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Using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products and services

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Social media marketing;
Influencer

Abstract   Research and applied evidence suggest that online opinion leaders are important promoters of products and services. However, managers and firms need to choose which opinion leaders to work with and better understand how to collaborate with those leaders to promote different types of products and services. Online opinion leaders should be used to promote the experiential (hedonic) and functional (utilitarian) value of products and services over different online forums. In this article, we describe how online opinion leaders can serve appeal leadership functions, serve knowledge leadership functions, and take multiple roles (e.g., experts, celebrities, micro-celebrities, micro-influencers, early adopters, market mavens, enthusiasts). We then present a five-stage planning process designed to guide partnerships with online opinion leaders. Specific steps in the process include: planning (setting the objectives of the campaign and the role of online opinion leaders), recognition (identifying influential and relevant online opinion leaders), alignment (matching online opinion leaders and online forums with the products or services promoted), motivation (rewarding online opinion leaders in a way that aligns with their social role), and coordination (negotiating, monitoring, and supporting the influence of the online opinion leaders).

1. Online opinion leaders within social media channels

Social media platforms and websites that enable knowledge transfer through social networks and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) provide opportunities for contemporary marketers and firms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens,

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McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Platforms like You-Tube, Facebook, and Twitter have helped brands like Coke, Dove, GoPro, McDonald's, Samsung Mobile, Nike Football, Oreo, KFC, PlayStation, Converse, and Red Bull market their products more effectively (Lin, Swarna, & Bruning, 2017). However, the mere adoption of social media technology no longer provides the competitive edge that it provided even 5 years ago. Today, everybody is on social media, including competing companies. The question is no longer whether to use social media, but how to best use social media to market brands, products, and services more effectively.

Practical advice for the management of social media marketing campaigns is available to guide the strategic management of social media activities according to specific social media functions (Kietzmann et al., 2011), to guide the integration of social media strategies to reach consumers across platforms (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), to integrate social media with the overall marketing strategy of a brand or firm (Killian & McManus, 2015), to design a social media (Facebook) page to promote a personal brand (Lin, 2017), and to manage social media brand posts to be more engaging across specific culturally based markets (Lin et al., 2017). While some of these guidelines imply the importance of online opinion leaders within broader social media campaigns, marketers need more specific guidelines on how to partner effectively with online opinion leaders within these broader social media campaigns. In this article, we intend to help marketers leverage the social networks underlying these social media platforms by providing prescriptive advice on how to work with online opinion leaders to promote brands, sell products, and provide services.

Opinion leaders are individuals likely to influence others within their immediate environment that can include one's neighbors, friends, and coworkers, as well as people with broader societal status like celebrities, experts, and other influential members within our online and offline communities. Opinion leaders tend to be better informed than the average person, and in the past were often more exposed to mass media channels (Weimann, 1994). In marketing, the concept of opinion leadership originated from the diffusion of innovations theory, which describes how individuals indirectly alter the attitudes and behaviors of others via social influence (Rogers, 1995). More specifically, they can influence the purchasing decisions of others due to their personal appeal or connection with consumers, as well as their specialized knowledge and/or authority on a given topic. In contemporary markets, these opinion leaders often operate online using social media forums to influence their followers (Hsu, Lin, & Chiang, 2013; Tsang & Zhou, 2005; Watts, 2007). However, research suggests that consumers respond differently to whether products provide experiential (hedonic) and functional (utilitarian) value (e.g., Im, Bhat, & Lee, 2015; Moore, 2015), implying that this distinction is critical to the effectiveness of online opinion leaders' endorsements for certain products. A typical example of a hedonic product would be a pair of Gucci satin mid-heel knee boots, while a typical example of a utilitarian product would be a pair of ECCO waterproof hiking boots. Herein, we describe how online opinion leaders can promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products or services by fostering personal attachment and providing useful information. We conclude by outlining some prescriptive guidelines for partnering with online opinion leaders.

2. Online opinion leaders' influence on utilitarian and hedonic value

Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have played a critical role in the success of electronic commerce, have changed the way people interact, and have created platforms for online opinion leaders to serve as brand ambassadors and influencers for products and services. These sites provide the opportunity for opinion leaders to interact with their followers and to share information that consumers seek to acquire. Offline opinion leadership and traditional word-of-mouth communications involve face-to-face information exchange between friends, relatives, or acquaintances. In these interactions, the opinion leaders' influence is direct and they are considered as individuals who are highly informed, respected, and socially connected. Online opinion leadership usually involves eWOM in which information and opinions are transmitted through writing, video, pictures, or emotion-laden characters (i.e., emoticons or emojis) over the internet. A result of these more detached and technological forms of eWOM is that online opinion leaders can have more diverse social connections that involve a greater number of what could be weaker relationships. From a marketing perspective, while online opinion leaders might have less influence on any one consumer that they interact with, they are more likely to have a much greater scope of influence, as they can reach thousands or even millions of potential customers.

Online opinion leaders play a pivotal role in marketing communication, as they can provide informal consumption-related advice to others (Tsang & Zhou, 2005; Watts, 2007). Opinion leaders tend to

be more socially connected with higher status, education, and social prestige, giving them the capability to influence followers (Li & Du, 2011). These characteristics make them respected sources of information who possess new and valuable insight, while also being personable and easy for potential customers to identify with. Indeed, online opinion leaders have played instrumental roles in previous marketing campaigns. When Dunkin' Donuts launched its Latte Lite product it used 3,000 consumers to spread the word about the product, reaching 111,272 consumers over 12 weeks. The company experienced increased sales by 26% in test markets (Bao & Chang, 2014). In 2010, when mobile phone manufacturer HTC introduced a Windows-based smartphone, it hired 1,000 T-Mobile or AT&T customers to write product reviews and post their comments on both Facebook and Twitter. HTC reached more than 234,000 consumers, increasing brand awareness significantly (Bao & Chang, 2014).

Consumers can be motivated to purchase products and services according to both the utilitarian and hedonic value that these products and services provide (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). *Utilitarian value* accrues through tangible and functional benefits experienced or anticipated by the consumer, such as fast smartphone data speeds, potent revitalization from an energy drink, or reliable high-quality auto repair. This value is governed by functional motivations related to tangible aspects of product assortment, product quality, convenience, price, and benefits. Utilitarian value is provided through the fulfillment of functional needs and is often recognized through rational decision making (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). *Hedonic value* is more subjective and symbolic; it can be reflected in the social status implied by staying at a luxury hotel, the dynamic image portrayed by driving a sports car, or the implied social authenticity projected when drinking particular craft beers. These motivations are much less functional and often relate to non-tangible aspects such as store clientele, personal (and social) product identification, reputation, social interactions, and enjoyable experiences. Hedonic value is often more vaguely felt or sensed by consumers (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982).

Both utilitarian and hedonic value relate to consumers' reactions to product creativity, presentation, and promotions (Im et al., 2015; Klein & Melnyk, 2016; Roggeveen, Grewal, Townsend, & Krishnan, 2015), as well as consumers' online shopping behavior (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013; Moore, 2015). These two types of perceived value are likely to operate in parallel for any given consumer decision, whereby perceived hedonic value would

impact consumer judgment through an automatic process and utilitarian value would operate through a conscious evaluative process (Bond, Bettman, & Luce, 2009). Research suggests that these two processes can operate in a parallel or sequential manner (Bhargave, Chakravarti, & Guha, 2015; Im et al., 2015) and can also be related to each other (Aydinli, Bertini, & Lambrecht, 2014; Bhargave et al., 2015; Bond et al., 2009). Thus, a given product can possess different levels of utilitarian and hedonic value for any given consumer. Furthermore, some products will have both high utilitarian value and high hedonic value, like Apple computers for tech-savvy Mac enthusiasts. Conversely, other products might only have relatively moderate utilitarian or hedonic value, such as generic store-brand scented candles or a dollar-store garden shovel. This utilitarian and hedonic value is perceived and evaluated by consumers (Batra & Ahtola, 1991), and can differ according to characteristics of the consumer and the environment (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), making it highly susceptible to influence from marketers and opinion leaders.

Based on the distinction between utilitarian and hedonic value, we explain how and why certain types of opinion leadership functions, such as appeal leadership functions or knowledge leadership functions, can influence consumers' perceptions of the utilitarian and hedonic value of a particular product or service. This explanation is based on concurrent value enhancing processes that include: (1) increasing personal attachment with the product to promote its hedonic value and (2) providing functional information about the product to promote its utilitarian value. Indeed, research on dual-systems processing would suggest that these two types of value can co-occur to either increase or decrease a product's overall value for a particular consumer (Bond et al., 2009; Im et al., 2015). In Sections 2 through 4, we describe the processes of personal attachment and functional information, the types of online opinion leaders who can both enhance personal attachment and provide functional information, and some of the online forums used to exert their influence.

2.1. Increasing personal attachment with the product to promote its hedonic value

Online opinion leaders can foster consumers' personal attachment to a product in order to increase its hedonic value due to both consumers' connections to the opinion leader and the opinion leader's (apparent) connection to the product. Opinion leaders carry a certain social prestige with their follower base that can foster consumers' identification

with the opinion leader and makes the opinion leader's message more personally appealing (Jin & Phua, 2014). People can look up to valued family members, friends, and community members in their personal lives (Miller & Mushfiq Mobarak, 2015), as well as more socially distant opinion leaders with varying degrees of celebrity status (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017; Knoll & Matthes, 2017). When celebrities or other popular figures endorses a product or service online, they attach their social status and personal brand to that product or service (Thomson, 2006). For example, when Oprah promotes a book as one of her favorites by including it in Oprah's Book Club, she integrates the hedonic value associated with her personal brand—which has a strong appeal to female consumers—with the product. Bethany Mota is an online opinion leader who appeals to a much younger consumer base. She talks about her fashion purchases and tips, and connects to her audience through the personal connection she establishes through her online communications. As of February 2017, her YouTube channel had over 10 million subscribers and garnered over 900 million views since it launched in June 2009. She attributes her online success to her ability to engage with her audience on a personal level, connecting them to her personal brand and the products she promotes. Online opinion leaders can also create a personal connection with consumers in a less personalized manner, whereby they represent an ideal that is personally desirable for the consumer. During the Ford Fiesta Movement campaign in 2009, Ford gave 100 company-selected agents from across the U.S. a new Ford Fiesta to drive for 6 months. The agents represented ideals of energy, vitality, fun, and adventure that could appeal to segments of the market without necessarily relying exclusively on the distinct personalities of the individual agents. In general, opinion leaders can connect consumers with the product on a personal level. This connection allows the opinion leader's interest and involvement with the product (Chan & Mishra, 1990) to be contagious and influence the consumer.

2.2. Providing functional information about the product to promote its utilitarian value

Online opinion leaders also provide important functional information to drive the utilitarian value of products through the breadth, timeliness, and detail of specialist information, as well as domain-specific authority. Information provided by others is a dominant source of pre-purchase information used by customers (Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005). Often the information provided by opinion leaders is not perceived by consumers to be motivated purely by commercial interests (Bao & Chang, 2014). Thus, their opinions are considered more credible and influential than other forms of company-sponsored promotion. This direct feedback on prior customers' experiences is also more relatable to consumers (Smith et al., 2005). Furthermore, opinion leaders are likely to be more interested in learning about the product (Bloch, 1986), enabling them to share the newest and most important information (Walsh, Gwinner, & Swanson, 2004). Opinion leaders can also possess more specialized knowledge about a certain field than others, which can give them a certain authority in the eyes of consumers (Nair, Manchanda, & Bhatia, 2010). Thus, partnering with respected industry experts could help companies gain consumer trust in the company's message (Hsu et al., 2013). This expert authority applies to any domain where an individual has verifiable expertise. For example, the YouTube videos of Jay P. Morgan's The Slanted Lens channel involves photography tips and advice. On the channel, he leverages his expertise gained through over 20 years of photography experience and associated acclaim as he recommends procedures, products, and his consulting services. His videos often end with a list of his sponsors. Jamie Oliver, professional chef and spokesperson for his own Jamie Oliver brand as well as brands such as Sobeys and T-fal cookware, is another example of an online opinion leader. He shares expert advice through his online channels while also endorsing certain products and lifestyles.

3. Identifying online opinion leadership functions and roles

Opinion leaders can fulfill a variety of social roles in both online and offline contexts that help them influence social contacts, fans, and followers. They can assume the roles of celebrities (Chung, Derdenger, & Srinivasan, 2013; Jin & Phua, 2014; Knoll & Matthes, 2017), micro-celebrities (Khamis et al., 2017), micro-influencers or hubs (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann, & Hong, 2009), experts and high-reputation informants (Hsu et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2010), market mavens (Walsh et al., 2004), early adopters (Du & Kamakura, 2011), and product enthusiasts (Bloch, 1986). Distilling these findings, we suggest that these various online opinion leadership roles can serve two general functions: (1) appeal leadership functions whereby the opinion leader increases their fans' and followers' psychological attachment to a

product or service, and (2) knowledge leadership functions, where the opinion leader provides useful information about a given product or service.

Through the appeal leadership function, online opinion leaders increase their fans' and followers' psychological experience with an attachment to a given product or service according to a positive association with a desirable personal brand (e.g., Thomson, 2006). When effective, this function is expected to increase hedonic value through enhancing consumers' expectations of a positive experience with a product or service. Through the knowledge leadership role, online opinion leaders provide persuasive functional information about a given product or service (Hsu et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2010) and can convince consumers of the usefulness and/or economy of the product or service. When effective, this function is expected to promote utilitarian value by persuading consumers to hold more favorable evaluations of the product or service according to the knowledge they are exposed to via the online opinion leader. It is also likely that online opinion leaders will serve multiple functions. For example, Jamie Oliver and Paula Deen are both experts at cooking but have also gained celebrity status within certain target markets due to their charisma. They likely serve both knowledge and appeal leadership functions for certain products and consumers. Similarly, Michael Jordan, Danica Patrick, Serena Williams, and David Beckham are all professional athletes who carry a certain expert authority within their athletic domain while also holding the personal appeal of celebrities. Each operates within their domain of excellence to provide a knowledge leadership function, while also being accessible and charismatic to provide an appeal leadership function.

As alluded to above, there are also specific online opinion leadership roles, such as experts, celebrities, micro-celebrities, market mavens, early adopters, enthusiasts, and other micro-influencers. These roles will differ according to their social reach (i.e., the number of followers they have), the degree to which their personal brand can be considered one of their primary professions, and the degree to which the product and/or service is related to their primary domain of knowledge and/or expertise. Most online opinion leaders have more than one role. Professional actors, like Jennifer Lawrence or Tom Hanks, are likely to be experts at acting; and professional singers like Beyoncé or Bono are likely to be experts at singing and performing. However, each of these celebrities also displays considerable charisma and various levels of accessibility over social media. Similarly, high-profile experts like Jamie Oliver, Paula Deen, and Shaquille

O'Neal all have achieved world-class recognition for their domain-specific expertise and talent but also have a unique charisma. This combination of expertise/talent and charisma characterizes these high-profile public figures as both celebrities and experts, enabling both their appeal and knowledge leadership functions. Many lower profile micro-celebrities, early adopters, and micro-influencers will also tend to fulfill multiple opinion leadership roles. Thus, the following categories should be considered as various online opinion leadership roles that an individual can hold, at the same time, to influence an online audience.

Experts can have specialized knowledge and skill in a given industry or applied domain (e.g., Chung et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2010), and can often communicate via blogs (Hsu et al., 2013). Experts can validate and prove the usefulness of specific products and services, and they tend to have a large, and often very large, professional following given their prominent status within a particular domain. In this regard, their domain of expertise is highly related to both their personal brand and professional role. Celebrities can endorse a brand to generate positive eWOM and influence a product's success through consumers' attachment to the celebrity and the product (Chung et al., 2013; Jin & Phua, 2014; Knoll & Matthes, 2017; Thomson, 2006). Oprah is one such celebrity who has harnessed her own personal brand to market a wide range of products. Celebrities are characterized by their very large social following and the fact that their personal brand is fully integrated with their profession. Micro-celebrities are people made famous by their self-branding activities on the internet (Khamis et al., 2017). They can be fashion or food bloggers, vine comedians with millions of views, or Twitter users who treat their followers like valued fans. Bethany Mota is one such micro-celebrity who is known for her YouTube videos where she provides fashion purchase tips. Micro-celebrities are also characterized by a very large social following that is specific to social media, and their personal brands are fully integrated with their role/profession on social media.

Micro-influencers are anyone on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, blogs, or other forms of social media with a relatively small follower base (i.e., less than 10,000 followers) of highly engaged and extremely attentive users (Mediakix, 2016). Researchers studying social networks refer to them as hubs or just local connections (Goldenberg et al., 2009; Miller & Mushfiq Mobarak, 2015). The main difference between celebrities (including micro-celebrities) and what we call micro-influencers is that there is a greater geographical and/or social

distance between the celebrity and their followers. Conversely, micro-influencers might interact with contacts and followers through both online and offline communications due to relatively close geographic proximity. They might also communicate primarily with their pre-established contacts within their social network that could include their family and friends. By definition, micro-influencers will also tend to have smaller follower bases.

Online opinion leaders can also be early adopters, consumers who purchase or use a product (or service) before the majority of the rest of the market (Du & Kamakura, 2011); market mavens, people who have considerable knowledge about multiple elements of a market and interact with other consumers by initiating discussions and responding to questions about the market (Walsh et al., 2004); or enthusiasts, people who display a strong involvement with a product, which can be more pronounced in certain situations and can endure over time (Bloch, 1986). These early adopters, market mavens, and product enthusiasts are less likely to have their primary profession fully integrated with their personal brand or a specific product or service domain, as these alignments are likely to classify an individual as an expert. However, they can share information on new products with their social contacts online to promote the utilitarian value of a product. In this regard, experts might have more information on a generalized product domain, while enthusiasts and early adopters could have more information on the product itself. Trevor James is one such travel and food enthusiast who documents his travels and rates different foods from local restaurants and vendors. His YouTube channel has gained over 500,000 subscribers and 60 million views between March 2013 and February 2017. Any particular online opinion leader can serve appeal leadership functions, knowledge leadership functions, and fulfill multiple roles.

4. Forums of online opinion leadership

Social media outlets like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, online blogs, and video blogs (vlogs) can be used by marketers to spread positive eWOM about their products and services through online opinion leaders. Many online opinion leaders operate on multiple forums simultaneously, helping them reach a broader and more diverse audience. This breadth of influence often reflects the strategic approach taken by larger companies with ample resources and a diverse target market. For example, many important social media channels were

used in the Ford Fiesta Movement campaign, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, so that the potential consumers could follow the activities of the 100 Fiesta agents. However, there are also instances in which a company should focus on a specific forum and associated target market out of necessity, as smaller companies could have fewer resources to invest or might need to focus on a specific channel to target a specific group of consumers. For example, a local restaurant in Taiwan might focus its promotions primarily on Pixnet.net, a blog platform with the highest traffic among all social media sites in Taiwan (Lin, 2017), by partnering with local food bloggers. When evaluating potential forums for online opinion leadership, managers and companies should consider both the target market they intend to reach and the function of the forum. Table 1 presents a simple overview of some specific forms of online opinion leadership.

5. Five guidelines for working with online opinion leaders

We present a five-step planning process to help guide marketers in the strategic use of online opinion leaders in Figure 1. These suggestions are provided for business-to-consumer companies that have an online social media presence. While there are likely to be very different resources available for large firms as opposed to small firms, the following steps are suggested for both. In this regard, marketers should consider the nature of their markets and the resources that they have to invest in the partnership(s) with online opinion leaders when adapting the proposed guidelines to their specific needs. Next, we explain considerations for working with online opinion leaders: planning, recognition, alignment, motivation, and coordination.

5.1. Planning: Set the objectives of the marketing campaign and the role of the online opinion leaders

The first step of any marketing campaign involves establishing the objectives or goals of the campaign, or in this case the goals and objectives of the online opinion leadership partnership/campaign. These specific objectives are likely to align with a company's broader social media strategy. Establishing these objectives makes the campaign more strategic and will likely influence which opinion leaders should be selected, the nature and duration of these partnerships, and what content should be provided to the online opinion leaders.

Table 1.   Forums for online opinion leadership

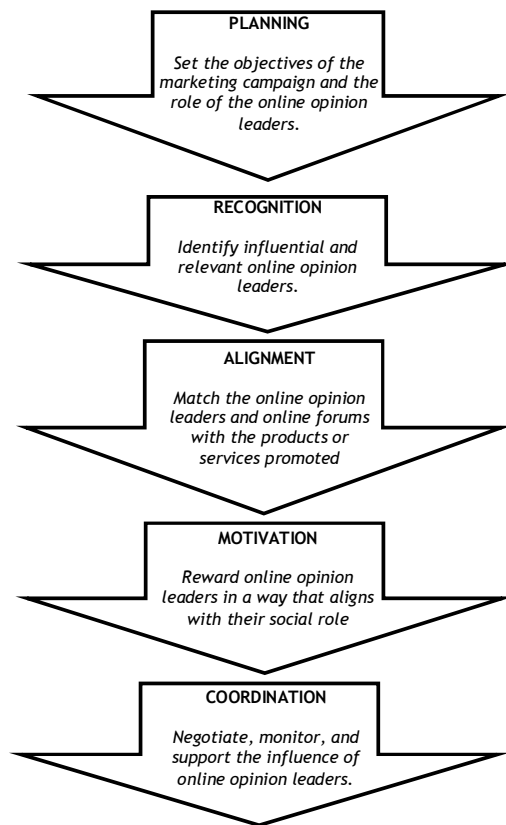| Online forum	Description	Benefits for hedonic and utilitarian value
Facebook	A social networking site where people and companies can create either pages, profiles, or groups.	Facebook's flexibility in terms of post length and content variety (e.g., text, photos, videos, and embedded links) facilitates the promotion of both utilitarian and hedonic value.
Twitter	A microblogging site that allows simple messages, 'tweets', of up to 280 characters.	An advantage of Twitter is its simplicity and its role as a link to more detailed content, facilitating both utilitarian and hedonic value.
Instagram	A social media site that allows people to post an image and short comment.	Instagram could have benefits over other social media channels for products and services, whereby the value of the product or service can successfully be conveyed through a picture with minimal additional text, making it more effective for conveying hedonic value than utilitarian value.
Blog	A website that provides information in a series of posts that can provide detailed and comprehensive descriptions of a product or service domain that can also include videos, photos, and text.	Blogs have the advantage over other social media channels as they allow more detail to be shared. While blogs can facilitate personal attachment (to promote hedonic value) and provide useful information (to promote utilitarian value), they are comparatively more capable of providing useful information than many other social media channels.
Video blogs (e.g., YouTube)	A website, or website channel, which provides information through the creation and posting of videos about a range of content.	Video blogs can provide both entertainment and useful information that can apply to peoples' personal and professional lives. They have similar benefits as blogs for promoting hedonic and utilitarian value, while also allowing greater vividness and entertainment.

For example, the target market and ideal online opinion leaders will be quite different for a large multinational sports apparel company than for a smaller company that provides veterinary services within a highly specific geographic region. In this regard, the multinational sports apparel company would seek opinion leaders that would appeal to a very large and diverse target market. It would also aim to create a presence on a wide range of social media forums to increase exposure to its target market(s). Conversely, the smaller and local veterinary company would target a more specific audience (i.e., pet owners in the target region) and focus on social media outlets that would allow it to focus its message on these consumers. In this case, the company might choose to create a blog or vlog that describes important information and get local micro-influencers to promote it on their social media channels. The company's expected stability in goals for partnership(s) with online opinion leader(s) over time is also an important consideration. A large

multinational company might set multi-year goals for its partnerships, while a small five-person company could need to change its goals monthly as it adapts within a competitive environment.

Marketers should plan their online opinion leadership campaign according to the following questions:

- What are the specific markets being targeted through the partnership with one or more opinion leaders?

- What specific outcomes will be sought from the partnership (e.g., increased awareness, improved attitudes, or increased sales)?

- What resources (e.g., money, time, personnel, technology) can be invested in the partnership?

- How stable, as opposed to variable, are the company's goals likely to be over the course of the partnership?

Figure 1.   A five-stage strategy for using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of products and services

PLANNING

Set the objectives of the marketing campaign and the role of the online opinion leaders.

RECOGNITION

Identify influential and relevant online opinion leaders.

ALIGNMENT

Match the online opinion leaders and online forums with the products or services promoted

MOTIVATION

Reward online opinion leaders in a way that aligns with their social role

COORDINATION

Negotiate, monitor, and support the influence of online opinion leaders.

Note: This figure outlines considerations that marketers should make when using online opinion leaders to promote the hedonic and utilitarian value of their products and services. These considerations are presented in sequence to help marketers ensure that they have completed the appropriate background work for each step in their decision-making. As multiple iterations of the process will be likely, the stages may also be parallel and simultaneous. Decisions could also need to be revised. Thus, marketers should be aware that they might have to go back to earlier considerations if their decisions seem to need revision.

Based on this information, marketers could create a generic profile of the opinion leader roles and the proposed function of these roles in the planned partnership(s).

5.2. Recognition: Identify influential and relevant online opinion leaders

Research suggests that a small proportion of online opinion leaders have considerably more influence than all of the other people discussing product information online (Kim & Tran, 2013). When considering which online opinion leaders to select, companies should consider both the resources they have to engage and support the opinion leaders as well as the roles and functions that they intend for the online opinion leaders to serve in the partnership. In this case, large companies might have considerable resources to invest in partnerships with multiple online opinion leaders, while smaller companies might be much more restricted in the number or prominence of opinion leaders that they partner with. For example, large companies like Nike can hire many elite professional athletes to multimillion-dollar endorsement deals that involve online posts and content regarding the company's brand. Conversely, small local startup companies might rely on local micro-influencers who are willing to promote the company online based on their personal relationship with the company. Companies also need to consider the specific markets they intend to target through the partnership. Different channels are used by different target groups, and these markets will likely be accessed through partnerships with different opinion leaders that could be more present on specific forums. Of course, some of the most prominent opinion leaders, like celebrities or professional experts-for-hire, could be on multiple platforms. However, these opinion leaders could also cost more to partner with.

Marketers should consider working with online opinion leaders that have these seven characteristics:

1. High social appeal;

2. A reflection of the members or the ideals of the target market;

3. Some degree of experience with or expertise relevant to the product;

4. An established pattern of social media activity;

5. An established—and hopefully growing—online following;

6. A demonstrated alignment with the specific market they wish to target; and

7. A collaboration cost or fee that is congruent with what the company has to offer.

Marketers should also consider the benefits and feasibility of partnering with multiple opinion leaders.

5.3. Alignment: Match the online opinion leaders and online forums with the products or services promoted

Social networking sites are attractive channels through which to market products because consumers are connected to each other on various platforms. However, marketers should seek to capitalize on this consumer buzz in an authentic and useful manner, as matching endorsers to products can make promotions more effective (Knoll & Matthes, 2017). Marketers should select online opinion leaders according to the online forum and associated market they intend to target. They should also consider whether the online opinion leaders provide the hedonic and/or utilitarian value important for the target consumers. In this regard, marketers promoting products with utilitarian or functional characteristics like usefulness, moderate price, accessibility, and flexibility in features should ensure that they partner with those who can effectively serve a knowledge leadership function and promote the usefulness of the product. Partnering with an online opinion leader who can promote the hedonic value of the product could provide an additional benefit for this type of product (Bhargave et al., 2015; Klein & Melnyk, 2016). Conversely, marketers promoting a product that has primarily hedonic characteristics, such as prestige,

identification, enjoyment, and general positive experience, should focus on partnering with those who can serve an appeal leadership function. Promoting the utilitarian value of these products or services might not be a worthwhile investment (Klein & Melnyk, 2016). Of course, many products could have both utilitarian and hedonic characteristics. Thus, marketers should seek online opinion leaders that serve both knowledge and appeal leadership functions by either partnering with an online opinion leader that can fulfill both functions or partner with multiple online opinion leaders who can fulfill different functions.

In practice, this step is likely to involve evaluating, ranking, and selecting which online opinion leader(s) to partner with according to both the online opinion leader's channel of influence (i.e., online forum), as well as their personal attributes and functions. Marketers should consider the following points when emphasizing specific channels for online opinion leaders:

- The channel should be used frequently by the target market;

- Blogs and vlogs might be the most effective channels for providing useful information to increase utilitarian value since they allow more detailed information; and

- Social networking channels like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter could help support the appeal function that increases hedonic value, and also allow embedded links that can connect consumers to sites with useful information to increase utilitarian value.

Marketers seeking to match with online opinion leaders should also consider the following:

- What channel(s) are within the online opinion leader's domain of influence;

- Online opinion leaders selected to promote the hedonic value of products/services should serve an appeal leadership function with the target market;

- Online opinion leaders selected to promote the utilitarian value of products/services should serve a knowledge leadership function within the product/service domain; and

- When possible, online opinion leaders should promote both hedonic and utilitarian value,

while emphasizing the appeal leadership function for hedonic products/services and knowledge leadership function for utilitarian products/services.

5.4. Motivation: Reward online opinion leaders in a way that aligns with their social role

Online opinion leaders share information for various personal reasons. Those reasons could be that they enjoy the status and positive attention gained by a large social media following; that they are deeply interested in a product/service or product/service domain (e.g., cooking, fishing, or home repair); or that they get paid or compensated by the brand(s) they promote. This motivation will not be constant, as opinion leaders' lives could change, their views of the product could change, their personal values and priorities could change, and their interests could change. The monetary value of their time could also change. Marketers will be challenged to keep opinion leaders motivated to share positive views and information on products and services over time. Marketers will also want to assess whether they want to maintain the relationship with the online opinion leaders over time. In some cases, it might be in the interest of one or even both parties to partner on a one-time collaboration. If marketers do want to continue the partnership with an online opinion leader, and this sentiment is mutual, they will want to motivate these online opinion leaders according to the following guidelines:

- Use feasible rewards that can keep online opinion leaders interested in promoting the product/service, like social status, product involvement, "insider" product/service information, discounts, free merchandise, or other sources of monetary value; and

- Match the rewards with the opinion leader's role in his/her network or channel to ensure the opinion leader's continued authenticity and internal desire to promote the product/service.

5.5. Coordination: Negotiate, monitor, and support the influence of online opinion leaders

The activities of online opinion leaders must be negotiated to align with the objectives of the partnership according to the campaign objectives outlined in step one. Marketers should coordinate how the partnership(s) fit with their objectives and business environment over time. In this regard,

an important component of coordination will be tracking and evaluating partnership effectiveness over time, providing feedback to the opinion leader(s), and discussing modifications to the partnership or activities. These evaluations and follow-up communications should be linked to the campaign objectives and, in some cases, could indicate possible benefits of ending the partnership. Companies should also be careful to follow national, regional, or industry-specific guidelines, regulations, taxes, and agreements when working with online opinion leaders. In 2015, retailer Lord & Taylor partnered with 50 influential fashionistas on Instagram to post a picture of themselves wearing the same Lord & Taylor dress on the same day (Adweek, 2015). However, the Federal Trade Commission complained that Lord & Taylor went against its newly published native advertising guidelines by allegedly paying the posters between $1,000 and $4,000 each to post the photo, but failed to disclose that information on the post (Stewart, 2016). Lord & Taylor was not penalized, but the instance should emphasize that regulatory standards should be closely followed when collaborating with online opinion leaders.

The activities of online opinion leaders can also be facilitated and enhanced through coordination. Online opinion leaders can be even more effective if they are provided with supporting material, such as links to information, informative product briefs, results of product performance tests, and other content that could help support the appeal and information provided in their communications of product or service details. This information could be provided on the company's website with easily attachable links. It could also be delivered to the online opinion leaders that have an established relationship with the brand via email or personal message. While the content provided will be partnership specific, marketers should consider:

- How the activities of the online opinion leader(s) should be negotiated and coordinated to match the company's objectives over time;

- How these activities and the results of these activities can be tracked over time;

- The adherence to regulations or standards that should be followed;

- What could be provided to online opinion leaders to facilitate their sharing of positive and supportive information about the product/service; and

- How this information could be provided so that online opinion leaders receive it, use it, and share it.

6. Strategically embracing and empowering online opinion leaders

Social media has become a critical channel through which firms market their products to consumers, and managers have begun to formulate more detailed social media marketing strategies. These strategies often involve online opinion leaders as implicit, yet critical, intermediaries. However, current managerial guidelines only provide vague and general suggestions to identify and facilitate the influence of these online opinion leaders. In this regard, managers could face a highly abstract goal to achieve without specific guidelines. We hope to provide specific guidance on this important aspect of a company's broader social media marketing strategy through detailed suggestions on how managers can foster and maintain strategic partnerships with online opinion leaders to facilitate the company's broader social media strategy. Generally, companies should consider partnering with online opinion leaders working in the social media channels where they exert their influence according to the company's needs, resources, and intentions to promote the hedonic and/or utilitarian value of the products. Companies should also provide ongoing incentives and support to online opinion leaders, which complies with relevant standards and regulations, to motivate and facilitate the promotions. Finally, companies should monitor the campaign's progress over time according to the company's goals and broader social media strategy.

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