CRAFTING COMMUNITY: A CASE STUDY FOR KINGS BLUFF BREWERY SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING

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INSTRUCTORS' NOTES

CASE DESCRIPTION

The primary subject matter of this case concerns social media marketing for small businesses. Secondary issues examined include consumer behavior, social networks, and uncertainty reduction. The case has a difficulty level of three, as it is appropriate for students at the junior level. The case is designed to be taught in three class hours and is expected to require one hour of outside preparation by students. Prior to assigning this case, instructors should review pertinent theories (social network theory, uncertainty reduction theory, uses and gratification theory) and industry resources with students. See below for related content.

TEACHING STRATEGY

Following a discussion of the theories outlined within this Instructor's Manual, instructors should introduce students to industry resources such as Pew Research Center, HubSpot, Social Media Today, and Social Media Examiner, where students can gain insights concerning consumer use of various platforms. Additionally, instructors should share with students the business resources available on social networking site pages such as Facebook for Business (includes Instagram) and Twitter for Business. Finally, students may benefit from a general awareness of the utility of social media content management platforms such as Hootsuite and HubSpot. Using a combination of theory, industry resources, and case information, students will respond to the discussion questions outlined below. Additionally, instructors may wish to assign students to develop a full content strategy, with an option to include sample social media posts.

Learning objectives
1. Students will be able to identify internal and external information (and sources) required to make common decisions small business owners face when developing a social media marketing strategy.
2. Students will be able to explain the role of social media in promotional strategy.
3. Students will be able to formulate research-based, mission-centric social media marketing recommendations for the firm.

Discussion questions

1. Which social networking sites should KBB use? Who should manage them? Provide supporting rationale and research. (SLO 1)

2. Through the lens of social network theory, explain why social media is a critical component of the promotional strategy for KBB, a new business seeking to build community and grow sales. (SLO 2)

3. What uses and gratifications may drive craft beer drinkers to follow and engage with KBB brand pages on various social networking sites? How can KBB use that information to strategically develop social media content aligned with their mission? (SLO 3)

4. Think about the reasons KBB customers, both prospective and existing, may experience uncertainty. How can KBB use social media to create a sense of certainty and, ideally, move consumers toward a long-term relationship? (SLO 3)

THEORY DISCUSSION

Prior to undertaking this case, students will benefit from discussion of social network theory, uncertainty reduction theory, and uses and gratifications theory.

Social Network Theory

An understanding of social network theory can help students better understand how individuals, groups, and organizations interact with one another. Through discussion of this theory, students can prepare to design recommendations that would enable Kings Bluff Brewery to build and leverage social networks.

Social network theory considers the interconnected web of relationships between individuals and groups of individuals. In discussions and literature on social network theory, each individual (or group) is often referred to as an "actor". This theory supports the idea that social networks can determine social capital for the actors, and highlights how actors interact and work with each other. The theory also supports the notion that actors' relationships can be just as important as individual characteristics in determining behavior (Liu, Sidhu, Beacom & Valente, 2017). Freeman (1979) asserted that an increase in the number of social ties to an actor led to an increase in the number of opportunities to give and receive information, and therefore increased the likelihood of that actor becoming an opinion leader based on the actor's "degree" of centrality in the social network. Other important factors Freeman identified that influence network centrality include "betweenness" (actors who bridge a gap between other groups of actors, which affects the reach of information) and "closeness" (the distance between actors in a network, which affects the speed at which that actor can spread information to others).

Rooted in the sociological study of relationships and influence, social network theory has long supported the belief that personal influence grows stronger within more unified, interconnected social networks than less unified, interconnected ones (Friedkin, 1993). If a person feels close to their network, they will be more heavily influenced by individuals in that network and messages received from that network, especially with the knowledge that others in the network received the same message. This theory also supports the idea that the more

connected a consumer is to other consumers via social media, the more information is given and received quickly by that consumer, and it can even be expected that he or she is more likely to make specific purchases than consumers on the outer fringes of the network (Akar & Dalgic, 2018).

When considering the application of this theory to relationships that are supported via social media, modern researchers also explore the concept of weak and strong ties. Strong ties refer to the aforementioned close-knit web of relationships and serve actors by providing direct influence, and (typically) friendship. Weak ties are the friend-of-a-friend relationships that bridge the gap between groups (Granovetter, 1973). Social media has provided new means of reaching weak ties, and thus in many ways has increased their influence on the spread of information in communities and social networks (Liu, Sidhu, Beacom & Valente, 2017). As online consumers "re-tweet" or "share" content from their own weak online social ties, actors in their group of strong ties are increasingly exposed to more heterogeneous information and ideas. The information shared with strong ties may seem redundant and homogenous, while information coming from weak ties may be entirely new (Weng, Karsai, Perra, Menczer & Flammini, 2018). An analogy that students might appreciate on this topic is thinking about their nuclear family as their "strong ties" – are the dinner conversations, political views, and consumer behaviors fairly homogenous as the year goes by? When extended family comes to town for a holiday dinner, "weak ties" are added to the mix. Do family members who live far away introduce new ideas and ways of living? Which group has more influence overall? Which group provides more homogenous or heterogeneous ideas?

In the context of this case study, social network theory can help students understand how organizations can leverage a deeper understanding of social networks to create an effective strategy to communicate information about their brand and position their messages to reach larger groups (Chen, Lei & Hsu, 2019). Students should consider that consumers who connect with Kings Bluff Brewery online via social media also are connected to others in a personal social network. Reaching certain actors in a network can influence how broadly and quickly that information will spread to other actors (Freeman, 1979). The brewery would be well advised to connect with individuals online who hold a high degree of centrality in their networks and serve as opinion leaders for others. Since one primary function of social media is to share information, students should consider how this theory can be applied when making decisions about which content consumers (actors) who interact with Kings Bluff Brewery online via social media should be seeing. Students should also consider any consumers or groups of consumers who may not yet have been exposed to this content, and how they can potentially reach that group through the existing group's social network. This information can be leveraged when making decisions about spreading information about events, new products, and other announcements. Students are likely familiar with "influencer" social media posts used by national brands, but may not have considered how this concept can be applied by a local business on a mission to leverage social networks to build community and grow sales.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty Reduction Theory explores the need for people to reduce uncertainty about others by obtaining information about them as they interact. People use this information to predict the other's behavior and actions, which the theory asserts is critical as the relationship develops. In recent decades, this theory has been expanded to include ideas about reducing uncertainty between not only individuals, but also organizations and brands. People turn to the

internet and social media to reduce uncertainty about people, organizations, and brands by gathering information that they perceive to be trustworthy from their online peers (Wan-Ying, Zhang, Song & Omori, 2016).

Developed in the 1970s, Uncertainty Reduction Theory is one of only a few communication theories that specifically considers the initial interaction between individuals, potentially even before verbal communication begins. People feel uncomfortable when they are uncertain about behavior or actions in a new relationship, so they tend to attempt to reduce uncertainty through interpersonal communication, affected by the following axioms: verbal output, nonverbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, and liking (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In modern times, many of these actions tend to occur in an online environment.

People attempt to reduce uncertainty as they initiate a personal relationship through either active strategies such as listening or initiating a conversation or passive strategies like observation (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The same rings true for consumer-brand relationships. Organizations have found that brands that took steps to reduce consumer uncertainty (from either active or passive strategies) enjoyed higher satisfaction and loyalty among their consumers. Lower uncertainty from consumers also indicated a higher degree of perceived usefulness of products (Shin, Lee & Yang, 2017). Information reduces uncertainty by increasing the predictability of a relationship or interaction. Uncertainty is increased by deviation from social norms or previous interactions (Redmond, 2015). The less uncertainty (and more predictability) consumers feel about a brand, the more they are able to enjoy the product.

Through discussion of this theory, students can also learn more about ways brands can intentionally communicate via social media with the goal of reducing uncertainty for consumers. Hudson, Huang, Roth, and Madden (2016) found that uncertainty can be reduced and consumer-brand relationships deepened through repeated social media engagement and interactions that attribute human characteristics to the brand for consumers. One example is positioning a brand in a way that exemplifies human qualities such as dependability or creativity. Social media posts can support these attributes by providing a consistent message and content that aligns with the selected quality. The researchers concluded that brands which use this strategy often find that their consumers will apply social norms to their relationships with the brands and feel more emotionally connected to their brand – in some cases, almost as if the brand is an individual.

Brands can also carefully curate their social media content in other ways to reduce consumer uncertainty. Rich media (video, audio, interactive elements) are more effective for reducing uncertainty than lean media (text or photo only), as rich media is more engaging for the consumer and increases the frequency of visits to a brand's page (Lipowski & Bondos, 2018). While lean media may sometimes be appropriate and effective, brands should strive to post rich media when feasible to communicate with the goal of uncertainty reduction. Researchers have also reported that information gathering can result in a better and more useful consumer experience. Perrault and Silk (2015) found that consumers who gathered more information online about a medical professional (both personal information and information about the practice itself) before their appointment reduced their uncertainty and experienced a more productive consultation due to patients' increased disclosure of medical details. Consumers and brands can enjoy a symbiotic process of using online media to effectively reduce uncertainty.

In the context of this case study, Uncertainty Reduction Theory can help students understand how social media content can be leveraged and curated to increase predictability and solidify opinions regarding brand image as consumers seek to make sense out of the information

they consume. Though students are likely familiar with the functions of social media, they may not realize that consumers seek to reduce uncertainty and therefore increase predictability - even with their favorite brands. Every time the brewery shares photos, stories, videos, etc. via social media they are helping the consumer feel greater certainty about who they are as an organization that seeks to build community. Students should consider that consumers who interact with Kings Bluff Brewery online via social media might be doing so for the first time, and therefore will be forming important initial impressions based on those interactions. Additionally, consumers who interact with Kings Bluff regularly online will expect a degree of consistency in content that increases the predictability and/or confirmation of what the consumer already believed to be true about the brand.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

An understanding of Uses and Gratifications Theory can help marketers better understand the motivations driving consumer use of social media and the value they seek to gain when they use social media, which often includes following and/or engaging with brand pages. Through discussion of this theory, students can begin to develop a research-based perspective on the types of content that will both contribute to organizational fulfillment of social media objectives and increase the likelihood users will attain gratification.

Consumers' basal needs such as the need for belonging and self-esteem are gratified through media use. Uses and gratifications theory outlines four primary needs consumers satisfy using media: surveillance (information seeking), personal identity (reinforcement of values or beliefs), personal relationships (bonds with fictional characters and real people; fodder for interactions that enable us to connect with people in our daily lives), and diversion (a way to pass time, an escape) (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972). This theory has faded in and out of popularity over the past several decades, with a resurgence occurring in the last ten years as researchers examine intentions and communication behaviors with regards to new media. The psychological viewpoint of the theory emphasizes individual use and choice rather than grouping consumers into homogenous segments. Since multiple media platforms are now available to most consumers at their fingertips, people have more options to choose from than ever before as they make decisions about which of those platforms will meet their needs in different situations (Ruggerio, 2000).

In modern times, uses and gratifications theory has been applied as a framework to outline three main types of motivation for the usage of social media. These include utilitarian (perceived usefulness, goal-oriented), social (building connections and relationships), and hedonic (enjoyment) motivations (Salehan, Kim, & Kim, 2017). Other researchers expand the list to include specific motivations regarding self-presentation (Hsu, Chang, Lin, & Lin, 2015). Still other studies show the micro-motivations that urge individuals to join and sustain usage of social media platforms range from keeping in touch with friends (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) to habitual use fueled by ungratified or insatiable social needs (Wang, Tchernev & Solloway, 2012), to meeting new people and professional advancement (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011). Since this theory depends on both individual needs and expectations of how the media will meet those needs, evolving functionality of social media begets new nuances in ways that consumers use social media to provide gratification (Rubin, 2008). Additionally, individuals' levels of gratification can be influenced by the amount of time spent using social media. Chen (2011) found that the more time an individual spends on social media, the more

they are able to gratify their need for an informal sense of camaraderie with other users and foster a sense of belonging.

In Hsu, Chang, Lin and Lin's (2015) study, these motivations are positioned as what enables consumers to use social media, and other factors that influence their perceptions of interactions that occur via social media were explored. Their results showed that entertainment, socialization, and self-presentation impacted human-to-human interaction significantly, while all four types of motivation influenced human-to-community interaction positively. Rubin (2008) adds that other factors that influence individual choice in media consumption include individual inclinations and dispositions, the environment, and interpersonal connections. Other researchers highlighted that the gratifications sought by individuals change over time in response to gratifications obtained (Johnson & Yang, 2009).

Ruggerio (2000) stated that social media "possess at least three attributes of data not commonly associated with traditional media: interactivity, demassification, and asynchroneity" (p. 15). Since interactivity gives users control over their participation in the conversation, demassification gives them control over the medium itself, and asynchroneity gives them control over the timeframe for communication, applications of uses and gratifications theory to social media usage are still evolving in usefulness and application as the platforms continue to evolve in technological capabilities and reach.

In the context of this case study, uses and gratifications theory can help students understand why consumers use social media and which needs they seek to gratify as they use it. Though students are likely familiar with the functions of social media, they may have varied levels of exposure to information that prompts them to consider appealing to consumers' psychological needs through social media marketing and engagement. Students should consider that consumers who interact with Kings Bluff Brewery online via social media could be doing so for a variety of reasons, including:

- Surveillance: What's on tap? What time does trivia begin tonight? Which food truck will serve lunch today?
- Personal identity: Participating in events and themed evenings that align with the consumer's own value system, such as paint your pet night, dropping off donations for tornado relief efforts, attending a celebration of women in brewing, etc.
- Personal relationships: Will my friends be there? What kind of personal relationship do I have with the employees at the brewery? How does my personal patronage of/association with the brewery affect my sense of community?
- Diversion: Checking social media to pass the time or out of habit.

Students should consider each of the psychological needs a consumer could seek to gratify as they make decisions concerning which social media platform(s) and which brand page(s) they frequent.

To access the discussion question guide and epilogue, email damront@apsu.edu or woodsk@apsu.edu.

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