identification with a brand and with creating communities centered around a brand have gained a great significance for brand management (Kuenzel, Halliday 2008).

There are at least three reasons why brand communities may be important for marketing managers. Firstly, they may be important sources of information about the market. The community members usually have extensive knowledge of the product, they discuss the launch of new products, their functionality and marketing campaigns and they may even have ideas how to develop new products (Filler et al. 2008).Secondly, brand communities are often considered separate market segments, to which specific marketing initiatives are addressed (Bagozzi, Dholakia 2002). Thirdly, brand communities may play an important

role in creating a relationship with a brand, as their members are strongly associated with the brand and may become its advocates (Algesheimer et al. 2005; Anderson 2005; Bagozzi, Dholakia 2006).

From the consumer's point of view there may be many reasons for the formation of communities. Consumers may participate in brand community (Ouwersloot, Odekerken-Schroder 2008):
- due to the need to make sure that the product is of good quality
- to express their engagement in a brand product
- because they require common consumption
- because they want to live in accordance with their brand symbolism.

The above-mentioned reasons lead to the formation of an increasing number of brand communities. This article focuses on the second of the aforementioned reasons for consumers' involvement in brand community. This article attempts to determine whether the conversion of consumer experiences is the basis for the emergence and development of brand communities. This knowledge will be further verified based on the analytical model using the Thermomix brand.

It appears that product categories with a high level of commitment include typically the products the consumer wants to feel connected to even beyond the moment of consumption. Consumers are looking for products with a high level of commitment, and then they feel the need to share experiences and feelings associated with consumption.

Thus, a hypothesis can be made that a community will be created as a result of consumer experienceconversion, and its existence and development will be supported by increasing or extending the consumption-related experience.

Essence of brand communities

The very concept of brand community has been interpreted in many ways (Skorek 2014). Hence, it is known that groups may emerge from the innate desire of consumers to act "with someone", that an individual strives to have stable relationships and to be clearly defined by themselves and by others (Cartwright, Zandler 1968, for: Bagozzi 2000). Brand community was primarily defined as a specialized and not geographically linked ecumene, based on a structured set of social relationships among the brand admirers. It is specialized, because it is centre around brand goods or services. As in other communities, it stands out with its shared awareness, rituals, traditions and a sense of moral responsibility. However, each of these values is grounded in the commercial and mass morality and has its own particular expression (Muniz, O'Guinn 2001). Thus, when describing brandcommunities, it can be said that these are the components of entities and the relationships between them. It is through the community that people share the basic resources that may be of cognitive, emotional or physical nature.

Of all the things which may or may not be shared within a given community, i.e. things like food, beverages, useful information or moral support, there is one thing that should always be shared, i.e: creating and selling meanings (McAlexander, Schouten 2002). These relationships may be classified as: customer-product relationship, customer-brand relationship, customer-company relationship, customer-customer relationship.

According to the above definitions, abrand community consists of groups of individual fans of a given brand who recognize and appreciate the sense of belonging and understanding with other fans of the brand, although without any formal social relationships (Carlson, Suter, Brown 2008).

According to this approach, brand communities are not sustained and supported by their members. Instead, they are created with individuals who identify with other people and who share their interest in a particular brand (McAlexander, Schouten 2002; Algesheimer, Dholakia, Hermann 2005).Thus, the behaviour and beliefs of people sharing interests in specific brands are similar, although the people may have never met. Such a process can be defined as collective imagination. It will be maintained through the cultivation of phenomena such as the use of common semiotic terms, organization of meetings and the exchange of experiences and opinions about a brand.

Transcendent consumer experience versus conversion of experiences

One of the concepts that allows to increase the value of the market offer for the customer is using the power of experience (Pine, Gilmore 1998), and in particular shared extraordinary experiences (Arnould, Price 1993).

The very concept of experience is not unique and it has undergone many transformations (Kacprzak, Dziewanowska, Earwig 2015). As defined in a dictionary, it is the knowledge and skills gained based on observation and personal experience, but it can also be regarded as a synonym for empiricism, practice, skill, experience, feeling and impression (synonimiczny.pl). In the source literature one may find three types of the definitions of experience (Ismail et al. 2011, for: Kacprzak, Dziewanowska, Skorek 2015):
- holistic, with the emphasis on the human (and not just his or her role as a consumer) and all the interactions that occur between him or her and the company (LaSalle, Britton 2003)
- based on unforgettable sensations (assuming the key role of a company, which stages experiences for the consumer) (Pine and Gilmore, 1999),
- based on co-creation, in which companies offer a platform of goods and services using which consumers can create their own, unique experiences (Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004).

Transcendent experiences are a special kind of experiences that can affect the building of a brand community. They consist of flow and/or peak experience. They can generate permanent changes in beliefs and attitudes, including the subjective self-transformation (Schouten, McAlexander, Koenig 2007). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) characterizes flow as total absorp-

tion in an activity. Flow produces a state of transcendence, a suspension of temporalreality, a sense of separation from the mundane, and a senseof unity with some higher plane of experience.The peak experience (Maslow 1962), however, is ephemeral, is less like a deliberate process and more like an epiphany.Whereas an individual orchestrates flow through extremefocus on a particular task, peak experiences seem often tooriginate from outside the individual and to transport thatperson to unexpected emotional heights.In the midst of apeak experience an individual feels intimately connectedwith some larger phenomenon, such as nature, humankindor infinity. Like flow, a peak experience leads to a stateof transcendence.

The category of peak experiences includes a number of phenomena of a religious or sacred nature. In that realm, we may know them as ecstasies, revelations, or conversions (Schouten, McAlexander, Koenig 2007). In this context, one can use the concept of hierophany (Belk 1989) which means the revelation of something divine to chosen ones only and not to all: "Holiness does not appeal to everyone.""Sacred Stone seems to be different from the ordinary stone for those who believe that he was revealed to them and that he it is exceptional, supernatural or totally unique". It is followed by "a change of identity, which changes the circumstances in the firm conviction".

The term "transcendent customer experience" can be used in relation to flow and/or peak experience in the context of consumption. They are described by feelings, such as self-transformation or awakening, separation from the mundane and connectedness tolarger phenomena outside the self. Transcendent experience may also be markedby emotional intensity, epiphany, singularity and newness ofexperience, extreme enjoyment, oneness, ineffability, extremefocus of attention, and the testing of personal limits.

Transcendent customer experiences have the power toshape or influence customers' attitudes and behaviours. (Schouten, McAlexander, Koenig 2007). This occurs through "triggers" (Maslow 1962), which include personal crises, the changing of roles, and unique experiences.In a religious sense, triggers also include scriptures, rituals and symbols. In the context of consumption, it appears that triggers include sensory experiences such as images, sounds and smells; unexpectedly gratifying interpersonal encounters, both with other customers and withmarketing personnel; and personal achievements thatexceeded people's expectations of their own abilities andpotential (McAlexander, Schouten 1998).

Transcendent customer experiences can enhance people'srelationships with other people, with objects, activities,values, and symbols. Dodson (1996) found that peak experiences strengthenedindividuals' ties to both a consumption activity (mountainbiking) and an instrumental possession (the mountain bike).

To gain the flow and the peak experience,first the conversion experience must be gained (Belk 1989). It is a phenomenon that consists in transformation of brand perception. While before the conversion experience the brand was not appreciated or noticed by customers and its profits or legitimacy of use were not visible, after the conversion experience consumers recognize the brand as absolutely the best, for them it becomes the essence of a need being fulfilled and it isperceived as excellence to such an extent that it seems to have no substitute. Thus a group of "fanatic brand followers" is formed, the existence of which can be noticed

and cultivated by brand followers themselves through the creation of rituals regarding the use of a brand, chronicles that consist in making descriptions, history and taking photos of a brand and with new technologies that facilitate the communication between brand followers, such as websites, chats or Internet forums. Brand groups are manifested through signs and symbols which make it possible to identify their members. These signs or traces of tribal identity cannot express the sense of belonging, however, they provide helpful tips to understand a community.

The analytical model of co-creation of a brand community

Getting to know a community requires exceptional measures. Usually a marketer is instructed to reject the most traditional monodisciplinary and systematic approach in favour of practices based on the discovery of signs, the search for clues and the discovery of what is extraordinary through (Cova, Cova 2006):
- studying everything that has been said or written about a community in the press and books, in chat rooms and on Internet forums;
- conducting structured and unstructured interviews with individual members of core groups (e.g. focus groups);
- observation of a participant and non-participant in places where members of a community gather.

Due to the absence of tribal stability and, at the same time, permanent abstract thinking of people identifying themselves with a group, two directions can be observed amongst a brand group.

This dual nature of its status could be identified by referring to two dimensions defining different aspects of a community existence and their corresponding types of information that can be obtained by a researcher (Cova, Cova 2006):
- visible axis (traces and evidence)
- invisible axis (clues and hints).

On the vectors of the visible axis there are ***occasions*** and ***institutions***, while the invisible axis represents: *everyday life* and *the imaginary.*

The physical and visible proof of a tribal existence is located horizontally (traces or evidence). It contains a level of time, the moments when group members gather for their rituals (occasions) and a spatial level, that is physical venues, and online spaces for communities to gather (institutions).

The vertical axis represents what is invisible (tips, shadows). Signs of daily activities that come from personal and shared experiences and from trends and current fashion, imagination and fantasy of the society are discovered.
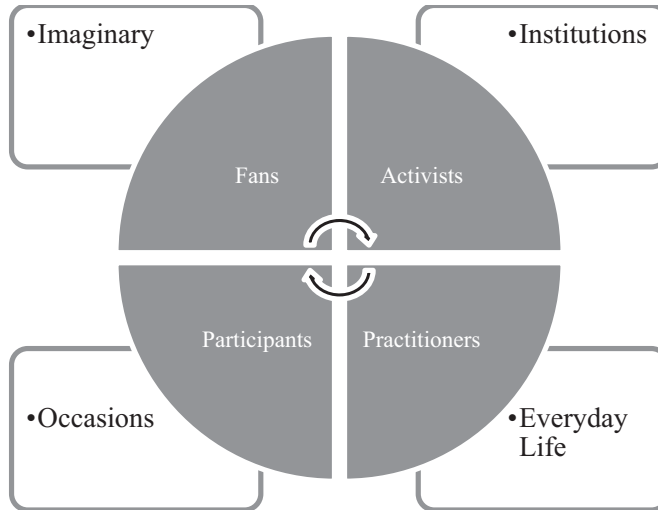
With this approach to the evidence for the existence of communities, many different roles can be developed, as well as interactions of tribe members with one another and with the society.

Figure 1

Analytical model of contemporary tribes by B. Cova

Imaginary

Invisible axis

Occasions

Visible axis   Institusions

Everyday Life
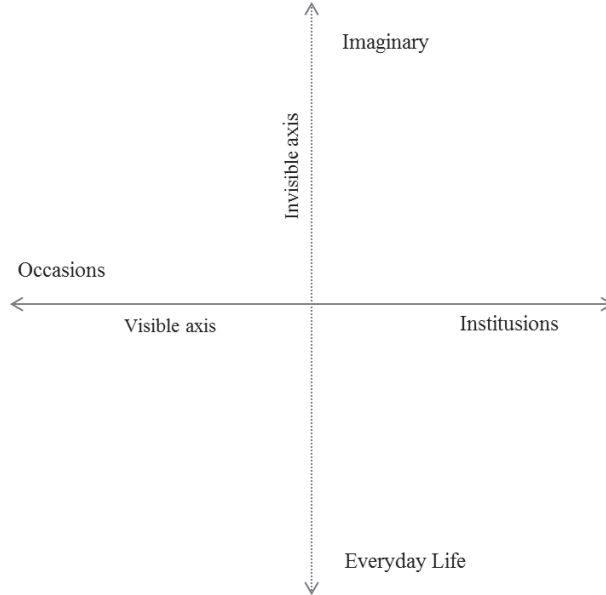
Source: Cova, Cova (2002, s. 606).

Figure 2

Analytical model of description of contemporary tribe members by B. Cova

•Imaginary   •Institutions

Fans   Activists

Participants   Practitioners

•Occasions   •Everyday Life

Source: Cova, Cova (2002, s. 607).

Members of a tribe can perform four functions (Cova, Cova 2006):
- a member of an institution (association, religious sect), an activist
- a participant of an informal gathering (demonstration, happening)
- a practitioner or a trainee involved in daily tribe activities
- a fan, following fashions and trends, integrated with a tribe online or marginally

Material and methods: a case of the Thermomix brand

In order to determine the origins of brand community and its development trends, the case of the Thermomix brand was used. The study included all three methods recommended above: studying the descriptions and the characteristics of the environment related to Thermomix, i.e: websites, forums, chats; conducting unstructured interviews with 19 members of the community (3 dealers and 16 users); observing members in places of their gathering with the researcher being present twice during their culinary workshops: at Easter and Christmas.

The data were collected irregularly in the period from March 2014 to the present. Below is a small its fragment from the collected research material. I would like to mention that the author of this article, who is also a researcher, is not a community member but merely its careful observer that engages in some of the rituals and events of the community members.

Results

Thermomix is a multifunctional kitchen appliance that, according to the manufacturer, takes the user into the future of cooking, it is the intelligence and precision in every process. Cooking becomes even more functional, by combining modern and intuitive design with the most advanced technology that makes the process easier and faster[1]. Before learning how Thermomix works, customers often manifest ambivalent or even pejorative attitude towards it, especially after hearing the price. No previous experience with Thermomix, just receiving the information on the device makes a negative impression and discourages from purchase. The conversion usually takes place during the meeting with the company sales representative (THE ACTIVIST). The conditions of meeting with the client and conducting the presentation (OCCASSION) of the device operation are precisely specified. The demonstration takes place in the customer's house (INSTITUTIONS). Before the meeting, the consultant (THE ACTIVIST) asks to reserve about 2 hours and prepare some food ingredients, e.g. frozen fruit, vegetables, flour, oil, etc. The demonstration always happens according to a specific plan(RITUALS). The presenter brings other important ingredients for the presentation and prepares: soup, the main dish, sorbet, breakfast breadrolls and Vegeta seasoning for soups.

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[1] http://thermomix.vorwerk.pl/strona-glowna [access: 05.11.2015].

At various stages of the presentation the customer is engaged (PARTICIPANT), by being asked to turn on thedevice, measure the quantity of products , use different features of the device such as scales, mixer, milling and blending functions. During such an engagement the brand experience conversion takes place. Participation in the cooking process and checking the simplicity and functionality of the device (in the opinion of the respondents) makes the recipients change their opinion on the brand. If, during the presentation, children or other persons who don't cook are present, they immediately become brand FANS.

The purchase of the product is encouraged by the possibility of alternative financing and despite its high price the vast majority of potential customers decide to buy the device, thus becoming members of the Thermomix brand community.

Immediatelyafterreceivingtheproductanditsinstallation,theowners(PRACTITIONERS) seek confirmation that their decision was right by contacting other owners via the net (the invisible axis, EVERYDAY LIFE /IMAGINARY). This way they make contact with other members of the community and become familiar with its other characteristic rituals, e.g. shared baking on certain days of the week and then registering this event through a description or a video posted on the Internet (documentation, factual materials, which are an inspiration for the prospective members to engage in group activities).Further development of community activities takes place through inspiring both the members of the community e.g. by organizing of women's evenings, during which cocktails and drinks are prepared in Thermomix, and the brand owner, Vorwerk company that organizes reunions twice a year before Easter and Christmas, and provides a platform with "My Thermomix"recipes. The community members write culinary blogs where they share their recipes and ideas for the use of the device. Some describe their unusual behaviours, e.g. "Thermomix always goes with me on holiday", "I run a restaurant so every morning I bring the device in and in the evening I take it home with me."

A sense of moral responsibility manifests itself the moment the device malfunctions or fails. The problem reported on the forum is immediately solved by engaging "repair specialists."

Due to the consumer's involvement in cooperation with users and brand vendors, flow and peak experience are slowly taking place. This is demonstrated by frequent use of the product, by praising it, or even engaging in its recommendation and selling. Some people personify the brand by treating it like a family member.

Discussion

The question arises as to whether the phenomena and events suffice to conclude that the experience conversion gave rise to a brand community? In addition, how does the Thermomix community manage to keep common awareness, rituals and traditions, while maintaining the level of hedonism and consumer freedom?

Conclusions

Conversion of customer experience takes place in relation to the initiative of a brand owner or other users, but it does not prevent the changes in perception of the Thermomix brand and joining the brand community. The initial experience is so strong that it allows to transfer to flow and peak experience. Peak experience strengthensthe ties to both a consumption activity (cooking in Thermomix) and an instrumental possession (the Thermomix device).

The Thermomix community is developing through shared awareness (updating information about the brand), rituals and traditions (regular meetings, exchange of recipes), moral responsibility (help in difficult situations with the Thermomix brand). Brand loyalty is manifested through not using other, substitute kitchen appliances, but only Thermomix. The Thermomix brand reaches the level of sacred and is treated by its owners as such. The collective desire to preserve the sacrum results in conscious co-creation of a zone around one particular brand. Fast developing community engages in activities aimed to recreate the transcendent experience through developing and maintaining shared fun, which allows them to temporarily forget about their normal lives.

The key to understand the complete submission of brand community members to their beloved brand may be primarily lying in the conversion experience. In addition, marketers may try to create a situation wherein conversion may occur, but they cannot impose anything on consumers. For members of a brand community, brands take on leadership qualities, not through coercion, but because a brand becomes sacred to a consumer from the moment of the conversion experience. In addition, marketers must take into account the online elements that contribute to the creation of brand community, such as Internet forums and websites which significantly increase reification. Concurrently, these websites must be respected, because it is there that some consumers express independence. Companies can successfully moderate the forums and websites in a way that allows users the freedom to participate in group practices that reflect their own preferences. The right to the community freedom should, however, be observed. In the absence of freedom to innovate and develop their own rituals, and areas of discussion, the community will not thrive, and thus it won't be important for the organization.

Although the qualitative research method is a limitation of this article, and therefore the research lacks representativeness, it seems to be a good starting point for organizing further research within a community. The next stage could examine whether through shared trust a relationship between a corporation and a brand community can be established, including the consumers ready to undertake collective and independent projects, which will allow them to maintain a sense of transcendence that will translate into strengthening the brand identity and popularizing it on the market.

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Konwersja doświadczeń klienta i jej wpływ na społeczność wokół marki - model analityczny *thermomix*

Streszczenie

Społeczności marek od dłuższego czasu skupiają uwagę twórców marek. Głównym powodem jest fakt, iż mogą one być źródłem ważnych informacji o marce zarówno dla firm, jak i samych klientów. W artykule badane są procesy przyczyniające się do genezy powstania społeczności marek. Celem artykułu jest zweryfikowanie, czy transcendentne doświadczenia klientów z marką oraz konwersja doświadczeń klienta doprowadza do jego przemiany, której skutkiem jest współtworzenie społeczności marki. W wyniku analizy wskazano implikacje marketingowe dla menedżerów związane z tym, jak na etapie formowania społeczności można zarządzać marką.

Słowa kluczowe: wspólnota wokół marki, doświadczenie klienta, konwersja doświadczeń, relacje klient-klient, identyfikacja z marką, transcendencja.

Kody JEL: M31

Конверсия опыта клиента и ее влияние на сообщество вокруг марки – аналитическая модель *thermomix*

Резюме

Сообщества марок (брендов) уже длительное время привлекают внимание созидателей бренда. Основная причина – факт, что они могут быть источником важной информации о марке как для фирм, так и для самих клиентов. В статье изучаются процессы, способствующие генезису возникновения сообществ марок. Цель статьи – проверить, приводят ли трансцендентный опыт клиентов с маркой и конверсия опыта к его преобразованию, результатом которого является участие в создании сообщества марки. В результате анализа

указали маркетинговые импликации для менеджеров, связанные с тем, как на этапе формирования сообщества можно управлять маркой.

Ключевые слова: сообщество вокруг марки, опыт клиента, конверсия опыта, отношения между клиентами, идентификация с маркой, трансценденция.

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