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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how properly designed web sites support e-branding as well as convey product information to potential customers as a substitute for buyers' own information gathering activities. Design guidelines to support e-branding are provided. Afterwards, survey results from online consumers are reported followed by future research issues.

INTRODUCTION

Shopping online offers consumers a relatively easy and inexpensive method of searching for detailed information on options, pricing and availability of specific products or services. However, the proliferation of large and small retailers online, some unscrupulous, makes it challenging for consumers to gather product information and gauge the quality and trustworthiness of that information. Sellers must not only distinguish themselves from their competitors with respect to their products or services, but also based on the design of their web site. A significant number of consumers bypass these problems by relying on recognized brands [8]. Even though the cost of searching online is quite low, marketing through branding, and particularly e-branding, is wise. Brand is the bridge between a business and its customers. The business builds the brand by executing a marketing strategy and consumers perceive the company and its products and services through the brand.

This paper examines how properly designed web sites support e-branding as well as convey product information to potential customers as a substitute for buyers' own information gathering activities. E-branding is compared with traditional branding. Specifics concerning how to design web sites to support e-branding are provided. Furthermore, the role of e-branding in marketing strategy is briefly discussed. Afterwards, survey results from online consumers are reported followed by future research issues. The paper concludes with a summary of how Web design impacts e-branding.

COMPARING E-BRANDING WITH TRADITIONAL BRANDING

Trade publications and research articles describing the impact of the Web on brands have varied between the euphoric to the deeply pessimistic [1]. Some authors have investigated whether consumers use brands as sources of information when shopping on the Internet [8]. Drawing upon theory from the economics of information, Ward and Lee [8] predict that consumers new to

surfing will be less proficient at searching for product information and will rely more on brands. As consumers search proficiency rises, their brand reliance falls, making ebranding all the more important.

Compared with traditional marketing media, the Internet brings many key benefits for branding. For example, the Web, because of its interactivity and community-building potential, empowers consumers and extends the influence that consumers have over each other [1], which improves and extends brand awareness. Some positive characteristics of the Internet that affect marketing communications include: (1) interactivity, (2) easy to build community, (3) no location and time limitations, (4) multimedia, (5) easy to target specific segments, (6) low cost compared to other media, and (7) easy to build context information. Some of the negative characteristics are: (1) absence of a sales force, (2) no face-to-face contact with customers, (3) absence of broadcasting, (4) text-based messages, and (5) space limitation to put advertising items. The negative characteristics limit the marketing communication capability online. Goldsmith and Lafferty (2002) said that the primary difference between online ads and traditional broadcast ads is that the online commercial does not fill up the visible screen and compel viewers to attend to the ad or to actively tune it out. The absence of a sales force and no face-to-face contact negatively affect trust building with customers.

Though there are many differences between traditional branding and e-branding, both may use the same marketing tools, such as coupon and sales promotions, to increase brand attention, awareness and loyalty. It is important for a business to integrate traditional branding with e-branding to obtain synergistic benefits in the fiercely competitive environment. As an essential marketing medium, how does the Internet change the ways in which a company builds its brands? In the next section, how web design impacts e-branding efforts is explained.

WEB DESIGN FOR E-BRANDING

Web sites are a powerful tool for building brands. A well-designed site facilitates branding, but a poorly designed Web site can destroy a brand. There are three stages of branding: brand awareness, interest and desire, and loyalty [7]. The three stages overlap rather than being distinct. In each stage, user requirements concerning functionality and web interfaces are unique. During brand building, the Web design should be dynamic. Since Web design significantly affects all three stages of e-branding in different ways, the following subsections describe the basic considerations of Web design for each stage.

Designing for Brand Awareness

The first, most important step for e-branding is to make consumers identify brands online by attracting the attention of consumers to the brands. Attraction can be achieved through domain name, brand name and search support [7]. Some of the key Web design concerns include Web site name design, online ad message design, ad models and their properties design, search engine and Web address link design, and organisation of Web pages. Each of these are discussed in detail next.

Web site name design – By embedding brand names in URLs, brands are reinforced in the minds of consumers as they surf. Many companies use this strategy. An easily realized and recalled name must be simple, specific and meaningful. The name of a Web site can be one of the major reasons for its popularity. The easier it is to recall, the more likely users will visit.

Online ad message design – Advertising content online should be designed to meet audiences' needs [4]. The information must be available, valuable, relevant, contextual, up-to-date and reliable [1]. Also, the message must be clear, reasonable and consistent to its promise. Two of the major advantages of the Internet are its interactiveness and community building potential.

Design of online ad models and their properties – During Web design, a company must pay attention to bandwidth concerns and information overload. Bandwidth so significantly influences download time for large graphic or multimedia files that users often leave by closing the Web window. Information overload results from e-mail and too many pop-ups. As a result, users directly delete many e-mails and close pop-ups. One solution is to send ad e-mails to users who opt-in only or who have expressed an interest in the information.

Search engine & Web address link design – Search engines and Web site links direct users to visit new Web sites. A Web site must be carefully designed so that as many key search terms as possible are contained within a Web site. Furthermore, a complex, informative Web site must have a search engine to make it easier for users to locate the desired pages within this site. Link design includes navigation map building, links organisation, and link address ad design. Links can be categorized by information types, products or user segments. Links to business partners help build co-brands. In order to attract new users, it is necessary to advertise on popular, related Web sites.

Organisation of Web pages – In order to attract users, items must be organized together to make the appearance of Web pages clear, friendly, informative, and entertaining. An effective Web site must be autonomous, proactive, adaptive and continuously popular [5].

Designing to Create Brand Interest and Desire

An effective Web design to create brand awareness must positively affect brand interest and desire. Normally, two things, emotionality and rationality, make people interested in or want to visit a Web site. Goldsmith and Lafferty (2002) stated that positive attitude toward a site is a function of entertainment value, informativeness and organisation of the Web site. Among other key factors that significantly influence interested desire are download software and time, and customization.

A very important factor in building brand interest is customization. According to research by Korgaonkar and Wolin (2002), Web users surf the Web regularly at night, from home rather than work, and for personal use rather than business-related use. This information helps companies as they build or maintain their Web sites because Web design can be customized based on this information. Users' demographics significantly influence the attitudes of consumers towards brands, purchasing patterns and beliefs in Web ads [4].

Web Design for Brand Loyalty

Customer brand loyalty is created by building awareness, interest in and desire for the brand. Robinson and Rohan (2002) said that, emotions aside, consumers are also savvy and time-conscious, so a company building its brand should work hard and quickly to develop a relationship and a level of trust with consumers. Understanding the brand audiences, knowing what they value about the brand and what they expect from the product or service is key [6].

The Internet allows companies to communicate with customers directly and simultaneously. An ineffective Web site that causes the failure of brand information communication is usually nonsensical, uninformative, unfocused, forgettable, and disruptive in flow by banners, interstitials, pop-ups and other forms of advertisement, has low click-through rates for banner ads, often lacks useful information, and lacks customer interest [2]. In order to build brand loyalty, a Web site has to make, enable and keep promises online as offline media do [5]. Papadopoulou, Andreou, Kanellis, and Martakos (2001) believe that the contents of the promises should be clear, explicit and carefully specified and communicated, as it will determine customer expectations from the service encounter.

To use the Web successfully, an organization needs to understand that while the technology is transformational, people's need and behavior remain essentially the same [1]. Maslow's hierarchy still applies. Yahoo satisfies the needs of users and in fact, one of the criticisms of the company is that it has users rather than customers [1]. Amazon is a company that by satisfying customer needs has established a large consumer base in a relatively short period of time [1].

THE ROLE OF E-BRANDING IN MARKETING STRATEGY

From Kiani's (1998) five-step model (consumer awareness, attraction, Web site visit and contact, purchase online, and repurchase online) for Web advertising and marketing, it is understood that e-branding begins offline and significantly affects purchasing amounts and rate online. In order to obtain synergistic results in attracting the attention of consumers to a brand or product, it is important that branding in the conventional media must be consistent with that on the Internet. A company can integrate traditional media advertising and online advertising by maintaining consistency in message and image, advertising the Web site in offline media, and surveying offline for online advertisement. Based on the experience of Sol Media Development, a division of Sol Media Group and an experienced Internet development company, any firm can develop a successful, comprehensive, and cost-effective campaign through the combination of conventional and Internet marketing branding. According to this company, the campaign is usually implemented before Web site development and covers the important factors such as company image and trust, technology, Web site image, customer care and online support, privacy and security online, and Web site functionality. E-branding builds customer trust in a company by satisfying customers' expectations, wants, and needs since customers can participate in product design, arrange delivery, and receive post-purchase support through the Web [4].

SURVEY RESULTS

Respondents came from a convenience pilot sample of undergraduate and graduate (part time and full time) students at a large northeast private university. There were 76 males and 25 females from six different countries (82 Americans, 13 Indians, 2 Chinese, 2 from Thailand, 1 from Eritrea, and 1 from Ghana).

Respondents were asked to state how much time they spent on different activities during the week and on the weekend such as watching TV only, listening to radio, reading printed magazines, reading printed newspapers, on the Internet, watching TV and on the Internet at the same time, and listening to radio and on the Internet at the same time. Survey results indicate that most people combine mediums. For example, 80% of those surveyed watch TV and surfed the web. This makes it increasingly difficult for marketers to get consumers to focus on their message.

The next question asked respondents if the contact with web sites affected their overall attitude towards that company. Fifty-two percent felt is improved their view of the brand. Forty-six percent felt it had no effect and 2 percent believed it detracted from it. Respondents were then asked if they could recall any web ads. The top ads remembered were for The Gap, CoolSavings.com, and Coca Cola. Of online advantages and disadvantages, respondents stated that the largest advantage for online advertising was that they could easily get more information by clicking on a web site. The largest disadvantage was that ads are usually cluttered and hard to read.

Some factors that were important that positively affected users' impression of a company or its products based on its web site were: appealing looking, available information, clarity, convenience, coupons, creative ads, professional look, good search function, up-to-date information, entertaining, good layout and navigation, quick loading and processing, ease of use, personalization, and creative ads.

Some factors that negatively affected a users' impression of a company or its products include: amateur looking, annoying, broken links, confusing navigation, information overload, too many ads, disorganized, bad domain name, slow download time, and poor design.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should address a number of issues. One issue is how does experience utilizing the Internet for search purposes impact reliance on ebranding. For example, questions that could be asked of consumers include: (1) Have you ever emailed a trusted authority concerning the purchase of a product or service prior to purchase? (2) Have you ever participated in chat-room discussions in order to acquire information about a particular product or service prior to purchase? (3) Have you read a peer review before purchasing a product or service? (4) Have you ever criticized a product or service in a chat-room? (5) Have you ever criticized a product or service on a bulletin board?

CONCLUSION

To ensure survival and support its brands, a company must adopt tactics to ensure that the brand's website is easy to use and attractive, submit to search engine listings and referrals from online partners, use special events and sponsorship of special interest sites run by third parties, and provide information and tools to support enriched services or support for communities of interest. Both offline and online brand supporting tactics are still evolving but many companies are moderately successful in meeting their current goals and some companies have achieved a high level of success. Companies achieving the highest level of success realize their online brand strategy must focus on lowering transaction costs, improving depth of content, speedier downloading time, encouraging new and repeat customer visits, greater customer retention, higher levels of brand differentiation, and successful launches of new products. Besides a name, logo, and advertising, to make customers loyal, any branding effort needs to develop a relationship with the company providing the product or service, and the customer. Businesses should not assume that brands would have the same appeal on the Internet as they do in traditional channels.

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