

EVANGELIST MARKETING: - CONCEPTS AND EMERGING TRENDS

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Received: June 03, 2018

Accepted: July 25, 2018

ABSTRACT

Evangelist marketing is the strategy of obtaining new customers through word-of-mouth communication by existing customers. This concept emerged in the era of internet and social media as people increasingly took to the said media for gathering information and for making purchase decisions. Studies have shown that the personality features of customers as well as certain brand features influence the display of brand evangelist behavior. Companies are constantly adopting strategies to influence existing customers to recruit new customers.

Keywords: *Evangelism Marketing, Brand Evangelist, Customer Evangelist, Word-of-mouth Communication, Brand Trust, Brand Identification, Corporate Evangelist.*

1. Introduction

Prior to the advent of industrial revolution and development of traditional mass media, much of business transactions were based on inter-personal communication between the seller and buyer. The seller would constantly interact with his customers. This would over a period of time, enable him to gain the trust and confidence of his customers. His trusted customers would then recommend his product to others. This primitive form of word-of-mouth communication prevailed for many centuries (Norbert H, Ulf, & Bernd, 2010).

However, the post industrial revolution era saw mass production of commodities. The commodities so produced had to be sold in a short period of time. This necessitated the manufacturers to employ massive promotion/advertisement schemes. Coincidentally at this time, there was a rapid growth of mass media industry as well. People heavily relied on mass media to gather information. Consequently manufacturers relied on mass media to advertise their products. This advertising strategy was highly successful so long as the communication means were limited to Television, Radio and Print Media and the numbers of branded products available in the market were limited.

Towards the mid of 1990's, internet emerged as a new means of mass communication. Internet is different from other forms of mass media communication in that it is a cost effective two way communication medium which allows persons on both sides of the communication channel to communicate with one another (Whittaker, 2002). As a result, most people shifted from the traditional mass media to the Internet for gathering information. The same period also saw the advent of globalization and the consequent opening up of hitherto closed economies. This resulted in increased business activity and hence the number of brands available for the same product dramatically increased. This resulted in increased competitive advertisement by individual brands. Customers were bombarded with promotional messages and advertisements through not just the traditional mass communication media but also the Internet. As a result, new era customers felt harassed by these advertisements (Whittaker, 2002). They often chose to ignore them (Silverman, 2011).

As a result, customers started moving away from the traditional advertisements towards word-of-mouth communication to make purchase decisions. However in this Internet age, the word-of-mouth recommendations are not limited to friends and relatives. Customers also rely on recommendations from strangers on the Internet and social media to make purchasing decisions (Mumi, Obal, & Yang, 2018).

Realizing this shift in customer behavior, businesses have started to re-orient their marketing policies. They are now developing strategies to get existing customers to actively recommend their products to prospective customers. It is a case of existing customer recruiting new customers. The set of strategies being employed for this purpose is together collectively called as evangelist marketing.

2. Definition

The word 'evangelist' has its etymological origin in a Greek word 'Euangelos' which means 'bringer of goods news (Norbert H, Ulf, & Bernd, 2010). Hence an evangelist is a person who brings good news and 'evangelism' means 'good news'. However, it is not this etymological meaning of the word evangelism that has led to the said word being used to describe the modern era word-to-mouth marketing of brands. The

word evangelism has come to be deeply associated with Christianity where evangelism means the act of intensely preaching the Gospel with the objective of spreading the teaching of Jesus. By such intense preaching, the evangelist hopes to bring more and more people into the fold of Christianity (White Estate, 2017). It is this religious usage that has led to the word 'evangelism' being used in marketing theory to describe the technique of corporates motivating existing customers to spread the good message of the brand to others. The hope is that the recipients of this good message will purchase the product.

Evangelism marketing is thus the technique of inducing existing customers to recruit new customers. It must be remembered to be a brand evangelist, it is not sufficient for an existing customer to repeatedly purchase a product for he would only be a repeat customer or at the most a loyal customer (McConnell & Huba, 2003). For a customer to be qualified as a brand evangelist, he must in addition to repeatedly purchasing the product, through his word-of-mouth propaganda bring in new customers. The best example of brand evangelist is Ann McGee-Cooper, a customer of South West Airlines. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon by terrorists using passenger aircrafts had crippled the US passenger Airline Industry. South West Airlines was one among the worst affected. In October 2001, Ann McGee-Cooper wrote a letter to the President of South West Airlines informing him that she was persuading her clients, friends and family members to fly on South West Airlines and was purchasing tickets on their behalf. Along with the letter she enclosed a cheque of \$ 500 stating that the airline's need of money was much more than her need. She had also purchased the stock of the company. Thus, Ann McGee-Cooper was not just a loyal customer but a customer evangelist (McConnell & Huba, 2003).

A brand evangelist not only purchases the brand and recommends the same to others but at times, he also disparages competing brands (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). The central aim of evangelism marketing is to create a large and ever growing army of brand evangelist, who would through the word-of-mouth, recruits new customers and thereby increase sales. Evangelism marketing also aim to convert the new customers so acquired into brand evangelists so that a permanent cycle of creating brand evangelist is established (Fitzgerald Bone, 1995).

3. Factors influencing Brand Evangelism

Brand evangelism is primarily a peculiar behavior pattern of a customer by which a customer not only purchases the product but also recommends others to purchase it. Hence, there are two actors in this phenomenon namely; 1) the customer and 2) the brand. Various studies have tried to identify the personality traits of the customer as well as the features of the brand that influence behavior patterns relating to brand evangelism.

A customer's evangelist behavior has some connection with his personality. For establishing this connection researchers have tried to relate brand evangelism with the five personality traits of the five factor model of personality (Mc Crae & Costa Jr., 2003). According to this model of personality, the personality of any person can be studied by measuring five factors, namely Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. Openness to experience is a personality trait of an individual which enables himself to try new things and accept unconventional ideas and beliefs. Similarly, Contentiousness is a personality trait which enables an individual to control the display of impulsive behavior. They are aware of the consequences of their actions and hence exhibit more goal oriented behavior. Extraversion is a personality trait which enables the individual to display an outgoing and more social confident behavior. They enjoy meeting new people and prefer the company of others. Agreeableness is a personality trait which enables a person to trust others and live in co-operation with them. They do not prefer arguments and conflict with others. Finally, Neuroticism is a personality trait which indicates low emotional stability. Individuals with high neurotics score are fearful, anxious and over thinking. They view all situations negatively and are less capable of coping with every day stress. In a study conducted by Samuel Doss and Deborah Carstensit (Doss & Carstens, 2014) was found that brand evangelism has a high degree of correlation with extraversion, openness and neuroticism. Similarly in a study conducted by Hatice Aydin (Aydin, 2017), it was found that brand evangelism has a high degree of co-relation with extraversion and openness.

Similarly the features of the brand will also influence evangelist behavior. However these features are very difficult to find and identify. Even if they are identified, most often than not, they could brand specific and also could be linked to some personality trait of the brand evangelist himself. Nevertheless there are some studies which shed light in this area. Enrique P. Becerra and Vishag Badrinarayanan (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013) have identified two such characteristics features namely brand trust and brand

identification. Brand trust is the name given to a set of attributes of the product which makes the customer to have such a high degree of emotional attachment with the product so that he is willing to rely on the product, irrespective of the risk or uncertainty associated with it. Brand identification, on the other hand, is the name given to a set of attributes of the product which makes the customer want to identify himself with the brand. The studies carried out by them try to co-relate these two features with three features of brand evangelism namely intention to purchase the brand, willingness to recommend the brand and willingness to oppose competitive brands. The study found that brand trust has high degree of positive correlation with purchase intentions as well as brand recommendation. The study also established that brand identification has a high degree of positive correlation with brand recommendation and competitive brand opposition.

4. Creating Brand Evangelists

Creating a brand evangelist is not an easy task. Companies have to adopt a number of strategies to convert their customers into brand evangelist. The first and foremost necessity is to have a quality product. A customer will recommend a product to another only if the quality of the product is good and the brand is well known.

One strategy that companies can be adopt, is to constantly collect customer feedback both online and offline . There must be dedicated staff to receive and analyze the feedback. Corrective action on the feedbacks must be taken immediately and communicated to the customer. Once a customer is satisfied that his grievances are being adequately addressed, it is more likely that he will recommend the product to others. The next strategy that can be adopted is to create a community of customers where they can meet and share. The shape of the customer community would vary from business to business depending upon the type of product and also the resources available. It could be in the form of online communities like Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups, online bulletin boards, email newsletters, or fans websites. It could also be real world clubs or associations which organize regular meetings and fairs. Further to co-ordinate the activities of the members of such communities a corporate evangelist can be appointed. His job would be to propagate the core values of the brand to the customers. They also remain in close communication with the most valuable customers of their brand so that the reputation of the brand can be continuously improved in the eyes of the elite customers. Such corporate evangelists have already been appointed by big corporations like Apple, Google and Sun Microsystems.

Yet another strategy that could be adopted is to intelligently create a buzz about the brand both online and offline. The word 'buzz' in this context means the sum total of all person to person communication about a brand. Buzz would thus include all the communication about the product that exists in the chat rooms, bulletins boards, Facebook pages, Instagram pages, WhatsApp groups, forwarded emails, YouTube etc. To create a positive buzz the Facebook pages, Instagram pages, YouTube uploads etc., should be frequently updated and all new positive information about the product must be provided. The customers accessing these social media websites must be encouraged to share the information with their friends, relatives etc. Last, but not the least companies must try creating a cause for their product and making the customer identify himself with that cause. Once the customer so identifies himself with the cause, he would most likely spread the word to others and convince them to buy the product. In September 2016, when Mukesh Ambani launched Reliance Jio 4G services, he called it as an effort to fulfill the Digital India dream of the Prime Minister of India (Desk T. , 2018). The attempt of Reliance Jio was to launch an affordable Mobile cum Internet Service and link it with the official Digital India project of the Government of India. This strategy seems to have worked well for Reliance Jio. Some of the mobile/internet users, who first saw the speech of Mukesh Ambani on television and social media, apparently decided to try out the services of Reliance Jio. Later, on being satisfied with the services of Reliance Jio, these customers spread the word to other persons, many of whom went on to purchase the same. Reliance Jio's marketing strategy was so successful that within nineteen months of its launch it became India's third largest telecom operator by revenue market share (Desk, 2018). It is now also the largest 4G Internet Service Provider volume wise (Telecom Lead, 2018).

The above enumerated strategies are only a few among many strategies available for creating brand evangelists. A company may use one or more of the available strategies. However, the different strategies adopted by the company must be closely coordinated and monitored by its marketing department. The strategies adopted must be dynamic. The company must be willing to modify the same as and when required.

5. Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis of existing research material on evangelism marketing that it is an emerging trend in the field of marketing. The relevance of this form of marketing which relies on modern forms of

word-of-mouth communication, has grown manifold due to the rapid growth of internet and social media. However companies must adopt evangelist marketing with much care and caution because the factors influencing the success of evangelist marketing is very subjective and dynamic. Evangelist marketing, if not properly dealt with, could get out of hand, doing more harm than good.

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