

Relationship marketing and brand involvement of professionals through web-enhanced brand communities: the case of Coloplast

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Abstract

More and more firms are recognizing the advantages of web-enhanced brand communities as a lever for relationship-marketing communication. Brand communities, not only provide companies with an additional communication channel, but also allow the possibility of establishing linkages to devoted users. So far, brand community has only been discussed in relation to B2C marketing. However, the effect of using web-enhanced brand communities in a B2B context may be even greater inasmuch as professional users have a strong and long-standing interest in exchanging product-related information. Based on the Coloplast case study, this contribution outlines a conceptual model for linking web-enhanced brand community activities and relationship building in B2B markets.

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1. Introduction

Stiffer competition, escalating marketing costs and ever shorter technology life cycles have led more and more researchers to suggest that marketing efforts should change from a focus on immediate exchange to the initiation, establishment and maintenance of long-term relationships with customers. As a consequence, relationship marketing has been suggested as the next dominating marketing paradigm (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

One of the central aspects of relationship marketing is communication with customers. Involving consumers in a marketing dialogue is a prerequisite for achieving brand involvement and loyalty, which in turn affects the prospects of establishing positive market relationships. More and more firms are recognizing the advantages of web-enhanced brand communities as a potential lever for relationship-marketing communication. Brand communities, not only provide companies with an additional marketing communi-

cation channel, but also enable the company establish linkages to devoted users of their product. Such users have taken the time and effort to engage themselves in consumption-related activities and share their knowledge with others, thus enhancing general knowledge levels and devotion to particular products and their utilities. So far, because the initiation and development of vital brand communities has required a certain critical mass of enthusiastic users, brand community activities have been few and far between. However, firms have increasingly realized that, via the Internet, they can overcome the time and space constraints that have so far limited their involvement in such activities. There is thus reason to believe that web-enhanced brand communities will grow in importance and unleash a new potential for developing market value for users and producers alike.

So far, there has been little research on web-enhanced brand communities and their utility as a marketing communication tool (Fischer, Bristor & Gainer, 1996; Kozinets, 1999; Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Up to now, the main focus of research has been on consumption and private end-users (e.g., Harley Davidson Clubs or Jeep communities; McAlexander, Schouten & Koeing, 2002),

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whereas brand communities in the context of industrial marketing has mostly been ignored. Existing contributions have looked mainly at how Internet-based communities can support brand building in consumer markets. Traditionally, industrial markets have not been seen as targets for brand marketing efforts (Michell, King & Reast, 2001). However, the potential impact of using web-enhanced brand communities in the industrial markets could be even greater since professional users may have a stronger and more long-standing interest in exchanging product-related information with the company and among themselves. The purpose of this paper is to outline a conceptual model of how web-enhanced brand community activities can influence relationship building in industrial markets. Furthermore, the model will be empirically based using an investigative case study.

2. The brand community concept

The community as a unit of analysis has its origin in anthropological and sociological research, and, today, there are countless definitions of communities. Usually, communities describe phenomena where people gather regularly and share a particular interest (Rothaermel & Sugiyama, 2001). Consumption patterns have led to the creation of a particular form of community, such as the Saturday fruit and vegetable markets found in almost every populated region in the world. Although brand communities share a number of characteristics with consumption-related communities, they also differ from them in being organized and managed by a supplier to further marketing aims (i.e., communication among customers and prospects), as well as being a communication and sometimes a distribution channel for the supplier. Consistent with this, brand communities may be characterized as a group of actors who are fans of a particular brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). In reality, not everyone interacting in a particular brand community needs to be a fan. Customers looking for product information or simply driven by curiosity can also be active members of brand communities. Over time, some of these may eventually become brand admirers, whose interest in (and loyalty to) a specific brand goes beyond searching for information about its functional aspects.

Besides increasing brand loyalty, brand communities mediate communication exchange among customers and provide additional brand involvement and brand value. Because of the important role played by the mediating technology, both the role played by the participants and the activities themselves differ from conventional communities. First, the initiator of a community has a dominating position vis-à-vis other actors. Other members of a brand community may feel fewer obligations to participate. In turn, the development of a virtual community is positively associated with market performance, as demonstrated in a recent study (McKinsey, 2001). For instance, on its website, Lego, a toy manufacturer, involves customers through chat facilities,

virtual games, competitions, etc. Likewise, Microsoft's community website hosts several user groups and involves these professional users in product testing, chat facilities, etc.

2.1. Traditional and web-enhanced communities

Traditionally, communities have often been seen as restrained by location. For instance, Tönnies (1912), a pioneer in community research, saw communities (*Gemeinschafts*) as intimate and private geographical and social enclaves based on the enactment of ideal social order, as opposed to the surrounding society (*Gesellschafts*), where order was based on positive law. According to Tönnies' early observations, communities are characterized by a group of actors interrelated in space and time, which—for better or for worse—were mutually dependent on each other and, in consequence, developed specific interaction patterns guided by socially constructed rules and norms. However, the widespread growth of virtual gatherings on the Internet has attracted interest in the community concept among several researchers. The development of the Internet as an infrastructure for communication and information exchange provides an impetus for overcoming space and time constraints. Some would even argue that the ability to support community building is the core quality of the Internet (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997) and is the forerunner of the network society (Rheingold, 1993). However, others argue that communication on the Internet in general is inferior to face-to-face information exchange especially with regard to trust-building processes (Rask, 2001). Although virtual contacts may eventually lead to face-to-face interaction, in most cases, virtual community activities complement and support rather than substitute other forms of social exchange.

This article concurs with the latter. It is believed that the Internet provides the infrastructure for enhancing the development of brand community activities: both by expanding the reach of communities (reducing barriers for interaction), by increasing communication effectiveness and by providing additional possibilities for interaction among community members.

Although mediated dialogue on the Internet is unlikely to supplant personal encounters among community users, it provides an important catalyst for community-building efforts. By reducing the efforts needed to find and join a community, by supporting nonsynchronized dialogue over time and space among community members and making it possible for discussions groups to form and disband easily and by (partly) freeing the community formation process from geographical restraints and making it possible both to create and join new communities and leave existing ones at will, the Internet is likely to boost the capability and utility of brand communities. Thus, web-enhanced brand communities seem to be a promising business practice for involving buyers and users in the marketing communication discourse, both as a means of responding to customer

experience and supplier feedback and by enhancing networking effects such as word of mouth.

2.2. Functions of web-enhanced brand communities in relationship-marketing programmes in B2B markets

Relationship marketing is usually described as the establishment, development and maintenance of successful relational exchanges (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The essence of these activities is to decrease exchange uncertainty and to create customer collaboration and commitment through gradual development and ongoing adjustment of mutual norms and shared routines. By keeping buyers over several transactions, both buyers and sellers can profit from experiences gained through previous transactions. The basic aim is to increase profits by ensuring a larger proportion of specific customers' lifetime spending rather than maximizing on single transactions (Palmer, 1994).

Relationship marketing, especially as regards B2B, involves a range of actors on both the buying and selling sides. Research on business marketing relationships has found that averages of more than 10 persons are directly involved in maintaining business relationships (Hallén & Johanson, 1986). Gummesson (1991) addresses this issue from the selling side by stating that the marketing function of an industrial company expands beyond the marketing department, potentially involving actors from all parts of the company. Likewise, in the industrial marketing literature, research has pointed out that buying activities of a company involve multiple persons, who can be assigned different roles in the buying task.

So far, many community builders have primarily seen web-enhanced brand communities as an additional sales channel. However, increasing numbers of companies are coming to realize the value of establishing and nurturing web-enhanced brand communities for purposes more indirectly related to sales activities since, especially in

B2B markets, although users may not be directly responsible for purchasing products, they can have a vital influence in the buying centre and thus on what the organisation decides to purchase. Communities are instrumental in fostering user loyalty and market share. As in consumer marketing, the advance of the Internet is also likely to enhance brand community activities among professional users, too, e.g., retailers, and may facilitate dialogue across several levels of the "conventional" distribution channels.

As a consequence, web-enhanced brand communities in a B2B context may take on a slightly different role than that of brand communities primarily aimed at B2C situations since they can involve a range of activities in relation to both internal and external actors, as demonstrated in studies of industrial buying behaviour and in research on industrial sales processes (Anderson, Chu & Weitz, 1987; Lacznik, 1979). Moreover, activities contributing directly to the development of products and service components of the relationship may be expected to play a more central role in the web-enhanced brand community as they have been shown to influence B2B exchange activities in general (Andersen, 1999).

Based on these considerations, a conceptual model illustrating the activities of web-enhanced communities in B2B relationships is shown in Fig. 1 and further outlined in the following:

First, brand community activities, both off- and on-line, are seen as a lever for relationship development and involvement (McAlexander et al., 2002). Some authors suggest that a brand community should be perceived as a structured set of social relationships (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Moreover, research suggests that the relationships formed among customers in a brand community load significantly and positively in the loyalty equation (Holt, 1995). Furthermore, relationships via increased buyer loyalty can be linked to market share.

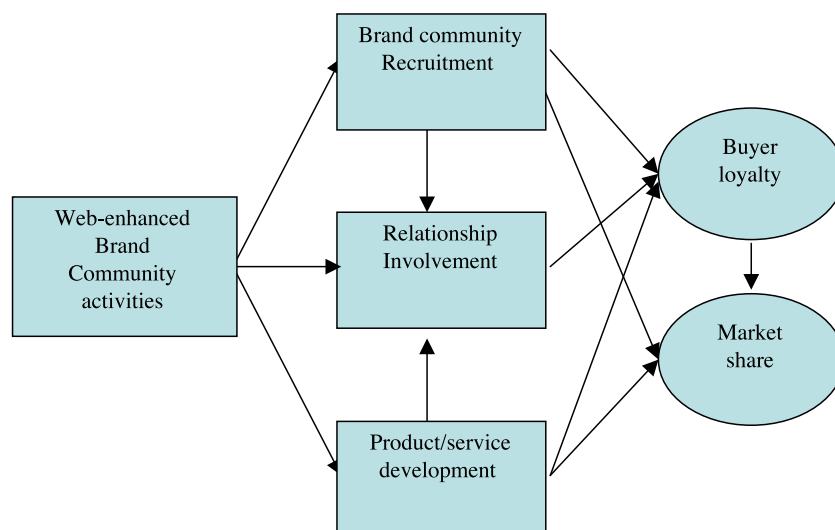


Fig. 1. Web-enhanced brand communities and relationship involvement: a conceptual model.

Second, web-enhanced brand community activities support community recruitment. Web-enhancement serves as a powerful tool for recruiting new community prospects, as has been demonstrated by viral marketing techniques (Beckman & Bell, 2000). Moreover, recruiting new community members in this way can be seen as an initial step in relationship development, as pointed out by Hagel and Armstrong (1997). Much like advertising activities, web recruitment also directly affects buyer loyalty and market shares, at least in the short term, by increasing buyer awareness.

Finally, community web-enhancement activities can leverage the involvement of customers in product and/or service development activities by communicating these possibilities to a wider audience. In turn, customer involvement in product/service activities may support brand involvement since it allows customers to influence product development and discuss possible product modifications with peer brand community members more directly and interactively. Product/service development activities may also directly support customer loyalty by enhancing the product/service development capabilities of the company in question. For instance, the “Super Chief” Santa Fe train, one of the best selling Lego items in 2002, was developed by members of a web-enhanced brand community. Likewise, Red Hat—the company responsible for the development of the Linux operating system—relies on professionals contributing to the ongoing development of their open source software, for which purpose they have developed extensive web-enhanced community facilities.

3. Data collection

The article is based on a qualitative case study, consistent with the methodology described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Yin (1994). However, while the study, due to its context, is qualitative, it is positioned between the deductive and inductive way of carrying out qualitative studies, it being neither a test of an already developed theory nor a development of a new theory. Rather, it is an extension of an existing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) through dialectic interaction between field studies and existing theory. This approach is similar to what in positivist field studies is described as the reconstruction of theory (Burawoy, 1991). This approach differs from traditional theory in the Glaser and Straussian sense by allowing theory to be a part of the researcher’s analytical framework. Unlike analytical induction, on the other hand, it not only tests theory but also develops it. Our intention is thus to modify existing theory and see how it applies to new and varied situations. This approach is appropriate here because the aim is the extension and modification of an existing and well-developed body of theory on relationship marketing.

To further theory building in this field, we have carried out a case study of Coloplast’s relationship marketing

strategy and the way in which the company uses the Internet to further community building among nurses in the health care sector. The case study has been based on the guidelines set out by Yin (1994) and by Miles and Huberman (1994) for single case studies. Data has been collected through interviews with top management and IT and marketing managers at Coloplast and has also involved other personnel at Coloplast responsible for maintaining the community facilities and, in addition, users of the community facilities, including nurses and engineers responsible for product development. A semistructured interview protocol was used as a guideline during the interviews, although the question order and subsequent discussions, etc., was not identical in all cases as respondents were allowed to freely expand on their answers, which the interview then followed up on. In all, 13 h of interviews with 10 persons were carried out and transcribed, amounting to more than 200 pages of field notes. Interview data were collected using an unstructured interview guide, and personal interviews were followed up by telephone interviews and additional data collection, including internal documents, newspaper cuttings, Internet searches, etc.

3.1. Coloplast

Coloplast develops and manufactures a range of disposable plastic and polymer products for the Health Care sector. The company was established in 1957 by Elise Sørensen, a nurse, who was concerned about the postoperational psychological difficulties of her ostomy-related patients. A person who had undergone ostomy-related surgery (rerouting of the intestines) was faced with radically different life conditions, which included cumbersome and often unreliable ostomy-related bags, affecting their possibilities for continuing a normal social life. In 1956, together with a manufacturer of plastic products, she introduced a system of disposable plastic bags with an adhesive for direct application to the body. The product was an immediate success, which the company also turned into an export success. Since then, the company has gradually developed both its product and market range. Today, Coloplast is a Danish-owned multinational with more than 4200 employees and annual sales of approximately 550 million Euro. The company has sales subsidiaries, manufacturing companies and joint ventures in more than 25 countries, and 97% of its sales are generated abroad. Its main focus is in Europe, however, which accounts for more than 76% of total sales. The current financial situation and prospects of the company are good, with double-digit growth rates in both sales and operating results.

Coloplast operates in niche markets, where there are few large competitors. In general, all these markets are expanding, and Coloplast has been able to increase its market share in its three main business areas: ostomy-related products, incontinence products and wound care products. In addition to these areas, Coloplast has three other product lines: breast care products aimed at women who have been operated for

breast cancer and skin treatment products developed for patients who, for example, suffer from irritation of the skin due to prolonged exposure to plastic products. The continuous developments of user-friendly and human skin-friendly adhesives are considered core technologies. Moreover, the company is highly focused on continuous product development. Around 32% of sales are generated from products that are less than 4 years old. In particular, Coloplast is a leading developer of adhesives for attaching plastic products to human skin, including user-friendly packaging, which makes self-application less difficult for patients. However, as the catch-up time for competition is relatively short, there are only real technological differences in a limited number of products.

3.2. Web-enhanced communities in support of relationship marketing in Coloplast

From the outset, Coloplast's business activities have been strongly oriented towards developing and maintaining relationships to nurses as a means of ensuring the loyalty and involvement of those it believes has a key influence on matters relating to postoperation patient care. At Coloplast, it is generally believed that, rather than focusing on product quality, it can best distinguish itself from competitors by signalling its strong commitment to helping nurses provide better patient care. Over the years, Coloplast has thus developed in-depth knowledge of health care in different national health systems. As pointed out by Coloplast as a key insight (2000, p. 1): "Generally it is a nurse who chooses the product or has an influencing role in its selection."

Coloplast products are typically reimbursed through the health care system, and nurses are centrally placed both in the purchasing decisions made by hospitals and in the after-care of patients in their own homes or when they experience difficulties relating to product use. As pointed out by one interviewee at Coloplast: "When the patient recovers right after an operation has taken place, it is the nurse, together with the patient who are to decide what will work best for the patient in the given situation. Since our product only marginally differs from those of our competitors we must be on the top of the nurses' mind and forming relationships are helping us in that respect."

In this case, it is nurses who choose the product from the shelf at the hospital or who have an influencing role in its selection based on their expertise and experience in patient recovery processes. Moreover, since nurses have primary knowledge concerning product performance, they are an important source of market information for Coloplast, which is why the company actively involves nurses as well as users in product development activities.

Coloplast regards its relationships with patients and nurses, together with its ability in adhesive technology, as the company's core assets. As pointed out by Lars Rasmussen, Corporate Director at Coloplast: "In essence

our ability to involve nurses by initiating and developing relationships is our core asset: much more than production technology, we are focused on positioning ourselves centrally or developing our relations to those nurses professionally involved in ostomy or spinal care."

Web-enhanced community-building activities are a natural continuation of Coloplast's strong focus on developing close relationships with nurses. The launching of a web-enhanced community provides a platform for further pursuing these aims and serves several purposes in supporting marketing relationship building: First, it accumulates information related to incontinence and stoma issues and, secondly but more importantly, it provides a forum where nurses can meet, chat, raise questions, and exchange ideas and knowledge. It can also function as a meeting place where users can exchange ideas (and where nurses can comment or otherwise keep themselves informed). Finally, it supports the development of product and brand awareness through the hosting of web events such as conferences on specific themes or the marketing of other events hosted by the community (and supported by Coloplast). Mikael P. Jespersen suggests: "We see communities as a great opportunity for further strengthening our relationship-building efforts toward nurses. We want our community to provide a platform for knowledge sharing among nurses, where less experienced nurses can learn from more experienced and all nurses can find information updates."

Developing web-based communities marks the second generation of web-based efforts in Coloplast. Since 1996, the company has gradually developed its web presence, including initiating and standardizing country-based web pages. In 2000, however, it was decided to commit more resources to E-business, and the notion of launching virtual communities to enable community activities among nurses was developed as a central part of the company's new E-business strategy. Internally, Coloplast developed an E-business function, which supports Internet activities as well as launches new initiatives.

At the moment, Coloplast hosts three country-based/country-affiliated web community sites focusing on enhancing primarily professional communities. We will focus on two of these community types: one is an open community, which provides a forum where patients as well as nurses and relatives can exchange ideas and information on incontinence and discuss more general and practical problems associated with spinal cord injuries (SpinalNet), and one is a web-enhanced community, which is exclusively for nursing personnel (StomaNet). In addition to these sites, Coloplast hosts a site specifically for women with external breast implants www.TheBreastCareSite.com.

3.3. StomaNet

StomaNet is a web-enhanced community exclusively for stoma care nurses (SCNs) (access requires a password). The

majority of ostomy-related activities relate to people whose intestinal outlet has been surgically rerouted through the abdominal wall—usually because they have been operated for stomach cancer or cancer in the intestines. At present, there are StomaNet communities in the Netherlands and Sweden linked to professional organisations, but several new launches are planned in other countries where Coloplast operates. Stoma care nurses (SCNs) are a community of specialists, often with special training in addition to their training as nurses. Usually, they are organized in specialised associations which focus exclusively on stoma issues and the care of cancer patients, and these exclusive groupings are found both at international and national levels, as well as within hospitals. This also provides specific grounds for the web enhancement of present community activities: “SCNs have clearly signalled that they want a place of their own. . . the important thing to understand here is the hospital hierarchy, where it strengthens their professional identity to have a set of virtual facilities which exclusively is for them and is managed by their own organisation” (Michael S. Amundsen, StomaNet Project Manager).

In establishing web-enhanced community activities, Coloplast has chosen to collaborate with these associations of stoma care nurses. To gain access to members of these associations and ensure their involvement, it has been important to emphasise a “quid pro quo” attitude and, as part of this, downplay Coloplast’s presence on the site. For instance, the national associations of SCNs in Holland and in Sweden are represented on the editorial board of the StomaNet website.

At present, the StomaNet community website hosts activities related to information retrieval, facilities for self-learning and communication. The virtual communities also include chat and on-line conference facilities, event calendars and bulletin boards, discussion fora, case libraries, literature overviews and full-text archives, training modules, expert advisory boards and announcements of courses and other educational activities. One example of the activities provided by StomaNet is the so-called themes, where editorial boards consisting of SCNs and web managers invite experts on specific issues. For instance, a theme on dietary prescriptions for ostomy-related patients over a 3-month period, where the focus is on tips about diet issues was presented. During this period, a virtual conference is hosted, where invited experts as well as community members direct questions, discuss and otherwise share their experiences. Each theme ends with a printed update, which is sent to all members of the national association of stoma care nurses together with their newsletter.

3.4. *SpinalNet*

As opposed to StomaNet, SpinalNet is an open web-enhanced community set up mainly for meeting the information exchange needs of nurses, patients and relatives

with an interest in the care of patients who have suffered a spinal injury. So far, SpinalNet only operates in the UK, but new launches are planned in a range of countries. SpinalNet shares a number of the facilities found in StomaNet but differs in terms of activities hosted as well as groups served. First, unlike the case of StomaNet, medical responsibility for handling spinal cord injuries and the corresponding problems of incontinence is not restricted to one particular group of medical personnel but involves several persons. Moreover, home care, the involvement of relatives, etc., makes it relevant to address a much broader group of users. Therefore, compared with StomaNet, the information provided on SpinalNet is much more general, addressing professionals as well as relatives and persons suffering from a spinal cord injury. The users are hospital nurses but also home care nurses, persons with spinal cord injuries and their relatives. SpinalNet is open to all who want to join, and everyone can participate in the activities here. Thus, in comparison with StomaNet, Coloplast has actively contacted a broad range of individual volunteers and involved these in hosting and developing web community activities. Like StomaNet, SpinalNet also hosts themes and various forms for events. However, these themes often address more general “quality-of-life issues” than the purely medical and treatment-related issues debated on the StomaNet site.

4. Case analysis

The following discusses the presented conceptual model linking web-enhanced communities to customer relationship-building efforts, using SpinalNet and StomaNet as a case example.

4.1. *Community recruitment*

Brand community recruitment is an important aspect of brand involvement. The attraction and recruitment of new virtual community members is a critical point for any virtual community start-up. This may be achieved either through attracting new members or converting member of existing communities to participate in community activities.

Coloplast develops the web-enhancing community together with a national partner, provides the technology infrastructure for both types, including a variety of modules and a business plan for recruiting users, and hosts and maintains ongoing information and communication activities on the web in support of community activities. Hence, rather than seeking to develop a community from scratch, Coloplast develops and enhances its activities in ongoing communities. As a consequence, the sites are not directly linked to commercial activities since professional associations would find this problematic and/or unethical. Rather, Coloplast influences site activities through the company’s role as administrator and incubator of new activities, events and themes. These activities are necessary to keep users

interested in the web-enhanced communities. As pointed out by Mikael Jespersen, E-business manager for websites at Coloplast: “Without our efforts it is our experience that virtual activities in these communities comes to an end. We therefore decided that we would not withdraw from a community before it would be running by itself. So far no communities are auto didactic and I am uncertain whether we will ever be able to withdraw our resources.” Moreover, taking on the role of administrator gives Coloplast the opportunity to select themes for and create awareness of activities and events hosted by Coloplast in the country concerned. So far, the recruitment of members has fulfilled the company’s expectations.

With regard to recruitment, it puts the company in contact with prospective new community members, who may turn into loyal customers. The first aspect concerns viral marketing. Viral marketing is an Internet-based communication strategy that utilises the contagious nature of information scattering on the Internet. Possibly the most well-known case in point is hotmail.com, a free Internet mail service provided by Microsoft, which, at the end of each submitted mail, provides an URL for recipients to set up their own hotmail account. Simply put, as stakeholders provide incentives, existing customers may knowingly or unknowingly include the message in all their Internet-related contacts with prospective community members. Furthermore, by motivating existing customers to convince and possibly recruit new buyers, sellers are able to utilise the personal contacts of customers and their encounters with prospective buyers throughout their everyday activities. “We were able to establish a triple win argument in order to convince new users. First, we were able to convince and involve the existing associations of spinal cord injured and their relatives in building comprehensive web facilities, which would also involve professionals. Secondly, health care professionals saw the possibility of reducing the time used for providing factual information to spinal cord injured. Finally, the site could be used by professionals and by Coloplast for exchanging ideas, resource for learning and training of new health care professionals, etc.” (Nils Bundgaard, Project manager, SpinalNet).

Professionals may unwittingly include the virus in their daily operations, for instance, as a link at the bottom of an e-mail, a URL printed on products or through other items carried by a community member.

In business-to-business marketing, personal accreditation and access to sociocognitive groupings such as professions are critical (Andersen, 2001; Andersen & Sørensen, 1999). Case studies and other forms of anecdotal evidence suggest that community building is an important aspect of relationship marketing and that the development of community-oriented brand sites may further the development of these communities. So far, however, there has been little research on the role of virtual communities in supporting relationship development and brand involvement. Research on the utility

of brand communities toward professional sales persons in particular is almost nonexistent.

Recruitment to the sites has differed somewhat, reflecting the status of the communities from the outset. In the case of StomaNet, Coloplast was able to draw strongly on existing community activities and the influential role of the Stoma nurse association. In the case of SpinalNet, Coloplast has especially used professionals, including doctors, nurses, support officers and social workers, as recruiters for their website. Both patients suffering from a spinal cord injury and their relatives face a radical change in the way they organize their lives, which means a lot of uncertainty and a corresponding information need. When contacting such patients and their families, home-care personnel and hospital nurses therefore strongly encourage both parties to join these communities. Patients in particular are severely handicapped in their movements and are forced to stay much more in their homes. Therefore, the possibility for virtually exchanging information and advice with other people in a similar situation becomes of much greater importance. “It is often the case, that spinal cord injured and their relatives feel themselves poorly informed or even misinformed. They really need to be in touch with professionals—meaning both health care persons and other spinal cord injured with some experience. The web is really an important socializing tool for these people” (Project manager Nils Bundgaard, SpinalNet).

Furthermore, those nurses and other professionals involved in the SpinalNet web-enhanced community also encourage other professionals to join. The primary motivation for this is the ability to provide timely information to patients and relatives, thereby reducing the number of redundant questions they are confronted with. Here, they can either search for this information themselves and offer it to the injured persons and their relatives or they can encourage the injured and relatives to join SpinalNet themselves to get the latest and best information, chat with people in a similar situation and read stories on how to cope with particular problems in relation to their injury, etc.

4.2. *Community involvement*

Brand involvement concerns policies of attracting and maintaining customer interest in a specific brand. One particular aspect of brand involvement relates to consumption. Consuming often involves a great deal of experience, which calls for an introduction to “how things are” in a particular world of consumption (Holt, 1995). For instance, to be able to tell what “is going on” in bicycle races such as Tour de France, spectators need some form of introduction to the intersubjective world of written, and not least unwritten, rules of this event. There are similar mechanisms in virtual business communities, e.g., when novice software developers are introduced to the specific technical jargon used by communities developing software for Microsoft products. According to surveys conducted jointly by

Coloplast and the association of Dutch nurses, in the case of StomaNet, learning the technical jargon, particularly among young nurses, has been seen as an important trigger for engaging in web community activities. For instance, a Coloplast survey of SCNs in the Netherlands revealed that nurses, at the beginning of their career in particular, use the discussion domains to develop their skills and see this as an important contribution to their career prospects. Information exchanges with older more experienced nurses in particular are seen as valuable. The importance of the combination of young and mature nurses for web community success came as somewhat of a surprise to the Coloplast E-business Project team: “When we initiated StomaNet, we were confident that this was strictly to be used by younger nurses, with some experience in using the web. However, we actually experienced that both young and more mature nurses use the web community. However, the mature nurses use it even more for debating than the younger nurses, who prefer listening in on interesting discussion threads” (Michael S. Amundsen, Project Manager, StomaNet).

Web-enhancing brand communities may support these efforts by engaging customers in a dialogue-oriented communication strategy. As pointed out by Evans and Wurster (2000), one of the main virtues of the Internet is that it makes it economically feasible for producers to increase the reach and richness of dialogue at the same time. Suppliers who in the past have had to rely solely on the communication willingness and ability of their distribution channel can now establish a direct computer-mediated dialogue with their customers, remember their preferences and adjust communication strategies accordingly. This improves the possibility of nurturing and possibly also enhancing brand involvement and brand loyalty as a means of strengthening relationship-building efforts. Brand involvement has been defined as “an unobservable state reflecting the amount of interest, arousal or emotional attachment evoked by a product in a particular individual” (cf. Martin, 1998). However, communities do not merely support brand involvement through increased possibilities for producer–customer dialogue. Perhaps even more important, brand involvement may provide support from lateral ties established among brand community members. As pointed out in a study of brand involvement, social interaction with fellow users constitutes an important value-generating effect (Morris & Martin, 2000). In particular, users who, for some reason or other, find themselves isolated in a specific usage context may find participation in brand communities useful to overcome the “odd-man-out effect.” For instance, in a business marketing context, specialists who have difficulty in finding someone within their organisation to exchange ideas may find it easier to explore communities to establish peer relationships with persons in a similar professional situation.

Communication is the quintessence of coordinating behaviour in any social setting, and marketing is no exception (Hutt, Walker, & Frankwick, 1995). Marketing

communication is a necessity for establishing a persuasive rhetoric, and the extent and quality of communication thus has a direct effect on the ability to create customer loyalty and customer relationships.

In the traditional marketing approach, marketing communication has been identified as a means of persuasion, which mainly involves one-way communication (Water-schoot & Van den Bulte, 1992). In marketing relationships, however, which are being developed by an increasing number of firms, especially in the B2B field, communication plays a central role in understanding exchange partners’ intentions and capabilities, forming the groundwork for relationship development. Communication is a prerequisite for trust building among exchange partners (Anderson & Narus, 1990). The quality and sharing of information influence the relationship-formation process and possible success (Mohr & Spekman, 1994) and is a central part of the relationship atmosphere (Hallén & Sandström, 1991).

In marketing relationships, communication also serves other means than persuasion, however, including informing, listening and answering roles, which calls for interaction (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Furthermore, the communication task is no longer confined to marketing personnel. Essentially, all supplier personnel involved with customer personnel serve as part-time marketers, fulfilling a role in the overall marketing communication scheme (Gummesson, 1991). To meet individual demands, expectation building involves interaction and dialogue. Moreover, in shaping expectations, only models of overtly rational decision-makers believe in communication as the exchange of purely factual information. In incomplete information settings, the development of expectations also involves affective elements, such as the judgement of character and anthropomorphism of brand personalities.

Brand communities have been suggested as an important lever for brand involvement through the initialisation of customer interaction as well as furthering the development of customer–supplier communication. A brand community has been said to initiate the formation of a fabric of relationships between (1) the customer and the brand, (2) the customer and the firm, (3) the customer and the product in use and (4) the customer and fellow customers (McAlexander et al., 2002; Fig. 2).

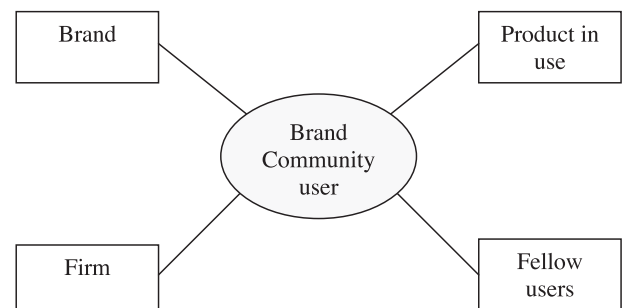


Fig. 2. Principal communication relationships in brand communities.

The development of customer–brand relationships is an important aspect of the marketing exchange process (Fournier, 1998). A brand may be defined as the extended product values associated with a product beyond its functional use. By relationships between the customer and the brand is meant the processes of personal and social identification that customers associate with the core values signalled by the brand, as well as the associated reduction of uncertainty and trust benefits of sticking to a particular brand. Moreover, both buyers and customers may engage in a dialogue regarding the particular product in use, potential uses, possible improvements of the existing product, as well as other desires and needs related to future products. Furthermore, as pointed out in the model, end-users, professional users and buyers may relate to activities of the company in question beyond immediate brand concerns. In the case of the web communities fostered by Coloplast, the relation to particular product brands is of relatively little importance, and downplaying these activities in both the SpinalNet and StomaNet is an integral part of Coloplast's web community strategy. In Coloplast's view, nurses and other persons in the health care sector are extremely sensitive towards suppliers' possible attempts to market their products through the "back door," using seemingly altruistic activities as a lever. Hosting conferences and similar activities for medical personnel is an often-used marketing practice in the health care sector and is generally considered unethical in a profession which values high ethical standards. Therefore, too much focus on product and branding aspects is believed to be counter-productive to achieving and maintaining high activity levels on the site. As Nils Bundgaard, Project Manager at SpinalNet, puts it: "When establishing the boards, we work very hard on coming across with the message, that we are not doing this in order to promote short term sales. Too much product pushing would immediately raise suspicions and we would lose whatever backup and goodwill we had."

Customer–firm relations involve customers' general beliefs about and interest in a brand's producer, and which may be an important part of their consumption experiences, desires and fantasies regarding the product. This may include a historical interest in the firm and its performance (for instance, wine connoisseurs who keenly express their knowledge concerning the performance of a specific producer) or in key persons responsible for shaping the firm's strategies and product policy (as when consumers of Jeep off-roaders exchange information about notable car designers who have been involved in shaping a specific company's overall car design; McAlexander et al., 2002), etc. Critical events relating to the general image and possible future of the firm may certainly play an important role in these stakeholders' valuation of the product and the brand. In the case of Coloplast, the relation to the company itself is of particular importance to brand involvement. As regards StomaNet, building strong links with the nurses' association is an important aspect. Coloplast uses these

associations to initiate, build and maintain their legitimacy, and, by engaging in a dialogue with these associations about these sites, they manage to generate strong commitment among nurses.

A third aspect concerns the link to products in use. Both SpinalNet and StomaNet provide discussion fora for product use, benefits and drawbacks. These discussions are important to the Coloplast key person or customer relation for several reasons. First, they provide Coloplast with immense market listening capabilities since they are able to follow and learn from discussions on both their own products and their competitors' conducted by those using these products on a daily basis. Second, these debates help Coloplast to pinpoint particular market actors with an interesting input and with whom they may want to engage in a product development dialogue. Third, since Coloplast is also on the board of the sites, they may influence the board to discuss a theme with immediate relevance for new Coloplast products. Community users may well understand this as an attempt to market products. However, since the communicative rhetoric is focused on product functionalities rather than brand values and since it is noted and accepted that Coloplast is an important sponsor of web community activities, discussing these types of issue is more acceptable from a community user point of view.

Finally, since communication in web-enhanced brand communities usually enables interaction among fellow users, it is important as regards forming expectations and valuations. This is perhaps the most important incentive for community users in the Coloplast case. In the case of StomaNet, obtaining information and exchanging knowledge are important drivers of web participation. The StomaNet management has analyzed the use of the community and segmented community users based on two dimensions of their web behaviour—frequency of linking to the community and interactivity in the community—and linked this to a survey of overall satisfaction with the StomaNet website. Based on these dimensions, a set of four user profiles has been developed: browsers/consumer, enthusiasts, light browsers and contributors (see Fig. 3).

Browsers/consumers are characterized as information seekers who visit the community frequently but do not involve themselves in the site, e.g., posting messages on the discussion threads, etc. They are typically younger nurses at the beginning of their career with access to the Internet at work. Enthusiasts are both highly committed and very loyal to the community. They participate actively in debates and other forms of involvement and are typically middle-aged nurses with some work experience who have access to the Internet at work.

Contributors are heavily but infrequently engaged in community activities. They are a mixed age group with limited or no access to the Internet at work. They may involve themselves experimentally or periodically but drop the Internet if their expectations are not met or other tasks demands their attention. Finally, light browsers consist

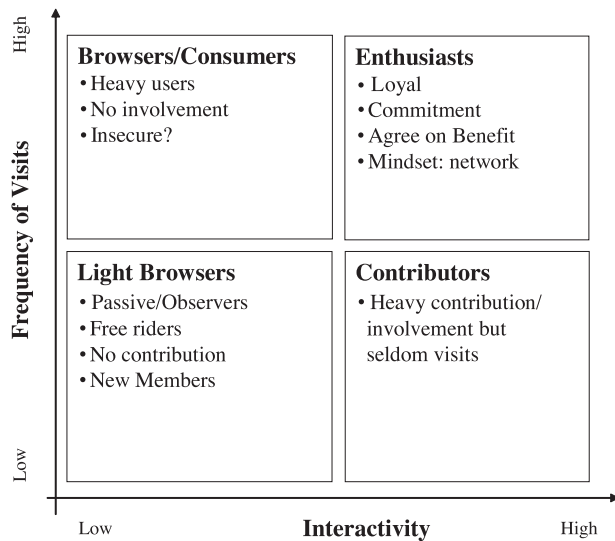


Fig. 3. User profiles on StomaNet (based on internal material from Coloplast).

typically of younger nurses and new users, who may be trying out the possibilities of the site before deciding whether and how to become more involved, either as browsers/consumers or as enthusiasts. Less likely, but also possible, this group of nurses may step up their involvement to become enthusiasts.

Similarly, in SpinalNet, the involvement of injured persons is illustrated using a phase–process model, where each phase represents a specific period of the injured person's process of adapting to changed life conditions. These phases are reflected in the interaction patterns, both in relation to the content searched and who is searching (relatives or the injured person).

Finally, we can expect some reinforcing interaction effects between the recruitment and involvement processes. First, viral marketing aided by virtual brand communities may help attract and convince buyers to become involved in the brand. Furthermore, brand communities can aid the efforts of loyal brand users, who “spread the word.” The existence of a brand community representing the product makes it easier to propagate the message (e.g., via e-mail) and for a prospective user to meet other devoted users.

4.3. User participation in product innovation/knowledge development

It has often been said that we are moving away from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy. This can be seen from the fact that, for an increasing number of firms, continuous innovation and learning are becoming dominant strategic priorities. Innovation concerns the process of combining and/or recombining existing knowledge distributed among market actors for the purpose of increasing economic value (Hayek, 1945; Kirzner, 1973). However, processes of developing new market combinations to fuel innovation activities are predominantly socially driven.

More and more producers are looking for ways to cooperate with customers and other stakeholders in innovation-related activities. Customers represent a unique knowledge source regarding product usage patterns, possible product applications, drawbacks and improvement possibilities. For the manufacturer, they therefore represent an important source of novel product ideas or general knowledge and awareness of how products are used. Other users may also benefit from sharing knowledge on product use. “One of the advantages of having a brand community site which not only presents our products is the comparison issue. All comments on all products will also be offered to us. For instance—comments on users’ experiences with poor product quality—whether it is a competing product or our own is useful information” (Thomas Kongstad, IT manager, Coloplast).

It has been suggested that virtual communities provide a unique platform for enhancing innovation activities by broadening the reach of actors as well as increasing interaction richness among them (Wurster & Evans, 1997). The rapid adoption of Internet-based communication technology adds capabilities for customer input to all stages of the innovation process. Product concepts can be shared more easily, and the Internet allows these to be tested and/or modified by customers. Lego, for example, has been able to identify advanced users via community chat rooms and has later involved them in product development together with its own product developers. This has led to the marketing of a range of customer-developed products, as well as generating a sense of consumer needs among Lego product development personnel. Similarly, customer involvement in product development plays a strong role in Coloplast. In 2001 alone, more than 25 customer groups were active in product development. The project manager responsible for SpinalNet points to the crucial role of the community in tracking and accessing key nurses for new product development activities: “Clearly, by involving ourselves in the development of SpinalNet, we have nurtured our social network and this has made it much easier for the UK subsidiary to form focus groups around product development activities. Through SpinalNet there is a much stronger contact to users and professionals.” (Nils Bundgaard, Project Manager, SpinalNet).

4.4. Linking community enhancement to performance

The measurement of brand community effects on market performance is a critical issue. Since there is no direct way of measuring sales effects of particular elements in market communication activities and Coloplast is already successful in capturing new market shares, the effects of community activities on market performance are still not clear. In the case of ostomy-related and incontinence products, it is difficult to trace the direct effects of from community leverage (i.e., word of mouth) on sales figures due to problems of obtaining reliable data on new

patient discharges. Measures such as “click through” ratios, which register how many nurses use the StomaNet and SpinalNet sites to reach the product sites, are also deemed inadequate at measuring the effectiveness of the communities. As pointed out by Steffen Eichner Hovard, E-business manager at Coloplast: “We are dealing with nurses with a professional life span ranging over 40 years. Most of them know our product already, and measuring the frequency of click troughs is meaningless in a brand communication context where you are not really interested in awareness.” For similar reasons, Coloplast’s management is less focused on the short-term sales effects of launching a new community website. Too much focus on these issues may be regarded as a market push effort which may backfire since nurses are highly sensitive to the commercial aspects of the company’s web community efforts.

Instead, Coloplast has decided to regard the community-building efforts as a natural continuation of their loyalty-building efforts with nurses. Using the European Foundation for Quality Management model for business excellence (EFQM, 2003), Coloplast focuses on the ability to sustain and further their value proposition by measuring customer satisfaction on an ongoing basis and links their web community activities to these measurement activities. The key performance indicators for customer satisfaction include:

- involvement (no. of SCNs with Internet access who have visited the site);
- frequency of visits to the StomaNet site;
- preference for StomaNet as an information source (compared with other on- and off-line information sources on ostomy-related issues); and
- image of Coloplast in relation to StomaNet.

A recent survey of SCNs in Sweden and the Netherlands showed a strong awareness of the site and a high level of satisfaction among the nurses. Thus, a top-of-mind analysis revealed that StomaNet was mentioned first among other potential ostomy-related websites by a majority of nurses. Moreover, StomaNet also met the majority of respondents’ expectations with regard to information quality, functionality and services.

Similarly, although no formal survey has been carried out yet, users of SpinalNet generally express satisfaction with the site activities. According to Nils Bundgaard, the Project Manager responsible for SpinalNet, one important indicator of this is the high level of participation among both professionals and the injured in creating and propagating the site. In particular, building the community and the activities around it differentiates it from competitive products, which is difficult to imitate. In the case of SpinalNet, which caters to both spinal cord patients and professionals, launch parties have attracted a considerable number of actors.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed the role of web-enhanced brand communities for supporting social exchanges of professionals based on a case study of Coloplast’s web-enhanced community of health care professionals. The findings suggest that, in line with expectations, web communities in the professional market build on preexisting communities, enabling community members to intensify the activities of the community to expand its reach. Moreover, the case explores processes of recruitment and involvement necessary for creating the required critical mass for brand community activities to develop. In particular, it highlights the important role of the community host in issuing, organizing and managing the inflow of new content for the community to constantly revitalize.

Some additional and perhaps less expected observations concerning the role played by “open” versus “exclusive” web communities were made, illustrating the multiplicity of roles that communities can play in enhancing (rather than building) communities and thus also in supporting customer relationships in a business-to-business marketing setting. First, as seen in the case of StomaNet, the exclusiveness of these web-enhanced communities may reflect and further support existing sectarian attitudes among the professionals. An important prerequisite for the continued success of this community may rest precisely on its ability to maintain the air of an “exclusive club,” where activities further supporting the exchange of professional knowledge among nurses, as defined by the nurses themselves, was a pivotal issue. In this sense, StomaNet adds to the master–apprenticeship mechanisms already existing within the community since experienced nurses train novices and use the web to discuss relevant issues and/or as a source for teaching material. On the other hand, the StomaNet community serves few social purposes. Nurses tend not to use StomaNet for ordinary private conversation, suggesting that the StomaNet serves strictly professional purposes.

In contrast, the SpinalNet community addresses professional health care personnel at all levels, the injured and relatives. It addresses a broad range of practical as well as medical issues relevant to spinal cord injuries and is based on an entirely different rationale than the StomaNet community. Rather than serving the need for internal exchange, it is meant to relieve professional health care personnel by providing detailed information to spinal cord patients and their relatives and by giving them the additional possibility for socializing with people suffering from the same injury as themselves. Professional health care personnel have an interest in participating in this dialogue, not only to rationalise information exchange, but also to learn more about the needs of spinal cord patients and their relatives to provide better support for these persons.

5.1. Managerial implications

For all companies, unleashing the creative potential of their customers and developing adequate fora for knowledge-generation processes is a key competitive parameter—not least because the ability to survive in business is increasingly driven by the ability to continuously create and recreate business models (Hamel, 2000). This is especially true for companies operating in B2B markets. Based on their practical experiences, customers often have valuable product knowledge and may contribute significantly to the development of core business ideas. In particular, when customers with specialist knowledge discuss product features among themselves, industrial marketers may listen and learn. Most marketing managers would agree on this. The critical issue is to develop a setting where customers are inclined and willing to engage in this type of dialogue. As pointed out by Hagel and Armstrong (1997), generating and retaining sufficient activity in web communities is the single most critical parameter for success.

Seen from this perspective, there are several lessons for marketing managers from the Coloplast experience in developing web-enhancing community websites. First of all, such websites seem highly successful as a tool for enhancing brand image and brand recognition among an important group of key persons in the purchasing centre: the actual users/consumers of the products in question. The exact extent to which the SpinalNet and StomaNet communities provide leverage for the Coloplast brand is a more subtle issue. As the above clearly shows, there is little if any direct support for particular products or even brands. However, as also pointed out by E-business managers at Coloplast, a web-enhanced community strategy aimed directly at improving sales would be recognized as a product push and fail immediately since professionals would consider it both unethical and naive to be too closely associated with a single producer. However, once these issues are put aside, professionals are eager to engage themselves in a fruitful dialogue with producers, which in the long run may improve product loyalty drastically. Herein lies another important lesson for marketing managers, which holds true beyond the current business-to-business setting: most professionals believe that their independence is an important part of their legitimacy as advisors and consultants. Therefore, they are sceptical about initiatives which seek to persuade them into pushing particular opinions and products. Thus, rather than focusing on immediate gains from community enhancement, business-to-business marketers should focus on the long-term brand image and privileged access effects of promoting web-enhancing community facilities. Another important point about the Coloplast case is that, contrary to popular belief, the use of web-enhanced brand communities in a B2B context involving professionals is not restricted to software development. Almost all businesses are becoming reliant on their ability to process information and exchange knowledge.

Web-enhanced brand communities provide a vital forum for the exchange of ideas, utilising the connectivity of specialists and the possibilities of engaging in dialogue. Hence, firms operating in B2B may find it increasingly useful to establish them.

5.2. Implications for research

For academia, the present case study sheds light on an interesting but as yet underexplored field of B2B marketing: the role of personal relationships and social networks in B2B settings and, in particular, the meaning of such networks for the initiation and sustaining of buyer–seller relationships. For instance, studies on punctuated buyer–seller relationships, relationship termination and reestablishment may benefit from possible contributions from this approach.

The notion that professionals may find both professional and private satisfaction from participating in web-enhanced brand communities also warrants further investigation. Moreover, the drivers of web-enhancing community building as presented in this case need to be further explored and challenged to develop a more robust understanding of these processes. In this sense, the present study represents a tentative first step.

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