

Using Social Media to Build Brand Loyalty: Insights from the Designer Shoe Industry

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INTRODUCTION

Companies are realizing after decades of mass marketing that this approach is no longer working as it used to. Due to the sheer volume of ads people are exposed to every day, most consumers ignore these, seeing them as a nuisance. As a result, marketing researchers advocated the use of relationship marketing in order to create longer-term interactions with customers. Companies began doing this by maintaining a history of contact information, buying patterns, and customer profiles in order to anticipate the needs of their customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

This move toward personalizing the marketing experience led to target marketing, demographic segmentation, and niche marketing. In order to make marketing efforts more effective, Seth Godin proposed extending this relationship-building through permission marketing where companies ask customers for “permission” to send them information on their products and services (Godin, 1999). As a result of these new approaches, companies were able to learn quite a bit about their target customers through the use of electronic resources.

However, these attempts to “personalize” marketing efforts were missing one key point. Social media-Facebook, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, and others-has changed how people interact with each other and with the companies they buy from. Social media allows people to reach out and virtually meet others they would never have had an opportunity to talk with before. It gives them “friends” to turn to when they need information or recommendations or just entertainment. They can use Digg to read the top stories that their connections have deemed newsworthy. They use Yelp to see what restaurants are recommended and TripAdvisor to get insights on hotels. They join Meetup so they can find others in their communities with similar interests. They go online to read reviews from others like themselves when searching for books to read, products to buy, and service people to hire. They trust the advice of those bloggers they follow on a regular basis. In fact, research shows that “50% of the active blog readers in the general U.S. online population have made a purchase based on a blog recommendation” (Collins, 2011).

As a result, companies who want to gain the trust and loyalty of their customers must figure out how to tap into these social networks. The paradigm is in using what’s essentially a mass marketing medium (information on these networks is available for anyone to see) to create an individual connection (the customer sees himself/herself as part of an in-group with a personal relationship with the company).

One industry that has been able to do this successfully in order to enhance brand loyalty is the designer shoe business. These companies have learned that building a relationship with customers mean making personal connections, hiring raving fans as employees, identifying trust

agents in the industry, being creative, and listening to what customers have to say. However, at the same time they recognize that interactions on social networks must be professional as once posted or tweeted, the message can be read and forwarded all over the world. What's said in Vegas does not stay in Vegas in this case. The following examples illustrate how these designers are using social media to build relationships and enhance brand loyalty.

They Personalize their Company

One way to personalize a company is to use top executives or key employees, a concept the shoe industry has embraced. Designers such as Jimmy Choo, Christian Louboutin, Kate Spade, Beatrix Ong, Alejandro Ingelmo, Brian Atwood, and others too numerous to count, understand the love that many women have for their shoes and how this translates to brand loyalty. Alejandro Ingelmo, who began designing shoes in 2006, comes from four generations in the shoe business and he gets it. As he notes, "My grandmother to this day, in her nineties, wears a 2-inch Ferragamo heel" (Schiednes, 2011). When asked why he decided to join Twitter in 2010, he stated, "I love [Twitter] because it's a direct line between us and our customers/fans" (personal interview, June 1, 2011).

Another designer who understands the importance of building relationships with customers is Stuart Weitzman. In addition to making fabulous shoes, Stuart Weitzman is a savvy marketing genius and is probably best known as the guy who designed the million dollar shoes for one of the Academy Award nominees starting in 2002. When Weitzman was asked how he earned credibility with the celebrities who wear his shoes, he responded that, "I make myself a part of it. These women like to know personalities...Celebrities don't want to buy anonymous products. They want to feel like they know the designer and they can call him and ask him to create something, so I make myself personally available" (Levin, 2008). He uses the same philosophy in his decision to use sites such as Twitter and Facebook; women all over the world can now feel a personal connection with the man who designs their shoes.

According to shoe designer, Brian Atwood, participating on social networking sites is no longer an option. He states, "I do have a Facebook page that we [he and his staff] constantly update. I also have a Twitter account and that's all me! Nowadays, you have to keep up with social media" (Cabrera, 2011).

This was echoed by one blogger who emphasized, "Social media is not a business press release and companies need to be constantly cognizant of having an authentic voice and not sounding like a corporate bot that's devoid of any real emotion. In order to do this, companies must develop a voice that resonates with your audience. Tell stories, crack jokes, laugh at other people's jokes, give words of encouragement, tweet at celebs you don't really know, and most importantly, recognize and cheer on your followers. Aim to be human in the social space" (McCormack, 2011).

They Hire People Who Love What They Do To Tell Their Story

When Stuart Weitzman was asked about his hiring philosophy, he replied, "I have found that by bringing people to the company who are product savvy and who love our product, regardless of what job they've done before, we get better work from them. It's about the product and it's not about just finances or running departments...Everyone in the company should be a part of the heart of the business" (Levin, 2008). In other words, he hires people who love shoes.

One recent hire is Susan Duffy who was chosen for a newly created position as Senior Vice President of Global Marketing and Communication. When Duffy was asked how important social

media was to Stuart Weitzman, she responded, “We really believe that you have to have a 24-hour conversation, but it has to be meaningful...we’re trying to understand how the brand lives within the lives of the customer and weave that message throughout everything we do” (Denardo, 2011). Duffy is a prime example of the way that social media can lead to relationships; she was first contacted for the Stuart Weitzman job by a recruiter on Facebook.

They Identify the Trust Agents in their Industry

Chris Brogan coined the term, trust agent, to describe the phenomenon we are seeing. He defines trust agents as “people who use the web in a very human way to build influence, reputation, awareness, and who can translate that into some kind of business value. In other words, these are people we feel as if we know and because of that, we are willing to trust their recommendations” (Brogan, 2008).

When George Vlagos decided to make quality men’s shoes in the United States at a reasonable price, he had very little name recognition or marketing budget. However, when he launched his new company, Oat Street Bootmakers, on August 31, 2010, he was able to sell every pair of shoes within 24 hours and currently has a six week waiting list. He was able to accomplish this amazing feat because a key blogger in the industry, James Wilson, wrote a post the day before the opening raving how much he liked the shoes and including photos and details about the quality of the design (Wilson, 2010). George Vlagos’s story “teaches us a very powerful lesson about blogs, and how they can be used to promote a brand on a shoestring...Identify key bloggers in your industry, and begin building a relationship with them” (Silverman, 2011). As Vlagos notes, “People will post photographs of themselves wearing their Oak Street shoes online. It’s unbelievable...I don’t have to get out there and say it myself. My customers will articulate it for me” (Pace, 2011).

They Make their Interactions Creative & Fun

Stuart Weitzman believes in having fun with social media. A team of four, plus Weitzman himself, hold contests*, advertise for interns (Sherman, 2010) and respond to comments made about their shoes on Twitter and Facebook. For example, they have held “Retweet to Win” contests on Twitter where winners can receive prizes such as high heel paperclips or silly bands shaped like shoes. As noted by Jackie Lampugnano in her blogpost on how to use social media to get the attention of Gen Y’s, “Think in terms of trends and what’s hot right now...The point is that Stuart Weitzman tied their brand into something hot with Gen Y right now – silly bands – and turned it into a fun, engaging activity on Twitter” (Lampugnano, 2010).

One of the winners, Olivia Lovenmark, is a 23-year-old fashion blogger who lives in Vancouver. She has been on Twitter for over two years, about the same length of time that she has had her own blog called StyleStruck. She feels Stuart Weitzman does a good job using social media as “their content is fresh and interesting and they’re engaging in the Twitter community well.” When asked if contests such as these build fan loyalty, she stated that she was a fan prior to winning. “However, I do think that reaching out to the shoe lovers on Twitter will increase the likelihood of their buying his shoes versus another brand’s shoes. It’s always good to connect with your audience” (personal interview, June 2, 2011).

In another contest, Stuart Weitzman teamed up with the online shoe store, Zappos, and challenged fans to put together a creative online video showing why they thought they could beat him in a Ping-Pong match. The prize was a free shoe wardrobe and an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City to take on Stuart. The campaign was a huge success with hundreds of videos produced. Melissa Koonin did the winning video that showed her bouncing a ping pong

ball on a paddle while eating, showering, and walking down the street (however, Weitzman won the match!).

They Listen to their Customers

One major reason for companies to engage in social media is to get feedback from their customers. However, it's important to really listen and then to respond to comments made. Rosalynn Holbrook, who tweets @rozfashionista in London, England, makes this observation: "It is hugely frustrating to me when a company only uses Twitter as a mouthpiece for their marketing department, as opposed to a tool to interact with customers." She goes on to mention a British shoe company with 74 stores in England and Ireland as an example of a company getting it wrong. "They're a huge brand here, but their Twitter page is just them advertising their wares, they never reply to enquiries, and delete comments on their Facebook that aren't positive." However, Rosalynn goes on to say that companies can learn from the feedback they get from social media sites. An "example I can think of is Brown's Fashion. They never replied to Twitter mentions, including when I was asking about fitting information on a pair of shoes. I bought elsewhere as they didn't reply. I [ended up emailing] them expressing my disappointment, and since then they have totally changed their attitude to Twitter, and now interact with customers and reply to enquiries - as it should be" (personal interview, May 30, 2011).

Another example of how companies can learn from their customers is illustrated by clothing and shoe designer, Julian Louie, who collaborated with ALDO for his Spring 2011 collection. As part of the Fashion Week show, he designed shoes that were to be used on the runway only. However, Joe Zee, creative director of Elle magazine, took a photo of the shoes and tweeted about them, asking his followers if they thought ALDO should make the shoes for the public. There was an overwhelming response on Twitter, Facebook, and various fashion blogs with the result that the shoes are now available for sale (Scott, 2011). As noted by Julian Louie, "Joe Zee really helped in bringing this all to life, and the blog interest in these shoes has been amazing. They're helping me reach a whole new demographic of people who probably wouldn't be aware of my collection and what I'm doing otherwise" (Chic Report, 2011).

Companies can make people feel as if they are part of an in-group with their designers by tracking comments about products and responding in a fun way. For example, Helena Glazer, who uses the Twitter name @BrooklynBlonde, tweeted on June 1, 2011, that she was "wearing the most comfortable @Stuart_Weitzman shoes ever" and posted a photo. Within hours, Stuart Weitzman's team tweeted back that "we love how u paired them...totally rocked the look!" (Twitter.com/Stuart_Weitzman, 2011). Glazer then retweeted Stuart's comment to her 1,400 followers, creating a number of positive comments about Stuart Weitzman.

They Understand the Importance of being Professional

One caution, though, to using social media is that it is easy to cross the line between being entertaining and being inappropriate as Kenneth Cole found out the hard way. Cole had attempted to create a marketing buzz by tweeting, "Millions are in uproar in #Cairo. Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online...KC" (Robinson, 2011). The hashtag #Cairo had been originally designated by followers of the Egyptian revolution in the Spring of 2011 and the public was outraged that Cole had tried to promote his brand this way. Cole quickly published an apology on Facebook after deleting the tweet but only time will tell if there will be any long-term repercussions for his brand.

This line between entertainment and professionalism can be challenging especially for designer products. Olivia Lovenmark notes that, "Social media, specifically Twitter, is tricky. I believe there is a balance that companies have to find between appearing as a sophisticated brand with value and communicating on a personal level with followers (customers). If a brand gets too comfortable with its audience, I think it can lose its 'designer' or 'luxury' appeal" (personal interview, June 2, 2011).

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

So what can we learn from the experiences of these shoe designers? As noted earlier, companies are recognizing that traditional marketing efforts are no longer enough. A top web analyst, Jeremiah Owyang, states that, "Consumers will rely on their peers as they make online decisions, whether or not brands choose to participate. Socially connected consumers will strengthen communities and shift power away from brands...eventually this will result in empowered communities defining the next generation of products" (2009). Companies should be prepared for the fact that their products can and will be reviewed by those on the Internet, regardless of whether the companies plan to actively participate on social media sites. It makes sense then to tap into these communities.

However, as these shoe designers have illustrated, it's not a matter of just signing up on a number of social networking sites and sending out marketing messages. It takes time and commitment to build the type of relationships that will translate into brand loyalty. Karen Ferko, Vice President of Public Relations at Stuart Weitzman, believes their strategy is an appropriate one to engage socially connected consumers. "Overall we use [social media] as a *PR tool* - to disseminate SW news and celebrity information as well as *Brand Building* - to give our followers insider company information" (personal interview, May 31, 2011). In other words, they make their customers feel like part of an in-group of people who love shoes, with a personal connection to the designer of those shoes.

The approach used by Weitzman and the other designers discussed here works because these companies understand the importance of being personal and creative while still professional in their dealings with the public. They hire employees who are fans of their products and thus make good spokespersons when communicating on social networking sites. They identify those trust agents in their industry who are respected for their blogs and tweets, recognizing that consumers will follow their recommendations. They listen to their customers and respond even if what the customers have to say isn't positive. In fact, they recognize that this is an opportunity to turn that disgruntled customer into a raving fan. Eric Norlin stresses this point, advocating that, "marketing abandon the message altogether, that we come to the table wanting to know what it is that you -- the buyer -- are really here for. It requires that we establish a process of interaction based on authenticity, trust, and openness. It requires that we be personal" (2001).

And that's what social media marketing is all about.

*NOTE: In Stuart Weitzman's first Twitter contest, readers were asked to tweet why they should be chosen to get a personal phone call from Stuart Weitzman. Dear Readers, I was chosen. The following are my notes from that interview.

Hello Delaney? It's Stuart Weitzman.

I've always loved shoes. My colleagues and students will tell you that my shoes are the first thing they check out after saying hello to me. So you can imagine how excited I was when I learned I was the winner of a contest on Twitter. My prize? A personal phone call from THE shoe designer, Stuart Weitzman.

Stuart called at 4:20pm on June 18, 2010. We talked about Beth Levine, the first female shoe designer, who along with her husband Herbert changed the look of shoes for all time. Beth designed the white go-go boots worn by Nancy Sinatra to publicize her 1966 best selling hit song (quick-name that song!). In fact, Beth took boots from the purely practical function of rain and snow protection at that time to the fashion accessory they are today. She introduced stiletto heels and mules to American women, both designed to make our feet look as elegant as her own tiny size 4Bs. I asked Stuart if his family had known Beth and he said yes. His father, Seymour Weitzman, whose shoes were labeled "Mr. Seymour," and the Levine's were co-manufacturers in the late 1950s.

I asked him his opinion of the huge current popularity of flip flops for both men and women. He responded by asking me if I had any and when I said, yes, a couple pairs but mine have bling on them, he laughed and said, Me too!

We talked about all the choices in shoes now-pointed toe, round toe, the new style that covers the ankles- and I asked him how this affected his approach to designing new shoes. He said it really allowed him to be more creative as he did not have to be wed to any particular toe shape. Instead he can listen to his customers more whom he says let him know their favorites. He noted that the runway was just show biz. The best fashion trends are an extension of what we see on the street, what people are actually wearing. This connection to his fans and customers is also why he personally interacts on Twitter.

We talked about how the world of social media has changed his business. He shared with me his experience when he designed an espadrille wedge shoe that had modest sales. Then the actress, Jennifer Aniston, was photographed several times in public wearing the shoes, people started blogging about them and going on discussion boards asking where they could be bought, and the shoe became one of Weitzman's biggest sellers of all time.

I bemoaned the fact that my favorite pair of Stuart Weitzman boots, bought in 2001 or so, were so worn that I had had to retire them. I asked him if he had ever considered bringing back some of the designs that customers liked so well in the past. He told me to send him a photo of the boots.

My last question was to ask Stuart what advice he would give my students. His first response was to say that if they liked fashion, then the world of fashion design is the most exciting place you could imagine. However, he went on to state that it's important to do something you love doing, something that makes you excited to get up in the morning and go to work. As Stuart creates some 600 styles per year, he obviously loves designing shoes.

Thanks, Stuart, for taking the time to call one of your biggest fans.

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