



Understanding Opinion Leaders in Social Media: An Exploratory Case Study on a Local Apparel Business Facebook Fan-page

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A new age of marketing emerges as a large population grows in the usage of social media. Facebook as a dominating social networking media can be leveraged to reach large fan bases, which may in turn increase customer base. Facebook page fans create User Generated Content (UGC) while interacting with others. UGC is documented communication or interactivity between users that can be considered electronic word of mouth. Word of Mouth (WOM) affects consumer s' attitudes, emotions and purchase intention (White, 2010).

Opinion leaders highly involved with a product with a judgment about a product or brand tend to share their opinion with people in their network (Richins & Root-Shaffer, 1988). These people are likely to be well trusted by peers and usually have the most access to updated information (Katz, 1957). Social media opinion leader are responsible for the majority of produced WOM, documented message for longer periods of time. Identifying Facebook opinion leaders and understanding their communication behaviors can help Facebook marketing planning and implementation. Observing and analyzing electronic social media WOM can assist in the understanding of consumer wants and needs in today's dynamic selling environment.

Companies, especially small businesses in the fast-paced fashion industry that cannot afford large advertising campaigns, can take advantage of Facebook to promote brand awareness, increase customer engagement, and promote sales (Shih, 2011). Fan-pages allow a company to market directly to its fans. Facebook fan-pages facilitate opinion leaders to easily share fashion forward brands with their friends and page fans (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011). In turn, opinion leaders also play important role in growing and engaging page fans since they keep generating and spreading WOM through interactivity with the page about products or other related topics to the brand.

To this end, the current research intends to fulfill the following research objectives to (1) profile the fan-page users; (2) identify the opinion leaders who direct WOM and customer engagement; (3) identify Facebook WOM themes; and (4) compare facebook WOM themes cross opinion leaders and page fans.

A local apparel business, Tru Colors Apparel, was chosen as the case for the empirical study. The company targets forward women ages of 18 and 45 who wanted to support their team with something more fashionable than the licensed selections. Developed female sportswear has been sold to over 100 stores in the Southeastern Conference (SEC) area. The business Facebook page launched in 2009 allows the owner and customers to share products information and users

to order products interact with other consumers who are actually wearing the clothes. Tru Colors also uses Facebook to generate buzz about the company and gain brand awareness.

All the fan comments and responses on the fan-page wall were collected. A user profile was created based on frequency of posting/responding to comments or clicking “like”. All fans were classified as high-active, moderate-active, or non-active groups (Viswanath, Mislove, Cha & Gummadi, 2009). The users categorized as high-active were then considered as opinion leaders. Content analysis was conducted to identify themes. Then a theme comparison was conducted to examine the WOM consistency between opinion leaders and rest of page fans.

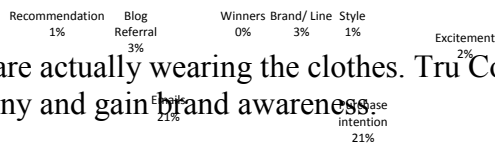


Figure 5. 2010 Fan-Page Wall Posts

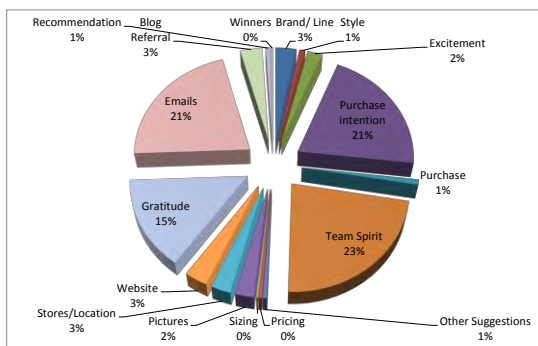


Figure 5a. Theme distribution of opinion leaders' WOM

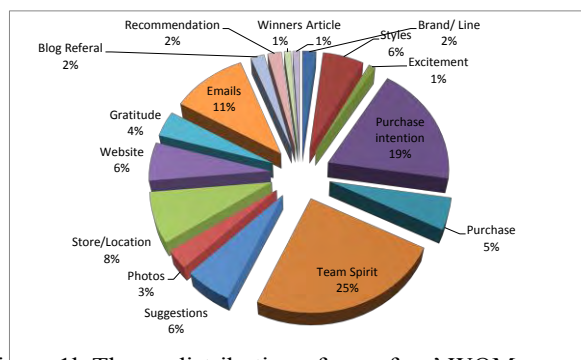


Figure 6: 2010 OL comments

The user profile identified 33 opinion leaders out of 1684 fans, accounting for 1.95% of the fans population. Eighteen themes were identified including team spirit, purchase intention, emails, gratitude, store information, prices, sizing, and etc. Results also showed consistency between opinion leaders and rest of page fans (see figures). Research findings confirmed the importance of opinion leaders in generating buzz, keeping fans, leading WOM toward favoring the company's products and brands. An interesting finding is that the fan comments tend to gravitate toward posted articles and photos, indicating business owners can easily keep fan pages active and growing by frequently posting related articles and photos.

Figure 6: 2010 OL comments

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