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Effect of Social Media on Marketing and Brand Image:

Does it Matter?

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Social media officially emerged in 1997, with the first recognizable site called Six Degrees which allowed users to friend and message one another. Two years later, in 1999, blogs became popular, but no one could have predicted the extent to which social media would grow. In the early 2000's, sites like Myspace, Facebook, and LinkedIn gained traction with the advancement of technology. At this point, around 100 million users had access to the internet (Hale, 2016) and that number was rapidly growing. With people's ongoing urge to be constantly connected, social media continued to flourish, and sites like Twitter, Youtube, and more eventually joined the game as well. In 2018, it is estimated that there are approximately 2.62 billion social media users in the world across many different platforms (Statista, n.d.).

With so many active users on social media and the rise of the internet, businesses began considering social media advertising as a component of their marketing efforts. Slowly, links to popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter began appearing on company's websites, leading visitors to the company's social media. In 2015, 88% of companies used social media for marketing and the prediction for 2018 was that 90.4% of companies would join the trend (Bennett, 2014). It's obviously a popular communication method, but does it truly assist in marketing? Can the effect be measured?

Consumers spend a lot of time on social media. The average person has five social media accounts and spends 100 minutes per day on social media (Davidson, 2015). A lot of this time is spent posting content, sharing content, and responding to others. For brands, this leaves much opportunity for exposure of their name and products, especially in advertisements on these sites, or by organic growth via sharing. Companies using social media also see more brand loyalty from consumers. According to a report published by Texas Tech University "... Companies

should take advantage of the tools social media gives them when it comes to connecting with their audience. A strategic and open social media plan could prove influential in morphing consumers into being brand loyal.” Another study published by Convince & Convert found that 53% of Americans who follow brands in social are more loyal to those brands (Demers, 2015).

The low cost of entry for social media makes it very appealing to small businesses in particular. While a 30-second spot broadcast nationally averaged around \$123,000 as of 2016 (Aland, 2017), social media is essentially “free”. We hesitate to call social media entirely free, because a company is paying someone to monitor and post to the sites, and advertisements and boosts on social media do cost money, but never to the extent of television commercials and radio spots. Social media promotions are also great because they allow consumers to easily share with friends. Friends cannot message each other a commercial for a product they think their friend would like, but they can tag them in a Facebook video and recommend the product to them. Social media is also flexible and can allow changes in advertisements, unlike other forms of promotions such as print that cannot be changed or updated once sent. Social media almost always includes calls to action as well, with links that can easily be tracked via outside links, click through rates, etc. Social media acts as a vessel to encourage consumers to take action and explore webpages, products, sign up for newsletters, etc. which has a huge impact on consumers’ brand loyalty and ultimate purchasing decisions.

In recent years, marketing has taken a turn to service-dominant logic, putting consumers back in control of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). This essentially means marketing is focused around the consumer and giving them a value offering that is created with the consumer.

Social media is a great vessel for this, as it provides feedback and real time suggestions for companies to use consumer input. Allowing customers to provide their input on products and their brand, making them brand ambassadors and pioneers for products. This lifetime value of a customer is crucial to companies, and ultimately helps their revenues by lowering the acquisition costs for new customers. With consumers being a focus and it being harder to reach them via traditional marketing methods such as print media that already didn't allow conversation, the emergence of a platform that allows conversation with consumers at maximum accessibility is key.

A truly trackable measure of an increased social media presence is increased search engine optimization (SEO). The word is thrown around commonly in marketing, but essentially is free, organic, editorial or natural search results on search engines such as Google. Ultimately, this improves website traffic, generates leads, and creates brand awareness. Search engine optimization ultimately allows consumers looking for your product to find your company, and despite current confusion on exact metrics that track SEO, it is commonly agreed that social media maturity and a strong presence and following does boost ranks in search engine optimization. Tracking search engine optimization is done through various key performance indicators (KPI) such as keyword opportunity, keyword click-through rate, SEO traffic, page views, etc. With the rise of SEO and the ongoing trend of understanding Google Analytics and AdWords, MarketDive reported in 2016 that marketers see SEO as becoming more effective, with 82% reporting effectiveness is on the rise and 42% of this group stating effectiveness is increasing significantly (McEvoy, 2017).

In my 4 years at Wright State, I have been experienced in social media in three different industries: Higher education for Wright State University, promotional products for Shumsky Promotional, and in non-profit animal charities. Across all boards, social media was a vital part of our branding and marketing strategies. At Wright State, we follow strict brand guidelines that must be cohesive across all platforms. In the past year, we launched a recent initiative to encourage colleges to have branded icons and headers on all major social media platforms with a brand appropriate “W” logo and their department name in our brand approved font with our brand colors. After doing this, as well as encouraging departments to post their direct wright.edu link in their bios, which increased website traffic for the first participating departments by an average of 17%. With informal feedback, we also learned incoming high school seniors were more receptive to information given on social media rather than the website or direct emails to them or their parents. The conversational tone makes a business or corporation more approachable and creates a more positive image of the company for a consumer, which increases their loyalty or favorability of a brand. Wright State is a firm believer in a social media presence boosting a brand, hence our strict brand guidelines and formal social media processes.

While the exact effect of social media on marketing and brand isn’t exactly known, it is an undeniable force in the industry. Companies are rapidly adopting formal social media practices and utilizing brand cohesiveness across all platforms. Social media management softwares such as Hootsuite, Sprout Social, and Salesforce are rapidly expanding to meet consumer demand. More and more commonly, social media specialist positions appear online for both small and large companies, proving the importance of a social media presence in a company. Social media is an evolving trend, and is not a fad that will fade. While it continues to

grow, so will the research behind it. For now, companies are gaining brand awareness, which can be tracked with key performance indicators specific to each company or corporation. There is no exact answer on how to track social media or prove its efficiency, but there is substantial evidence that the demand for it is growing, especially as internet usage across the world expands. It's a vital way to reach consumers without huge costs and allows a consumer to feel valued and be more brand loyal. Ultimately, brand awareness is usually the goal regarding companies and social media, and with proper usage of social media platforms, the potential for brand awareness is limitless.

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