

The Persuasive Effects from Web 2.0 Marketing: A Case Study Investigating the Persuasive Effect from an Online Design Competition

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Abstract. This case study investigates the effect from a Web 2.0 campaign, an online design competition, accomplished by a company that produces and marketed feminine care products (sanitary towels). The target segment for the campaign was girls in four Nordic countries, in the age between 14 and 25. The main characteristic for the target segment is that they are not much interested in the product category. Our interpretation is that the online design competition had a persuasive effect towards the target segment. By using the internet in an interactive and social way, companies can achieve brand awareness and create a positive attitude towards a brand in low-involvement segments. Suggestions for further research are given.

Keywords: Web 2.0, Interactivity, Persuasion, Involvement, Interactive marketing.

1 Introduction

Web 2.0 can be used to do what traditional advertising does: to push information to persuade consumers to buy products or services. For example, a company may implement a blog on its web site and regularly publish information about products and their benefits. However, according to Parise et. al. [1] that kind of approach misses the point of Web 2.0. Instead, companies should use the Web 2.0 tools to get the consumers involved.

To investigate to what extent Web 2.0 marketing has the ability to influence the target segments' intentional effort, we used the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion as a guide to data analysis and interpretation. The ELM, developed by Petty et al. [2], is based on the idea that attitudes are central in guiding the consumer's decisions and other behaviors. While attitudes can result from a number of cues in the consumers setting, persuasion is a primary source. The ELM framework suggests that important variations in the nature of persuasion are a function of the likelihood that receivers will engage in elaboration of (thinking about) information relevant to the persuasive issue [2].

By investigating the persuasive effect from interactive and social campaign companies could better understand why Web 2.0 communication works, and as a result increase their benefits from marketing activities online. This paper is structured as follows: In the first section we give a presentation of present studies on the effect from online interactive and social marketing. Second, there will be a short presentation of the ELM framework. Third, based on a case study we discuss the persuasive effect that the Web 2.0 marketing may have had on the target segment. Finally, our last section contains concluding comments on the use of Web 2.0 activities to influence consumers' intention to purchase by means of interactive and social marketing. Suggestions for further research are given.

2 Related Work

Web 2.0 is a term that is used to describe changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design. The term was introduced for the first time in 2004 by Dale Dougherty, a web pioneer and O'Reilly VP, at a conference brainstorming session between O'Reilly and MediaLive International. Web 2.0 is, according to Tim O'Reilly, the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. The rules for success entail using the Internet in a interactive and social way [3]. Most authors focus on describing the way of using Web 2.0 in interactive online campaigns in general [e.g. 4]. However, little has been done to explain the persuasive effect that Web 2.0 marketing has toward consumers.

Hoffman and Novak [5] point out that the Web frees customers from their traditional passive role as receivers of marketing communications, gives them much greater control over the information search and acquisition process, and allows them to become active participants in the marketing process. The unique forms of interactivity, "machine interaction" and "personal interaction" respectively, have contributed to a rapid diffusion of the Web as a commercial medium in the last several years [5]. Interactivity can be conceptualized from various scopes. For example, Ghose and Dou [6] conceptualize interactivity from a marketing perspective, identifying 23 functions of interactivity mainly driven by communication-based conceptualization of interactivity. Another example is Ha and James [7] who conceptualize interactivity from an interpersonal communication perspective focusing on interactivity as communication, either through a medium or without the aid of a medium. The latter conceptualization of interactivity will be used in this paper as basis for discussion and interpretations.

Some studies have examined the effect of interactivity on companies' web sites. Accordingly, Coyle and Thorson [8] did an experiment on the effect of interactivity and vividness on commercial web sites. Results show that perception of telepresence (simulated perception of direct experience) grew stronger as levels of interactivity and levels of vividness in web sites increased. In a study on the attractiveness of a web site, Ghose and Dou [6] found that the greater the degree of interactivity, the more likely it is for the company's web site to be considered as a top site. In addition, they find that the "customer support" component of interactivity has a significant positive

impact on the likelihood of a company's web site being included in a list of high-quality web sites. Interesting studies have been done on the effect from interactivity. On the other hand, none of these studies investigate the persuasive effect that interactivity has on the consumer's intention to purchase a brand.

3 The Elaboration Likelihood Model

According to O'Keefe [9], persuasion can be defined as: "a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuaded has some measure of freedom." The ELM, developed by Petty et al. [2], is a theory that proposes a global view of how attitudes are formed and changed. The basic idea is that the receivers (e.g. online consumers) will vary in the degree to which they are likely to engage in elaboration (thinking about) of information relevant to the persuasive issue. For example, when information becomes more personally relevant, consumers are willing to engage in extensive issue-relevant thinking. They will pay attention to a specific web site or an online campaign, evaluate thoroughly the information that is presented, and, recall from memory other issues that are relevant to the specific situation. However, sometimes when the information is not personally relevant, consumers will not undertake much issue-relevant thinking and display relatively little elaboration. The degree to which consumers engage in issue-relevant thinking forms a continuum, from cases of extremely high elaboration to cases of little or no elaboration.

The ELM suggests that important variations in the nature of persuasion are a function of the likelihood that receivers will engage in elaboration of information relevant to the persuasive issue. Two types of persuasion process can be engaged depending on the degree of elaboration [2]: a central route involving systematic cognitive thinking and a peripheral route involving cognitive shortcuts. The central route to persuasion represents the persuasion processes involved when elaboration is relatively high, and persuasion is achieved through the consumer's thoughtful examination of issue-relevant considerations. The peripheral route is the persuasion processes involved when elaboration is relatively low. When persuasion is achieved through peripheral routes it usually comes about because the consumer uses some simple decision rules to evaluate the advocated position. For example, the consumer may be guided by whether they like the color or the design of the web site. That is, the consumer may rely on peripheral cues as guide to attitude, rather than to engage in extensive issue-relevant information processing.

4 Case: An Online Design Competition

Our research has an inductive approach which indicates that we gather empirical data without having a hypothesis in advance. Because it is difficult to separate the object to be studied from its context, we found that a case study was an appropriate method to use [see 10]. The rationale for this choice is also that the case study is suitable for investigating up-to-date processes or behaviors of others, which happen in their real-life context but are little known [11]. The key to successfully designing a case study is

to have developed beforehand a theoretical proposition to guide data collection and data analysis [10].

A company that had accomplished a Web 2.0 campaign was chosen. The company produces and marketed feminine care products (sanitary towels) in 85 countries worldwide. In Europe the products occur under the brand name Libresse™. Besides demographics (gender and age) the company reported that there are two main characteristics of the target segment for feminine care products: first the consumer often stick to the brand she decides to choose first time, and, second the consumer is not much interested in the product category (sanitary towels). This is a challenging situation for the marketing department of Libresse™. To be able to achieve brand awareness and attitude towards the brand the company accomplished additional research to better understand the target segment. Results from the market research (survey and focus groups) show that the target segment has varying interests. However, fashion design was one of the most dominant interests reported by the respondents. As many as 25 % of the respondents, age 14 to 25, reported that they want to work with fashion and design. The owner of Libresse™ sees this as an opportunity for their 2007 campaign. A two month online design competition was created as the main communication activity in the campaign toward the Nordic segment (Iceland was not included). The other communication channel that was part of the campaign was print, TV and stores. Libresse™ did also create a package design exclusively for the online design competition.

The target segment was invited to design a pair of underpants on the Libresse™ web site. The competition was open for each and everyone but the main target segment was girls between 14 and 25 years of age. Girls who were attracted to the invitation were able to use a design tool to choose color and patterns for their underpants (see figure 1). With help of the drawing program, she could create the submission by choosing between templates, complete figures, and by freehand drawing. The Libresse™ brand name was strategically placed on the top left of the web site. The web site also presented the jury and the attractive prizes.

When the consumer was satisfied with the underpants design, she could submit it on the Libresse™ web site and join the design competition. However, she could also

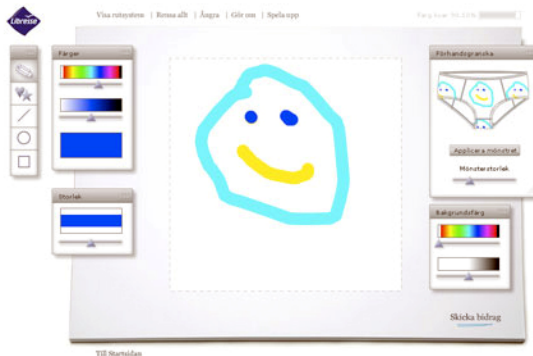
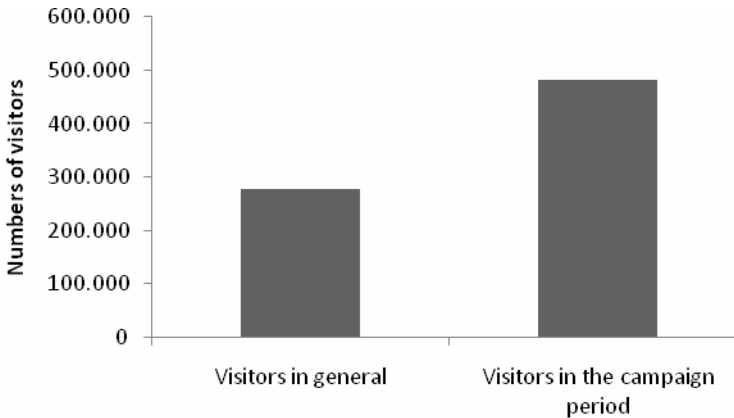


Fig. 1. Design tool on Libresse™ web page

invite friends by Facebook™ to vote for her design underpants. If she didn't want to design a pair of underpants, she could vote for her favorite pattern, and in addition send it as a postcard. Every week the winner in each country was lining up for the final. The winner of the design competition obtains a sum of money and, even more important, her underpants were launched in 180 JC™ stores around the Nordic countries. So, the dream of being a fashion designer could be realized on Libresse™ web site.

5 Campaign Outcomes

One goal that Libresse™ had for the campaign was to increase the number of visitors to each country's website by 25 %. In total (see figure 2), the number of visitors increased from 277 657 to 483 036, in other words, an increase of 205 379 visitors (+ 74 %). The time consumers spent at the web site also increased by 60 % from approximately 12 minutes to 19 minutes.



Visitors in general versus visitors in the campaign period

Fig. 2. Visitors at Libresse™ web site

The response from the target segments was enormous. As much as 90 000 underpants were designed and submitted to the design competition by girls in the Nordic countries (see figure 3). Sweden had the highest participation with 40 500 submitted underpants. Norway was second with 17 100, and then Denmark and Finland with both 16 200 submitted underpants.

Impact-wise, the media impact was extremely strong, especially the digital. Within the blog world, the competition was one of the major topics during the summer 2007. In regard to sale, Libresse™ also witnessed an increase in sale in the campaign period.

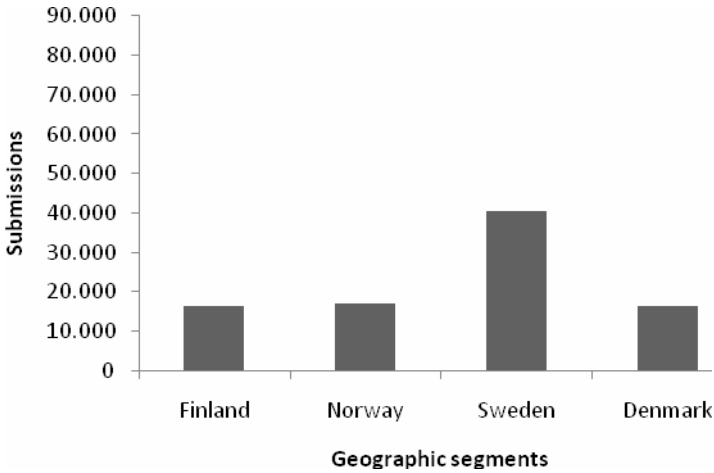


Fig. 3. Numbers of submissions in Nordic segments

6 Discussion

The increase in sale in the campaign period can be explained by means of the ELM. The ELM is based on the idea that under different conditions, receivers will vary in the degree to which they are likely to engage in elaboration of information relevant to the persuasive issue [2]. The basic idea is that consumers are more likely to carefully evaluate the attributes of a product when the purchase is of high relevance to them. Conversely, the likelihood is great that consumers will engage in a very limited information search and attribute evaluation when the product holds little relevance or importance to them.

The target segment of Libresse™ reported that they are not much involved in the product category (feminine care products). Their engagement in information search and attribute evaluation will therefore most probably be limited. As presented in the introduction, ELM makes a distinction between two routes to persuasion [2]: a central and a peripheral route. The central route to persuasion represents the persuasion processes involved when elaboration is relatively high, and the peripheral route represents the persuasion processes involved when elaboration is relatively low. According to Petty et al. [2] attitude changes that occur via the peripheral route occur because the attitude issue or object is associated with positive or negative cues. In the Libresse™ design competition campaign, brand awareness and a positive attitude towards the brand are most probably achieved because the brand Libresse™ is associated with fashion design (positive cues). The peripheral route to persuasion can explain the brand awareness, positive attitude towards the brand, and finally, increase in sale for Libresse™ in the campaign period.

7 Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated that the peripheral route to persuasion strategy can be realized with the support of Web 2.0 marketing towards low-involvement

consumers. By using the Internet in an interactive and social way, companies can achieve brand awareness, positive attitude towards a brand, and finally, increase in sales in the target segment. This study is not without limitations. One limitation is its lack of empirical data. Its interpretative design has obvious limitations, especially with regards to internal validity (to what extent the interactive design competition is a cause to the increase in sales). In spite of the limitations, the online marketing implication of the ELM is apparent: when planning an online campaign, companies should consider to what extent the target segments are involved in the product category. A follow up study could be to conduct an experiment which would increase validity regarding causal conclusions. Another follow up study could be to investigate the persuasive effect of Web 2.0 marketing towards high-involvement consumers. To what extent can companies use Internet in an interactive and social way toward target segments that are likely to engage in elaboration of information relevant to the persuasive issue? A third follow up study could be to replicate the present study in different contexts and see if it gives the same results.

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