Impact of Social Media Expressions on Engagement and Trust of Customers

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Social Media has assumed a significant value oriented proposition among the organizations, which were earlier reliant on traditional media for promotion, awareness, customer engagement, creating trust etc. Consequent to generally "one way" propagation of traditional media deemed as rather ineffective way of engaging customers and creating trust, organizations are now paying strong emphasis in integrating social media strategy with overall promotion strategy or using social media strategy as the only promotion strategy for reaching out to the prospective as well as existing customers. Social Media is offering numerous opportunities to customers for engaging with and creating trust for product / service / organization as a result. This research has studied the aspects through which organizations are engaging customers on various agendas and has tried to assess their impact on creation of trust among the customers with respect to product / service / organization. This research has also found that there is a significant correlation between customer engagement and customer trust thus providing sufficient motivation for organizations to engage customers seamlessly.

Keywords: *Social Media, Social Media Expressions, Customer Relationship Management, Customer Engagement, Trust*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has provided an additional avenue to the organizations for engaging a niche audience proficient in social media usage. Social media is allowing the organizations to harness the tremendous potential ingrained in engaging customers.

Organizations are benefiting from utilizing social media in engaging customers and consequently building trust as the customers have access to direct channels to express their experiences as well as expectations.

Importantly, organizations are positioned better to understand the expectations of the customers better and in a more effective manner as customers through their engagement are expressing candidly and in unbiased manner.

Another benefit associated with engaging customers on social media platforms is trust that customers tend to impose when their expressions start mattering to the organizations and organizations actually start acting by delivering as per the expectations of the customers.

The researchers have surveyed number of social media platforms where organizations have established their digital presence or identities for interface with the customers. The researchers have found that these digital identities are abuzz with numerous activities taking place.

The customers are freely using these platforms to interact with the organizations expressing their pleasures as well as displeasures, making suggestions for possible improvements, and even recommending product/service/organization on the basis of their trust.

These observations motivated the researchers to conduct a research study to assess the impact of social media expressions on engagement and trust of customers.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

Social media has introduced a new dimension in the buying framework of buyers by bringing about integration of social interactions with favorable or unfavorable decision to buy (Stephen & Toubia, 2010).

Organizations are operating at possible intersections of social networks with buyers to drive the value up and to create sales opportunities for products and services. This proximity with buyers has helped the organizations in maintaining robust relationships with customers for early identification of their needs, subsequent fulfillment and realization of revenue (Plouffe & Donald, 2007; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007).

Social media is discharging the role of an important facilitator in establishing strong relationships with the customers making social media a sound beneficial case for organizations to adopt and implement (Tedeschi, 2006).

Social media serves as a comprehensive communication channel with buyers for realizing three highly sought after objectives namely customer interaction, customer engagement and trust (Behravan & Rahman, 2012).

The buyers worldwide are increasingly using social media for buying decisions as substantiated by a global survey, in which almost 50 percent of the buyers admitted about increased role of social media in the buying process. Interestingly, organizations have yet to have a comprehensive social media focused strategies as only 9 percent of sales people acknowledged having a strategy dedicated to social media integration with sales strategies (Featherstonebaugh, 2010).

Senior managers have failed to attach the due importance to integration of social media with sales strategies as they visualize social media as just another avenue to market their respective products/services (Kryder, 2011).

A number of organizations, still to realize the potential of social media, are yet to integrate social media with sales functions. This phenomenon can be due to lack of knowledge of top management as well as absence of proven models to enhance the desire (Gupta, Armstrong, & Clayton, 2010).

Organizations should integrate their sales channels with social media for utilizing a cost effective medium to strengthen the brand, engage seamlessly with wider audience including customers, employees, peers etc and seek immediate feedback regarding their expectations from offered products/services. This instant or immediate feedback can prove to be crucial resource in the wake of suggested improvement in products/services (Dutta, 2010).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ENGAGEMENT

Customer engagement is largely influenced by interactive customer experiences which result due service relationships or experiences. It is imperative to realize that positive feedback would strengthen and negative feedback would weaken buyer–seller relationships (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011).

This calls for a comprehensive customer engagement framework influencing buying behavior positively, ensuring strong loyalty and consequently increasing the levels of engagement as well as trust (Bowden, 2009).

As social media offers numerous opportunities of comprehensive interaction, tools handling these interactions supporting broad ideas about products and services can be deployed to interact effectively with a larger audience (Kryder, 2011).

Social media provides opportunities to salespeople to interact and engage with customers while deriving values for both organizations as well as for customers resulting in a mutually beneficial relationship (Jones, Busch, & Dacin 2003).

Organizations can look forward to increased customer engagement by allowing customers to seek, give, and pass opinions about products and services on social media. This can not only serve as comprehensive knowledge base for existing and prospective buyers but can also help in increasing buyer involvement and trust (Chu & Yoojung, 2011).

A social media plan focused on customers can provide an effective connect with the buyers. Due care should be taken to provide truthful information to the buyers without misleading them. Also, the expressions by the buyers should be paid due emphasis to. It is important to understand the value of expressions by the buyers on social media as they may prove to be important resources for driving value to the customers as per their expectations (Zeisser, 2010).

Though social media gives numerous opportunities to engage customers, however due caution has to be exercised in identifying the types of communications to engage the customers and to ultimately form long lasting relationships with them (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND TRUST

The prospective customers tend to research on social media about product/service/organization they are interested in and usually take decisions after screening the comments, feedbacks and experiences of others. Also, in order to gauge the level of trust

that a product/service/organization enjoys or the reputation it has, they tend to engage with other buyers on social media (Golbeck & Hendler, 2004).

There are ongoing conversations related to a product/service/organization on social media among existing and prospective customers, which require intricate monitoring. As these conversations have the potential of breaking or making trust, due efforts should be made to address them comprehensively through quick feedback and ready services (Bertrand, 2013).

Some customers also access the social media to gather non-purchase information. A strategic social media can accumulate all such data, queries, contacts etc to help organizations in understanding expectations from and perceptions of organizations (Keller, 2011).

If the expressions on social media are handled with professionalism and patience while exercising due caution against hurting the sentiments or expectations of the customers, they tend to increase the level of trust (Ahearne, Hughes, & Schillewaert, 2007).

As the increased level of trust reflects in recommending or advocating behaviors of customers, it results in new or repeat sales. On the contrary, negative level of trust due to failure to respond or inaction on the part of the organization can damage the prospects (Mundinger & Jean-Yves, 2005).

Successful relationships between buyer and seller duly supported with greater levels of trust result in potential benefits to the organizations (Moorman, Zaltman, & Deshpandé 1992; Morgan & Hunt 1994). Such trust building activities employed by sales people result in long lasting and recurring benefits to the organizations (Othman, Johnston, & Merunka, 2009).

Sales technology has the potential to help salespeople in developing customer trust by

allowing them to demonstrate trust driving behaviors (Othman, Johnston, & Merunka, 2009).

Any trust building activity on social media shouldn't just be a superficial activity; rather it should aim at comprehensive resolution to earn the trust of the customers (Ingram et al. 2007).

The trust of customers is not dependent on only fulfilling expectations of the customers with respect to product or service. Rather, it should be duly reflected in commitment of the top management and realized throughout the organization in whichever forms possible (Beinhocker, Davis, & Mendonca, 2010).

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

Based on the review of literature in social media, the research was undertaken to assess the impact of social media expressions on engagement and trust of existing and prospective customers.

More specifically, the present research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the impact of social media expressions on engagement of existing and prospective customers.

2. To assess the impact of social media expressions on trust of existing and prospective customers.

The following hypotheses were framed in the light of the above mentioned objectives:

H_1: Expressions on social media significantly influence the engagement of existing and prospective customers.

H_{10}: Expressions on social media do not significantly influence the engagement of existing and prospective customers.

H_2: Expressions on social media significantly influence the trust of existing and prospective customers.

H_{20}: Expressions on social media do not significantly influence the trust of existing and prospective customers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research uses a structured questionnaire to assess the impact of social media expressions on engagement and trust of existing and prospective customers. The respondents were first explained the concept of social media expressions through a small introductory note and were then asked to rate the impact of social media expressions on their individual engagement and trust regarding product / service / organization. The respondents were also requested to not to answer the survey, if they didn't use social media for the above objectives.

A majority of respondents were in the age group of 18 to 25. Mainly, National Capital Region (NCR) of India was targeted for data collection purposes.

Primary data was collected through purposive sampling method as only the respondents who were equipped with access to Internet and were using social media for engaging with and building trust regarding product/service/organization were asked to give responses.

Out of 378 questionnaires issued, 274 filled in responses were received and 261 duly filled in responses were included in data analysis.

However, 31 responses were collected through eSurv.org, out of which 7 responses were from NCR and remaining 24 responses were from rest of India.

In totality, 292 responses were analyzed through Reliability Test, Chi Square Test and Regression Analysis.

Structured questionnaire used five-point Likert scale ranging from Very High (5) to Very Low (1) to obtain the responses from respondents.

Reliability of the data was checked through Cronbach Alpha Score and Spearman-Brown Prophecy Score. After testing the reliability, significance of data was checked through Chi Square Test and finally Regression Analysis was performed

to check the dependence of trust on engagement of customers with product/service/organization through social media.

ANALYSIS

Suitable variation is indicated in the demographic profile of 292 respondents, with most of the respondents being male (61.7%).

Out of 292 respondents, 32.7% respondents were married. Among the respondents, 41.77% respondents were with annual income of Rs 2-5 Lacs, 34.76% respondents were with annual income of Rs 5-10 Lacs and 23.47% respondents were with annual income of Rs 10-15 Lacs. Out of 292 respondents, 8.21% respondents represented rest of India.

Both items were rated on five point Likert scale (1-5) with responses ranging from "Very High" to "Very Low" by the respondents. Demographic question (fixed alternative) pertaining to the respondent's age, location, occupation, etc. were asked in the first section. Besides the demographic questions, 2 items (impact factors) were asked in the second section.

Table 1: Reliability Test	
Cronbach's Alpha Score	Spearman-Brown Prophecy Score
0.979	0.987

Reliability of these factors and consistency of the scale were tested through reliability tools Cronbach's Alpha and Spearman-Brown Prophecy. High values (>0.5) for all measures indicate good reliability.

Table 2 (a): Engagement			
Responses	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Very High	94	58.4	35.6
High	74	58.4	15.6
Moderate	56	58.4	-2.4
Low	41	58.4	-17.4
Very Low	27	58.4	-31.4
Total	292		

Table 2 (b): Trust			
Responses	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Very High	101	58.4	42.6
High	82	58.4	23.6
Moderate	44	58.4	-14.4
Low	37	58.4	-21.4
Very Low	28	58.4	-30.4
Total	292		

Table 2(c): Chi Square Test Result		
	Engagement	Trust
Chi-Square	48.03	67.83
df	4	4
Asymp. Sig.	<.0001	<.0001

The value of χ^2 test for engagement is 48.03 at four degrees of freedom. Since, the value of p is less than 0.05 i.e. (<.0001), we can infer that expressions on social media significantly influence engagement of existing and prospective customers.

The value of χ^2 test for trust is 67.83 at four degrees of freedom. Since, the value of p is less than 0.05 i.e. (<.0001), we can infer that expressions on social media significantly influence trust of existing and prospective customers.

We have defined engagement as an independent variable (henceforth known as x) and trust as a dependent variable (henceforth known as y).

We have tried to ascertain whether trust of existing and prospective customers is dependent on their engagement with product/service/organization on social media through regression analysis. We have obtained regression coefficient as .974, which is satisfactory and, therefore, it can be inferred that trust of existing and prospective customers depends on their engagement with product / service / organization on social media.

We have also explored the non linear options to identify the best fit equation. The regression coefficient in non linear option was found to be lower than the regression coefficient in linear regression analysis. Therefore, it is safe to predict that linear regression is the best fit to demonstrate relationship between engagement and trust.

Regression equation thus obtained is:

$$y = -9.181 + 1.157\,x$$

CONCLUSION

This research established the significant impact of social media expressions on engagement of existing and prospective customers with product / service / organization and trust generated as a result. The research can safely conclude that social media offers engagement to existing and prospective customers

Table 3 (a): Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.974[a]	.948	.931	8.260

a. Predictors: (Constant), Engagement

Table 3 (b): Coefficients[a]					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t Stat	P-value
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1　(Constant)	-9.181	9.828		-.934	.419
Value Perceptions	1.157	.156	.974	7.420	.005

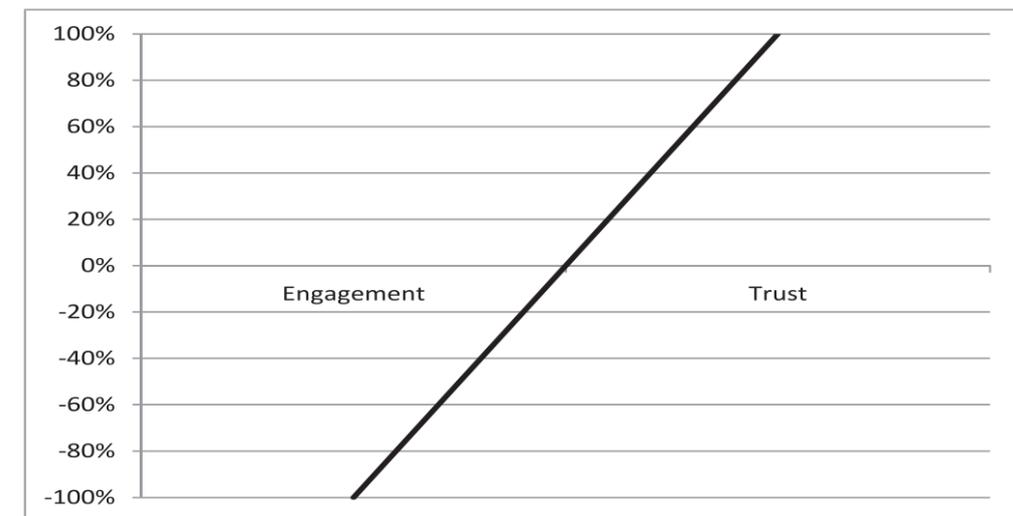a. Dependent Variable: Trust

Figure 3: Plot of TE values for the Period 1986-87 to 2013-14

Graph of the equation (y = -9.181 + 1.157 x) plotted also indicates that trust is positively related to engagement of prospective and existing customers.

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while providing them opportunities for expressions thus resulting in greater trust among them with respect to product/service/organization.

The results of the present research work can help organizations in putting systems in place to carefully plan and monitor the engagement of existing and prospective customers on social media and ensure that their trust stays in positive domain.

LIMITATIONS

This research had limitations such as small sample size, greater localization (NCR), and bias. Therefore, generalizing the results for a larger domain remains questionable for the time being. Future researches with larger and diverse samples may certainly help in deriving concrete conclusions.

Finally, the findings of present research work need to be benchmarked against any future framework pertaining to social media expressions and their respective contributions to increased engagement of existing and prospective customers and subsequently resulting in enhanced trust with respect to product/service/organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers after the data analysis in this research paper can conclude that social media expressions significantly impact the engagement of existing and prospective customers.

Furthermore, trust is significantly dependent on engagement of existing and prospective customers.

The researchers recommend that organizations should use social media to rigorously engage existing and prospective customers to generate trust among them.

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