

Evolution of Blogs as a Credible Marketing Communication Tool

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Abstract

The fervor with which internet has been adopted for communication has certainly surprised proponents of traditional mainstream media. The opening decade of the new millennium has experienced the first examples of true two-way marketing “conversations” between customers and some of the world’s leading consumer brands. Driven by a confluence by innovation, competition and big shifts in consumer behavior, the dialogue between brands and their customers is expected to replace the traditional marketing monologue. At present successful examples of blog usage abounds the virtual world, which was not the case initially when blogs were adopted as a mode to communicate with the influencers and end customers. This case study discusses several stumbling instances of marketers to exemplify their wading in the blogosphere. It also takes into purview the increasing influence of blogs, its evolution and adoption, for marketing communication purposes. A reality check of the fledgling blogosphere on the digital medium is taken to find out the activities of corporate marketers, and how/ what can be learnt from the travails of marketers across the world. The case particularly focuses on the malfeasance of blogs by marketers as they experiment with the tenacity of blogs in the cyber world.

Introduction

The pace of evolution and adoption of internet has facilitated the development of **Consumer Generated Media- CGM** or user generated content on the cyber world, which has compelled the marketers to rethink their marketing communication guidelines. The convergence of media and technology has given customers the prerogative to personalize and present their voices with effectiveness. One such outcomes has been the progression of **Consumer Generated Media- CGM**, which also includes blogging and micro blogging on social networking sites such as Twitter, Google, Windows Live Spaces, etc. **Consumer Generated Media** has begun to prove itself as an outstanding tool for not only social networking, but also as an effective interactive communication medium in the realm of business. But recognition of blogs as a convincing tool did not come naturally to the marketers. An integration of online and offline communication activities by traditionalists was not only tough but also extremely difficult to adopt. The mechanical route was to pass on planning and execution to the time-tested old hat veterans of conventional media, but unfortunately this strategy backfired scathingly; bringing in a lot of flak to many esteemed marketers. This further led to repulsion to the online communication activities by many leading brands, only to disagree with their approach later on.

As a result, the approach of marketing communication involved too much of experimentation or too much of restraint, whenever **CGM** was considered. An indecisive reluctance ultimately resulted in marketers opening up for discussions on corporate blogs but again the process remained censored thus humbling any efforts. But with passage of time, it has dawned to many

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a marketers that online medium has become indispensable and is a potential asset in its own right. Moreover marketers who had financial constraints to promote their products greeted and adopted this digital handshake eagerly. With an online medium the mix of media channels has shifted from a one way broadcast model to a set of dynamic two way media for forums. Now, consumers not only talk back to marketers and interact with marketing messages, but also reshape and distribute those messages through global communities. Marketers can take control of the relationships and create new opportunities to directly reach, connect with, and influence consumers. Unlike the past, now marketers can listen to consumers in real-time, or predict what they are going to do or say. But now, they can—and they do [1]. In spite of increasing **CGM** acceptance, many marketers had a tendency to discount blogs as a fad. As it turns out emphatically, companies can no more sidestep online medium with a casual approach, therefore online marketing is no longer considered as “the other medium”, supplementing print, television, radio or outdoor advertising. Instead, companies are drawn from their experience with online techniques and technologies to reinvent the whole corporate marketing function.

This case study converges on the travails of blogs during their evolution as an effective mode of communications by marketers. The case further discusses credibility resurrection efforts by marketers’ in instances where they misconstrued the medium’s novelty and exploited it to their self-interests. The case study puts an effort to emphasize the imposing uniqueness of the new communication medium and online communication issues.

Blogs: Recognition of Individualized Opinions

Much like products, media may also have life cycles. In the beginning there was a medium. And it was fair. And the marketer took it and shaped it to his own purpose. Television began the infomercial. Telephones began the telemarketer. And internet began the e- marketer. But, the cynosure of modern era is Consumer Generated Media –**CGM** which is a variety of new and emerging sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used with consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues. The case discusses about blogs- one of the manifestations of Consumer Generated Media- **CGM** which has clearly created a lot of hype and are being intently sought by marketers [2].

For a consumer, exposure to this interactive medium has unraveled, unparalleled & unbridled expression/ exhibition prospects to be availed with equal authority without any qualifications, and one of its demonstrations is in the form of blogs. A **blog** (short for weblog) is a corporate or personal online journal with reflections, expressions, comments, and often hyperlinks are provided by the writers. Blog displays in chronological order the postings by individuals and typically has links to comments on specific postings. As blogs provide first hand information to

its patrons, it gives a huge opportunity for the marketers to leverage its virtues to their benefits. Whereas a “**flog**” is a fake blog (sometimes referred to as a flack blog) having contrived plausible opinions and comments, fabricated by the marketers/ communicators to portray a favorable image of the company. “Flog” is in fact sponsored by marketers and the reason behind both forms is to arouse viral marketing that generates traffic and interest in a cause.

Though undoubtedly mainstream media-MSM- rules the roost, but in order to offset any constraints or to edge out in the cluttered media space, marketers need to be unique. Marketers for long have acknowledged word of mouth – WOM- references as the most credible and convincing method for a preferred behavior, now this WOM is being facilitated by technology via online modes. Although inspired by traditional marketers and marketing activities, online word of mouth is however owned and controlled by consumers, and it often carries far higher authority and confidence than traditional media. With opinion leaders or customers expressing themselves in the digital medium, it has become a tip-off platform impacting behavioral inclinations. This has led savvy marketers to adopt online medium out of need; but lack of any prior exposure and experience has taught them many important lessons which need to be watched for. Though, rhetoric on cyber world may be easily forgotten but is accessible for long, therefore it’s advisable to tread cautiously before venturing. Moreover, to the dismay of a marketer, even a small mistake is dissected thread bare on the internet. Multiple interpretations may give all possible twists and turns to facts giving birth to entirely new concepts unrealized initially. However, if desired results are sought, any improvised attitude should be disregarded [3].

Changing of Guards-The New Influentials

In the overlapping worlds of media and commerce, authority is shifting away from large institutions and corporations and congregating around smaller networks and individuals. The classical opinion makers operated with an embracing thought whereas the new influencers have more of a chaordic - blending of chaos and order – approach to their rhetoric. Much to the chagrin of old guards of mainstream media-MSM, prior to launch of any new commercial activity marketers deliberately tip-off clues via cyber mode, thus ensuring it to be hyped virally. Facilitating this entire diffusion are the online modes like *open diary*, *livejournal*, *blogger.com*, *youtube*, *twitter*, *orkut*, *dailymotion*, *facebook* etc expediting the spread of word of mouse virally.

And as reported quite convincingly in The New York Times, the next generation of customers i.e. “*Millennials*” -defined as those born between 1980 and 2000, don't read traditional newspapers (which they describe as too big and clunky), they like technology, they like consuming, and they like to consume technology. They are the future customers, employees and competitors. They are part of a new online generation. This emerging generation gets its information from online resources, of which blogging is one of the recognized form. They trust

each other as sources. A conspicuous reduction has been witnessed in reading newspapers, watching television or listening radio. They have remarkable resistance to marketing messages, particularly advertising. To decipher it in terms of marketing, customers can share their opinions online and influence tens of millions of people to buy from you – or not. Substantiating further a *Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey* of more than 25,000 Internet consumers, claims that people now trust recommendations and opinions from real friends 90 percent of the time, and from virtual strangers 70 percent of the time. In contrast, 62 percent of respondents indicated that they trusted TV ads, 54 percent trusted e-mails they signed up for, and 33 percent trusted online banner ads [4].

So, does that portend a huge opportunity for the marketers in the virtual world? Or if we offer something on the virtual platform it has a natural acceptance in the audience? Quite naturally, every silver lining has a potential cloud, and marketers have already started tripping over potential problems.

Caution is the Word

Another aspect, felt by pundits, that makes companies cagey to blogging is their loath to any runaway outcomes that may generate as a result of blogging. For many the fear of naivety being taken up by the mass media for unbridled lengths further acts as a deterrent. Experts also feel that digital medium is a phenomenon which will become interesting only when internet connectivity increases. That is why not much of lateral thinking has gone into using the digital medium as a mainstream activity. It's not only reluctance and reticence, but also the fear that blogs may prove to be a liability if the embraced open culture makes customers more demanding. The unwillingness to adopt a more responsive approach is also making marketers repulsive to adopt digital medium. But worldwide, with customers seeking for cues and latest information from the internet, blogs as Consumer generated media -**CGM** have started gaining clout.

Quite skillfully many guile and unscrupulous marketers have tried to exploit the virtues of the digital medium, wherein they craftily masked themselves as a proactive satisfied customer representing the cause of promoting a marketer. This has led to the controversial impression that the digital medium is mysterious and misleading. These indeterminate distinctions of blogs coupled with apprehensions of the outcomes have further brought in dispute and thus marketers could not exploit the benefits of blogs. Though all this confusion has not undermined the potential of blogs, but with different contradicting inferences, neither the customer and nor the marketer were able to establish the authenticity & potential of the medium. Quite bizarre, but even all this has not deterred either the consumers or the marketers, as tuning out of this mode of communication means becoming obsolete and ignoring the recency and pulse of the market which could prove detrimental to individual interests.

WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS [5]					
World Regions	Population (2009 Est.)	Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000	Internet Users Latest Data	Penetration (% Population)	Growth 2000-2009
WORLD TOTAL	6,767,805,208	360,985,492	1,802,330,457	26.6 %	399.3 %

Getting Equated Equitably

Thus internet has offered a communication mode which could be exploited; with the inequity of genuine veracity along with inflated veiled statements, enjoying guile anonymity. Of late, with the increasing penetration of internet via unconventional modes like cellular phones, and data card internet access has become even more convenient. And with internet as an information storehouse, potential prospects evaluate their decision alternatives/ opinions first on the internet and then take decisions. Blogs thus come handy with their exhaustive and pioneering provision of meticulous information to its readers.

Area	Traditional Marketing	Cyber Marketing
Promotional Method	Word of Mouth	Viral Marketing Word of Mouse
Product Communication	Broadcasting of Advertisement	Banner Ads
Public Relations Communication	Press Releases	Website Pressrooms
Personal Selling	Direct Mail	E-Mail
Distribution	Client to Client	Online Events
Payment Settlements	Channel Partners	Affiliate Marketing
	Paper Currency	Cyber Currency – Yenom.

Now the question arises that: Is blogging the next big communication medium? Increasingly, this is the question on the mind of many a professional communicators across the globe. A comprehensive look at the corporate landscape reveals that blogging is already entrenched but the roots will take time to expand.

Evolving from Experiences

In the new millennium controlled communication is passé as it is now established that organizations cannot keep facts under wrap. Though teething troubles were expected in the cyber world, but marketers who were quick and able to learn have leveraged the technology for their benefits. Marketers who have been used to traditional monologue communication got an eye-opening shock when they realized that they can no more be complacent after disseminating something inconsiderate, without any reaction from the targeted audience. Initial misadventures brought in bitter memories to be held for future learning and strategizing.

The fortuitous awakening to blogging and its impact has transpired in an unpleasant manner to many marketers, but it could be underlined with happenings that blogs are not at the mercy of the marketers for their wisdom. For companies anxious about how consumers and activists view their business practices, these new media channels present a brand new challenge, discouraging a traditional command-and-control approach to corporate communication and reputation management. Certainly it does put consumers on a more level playing field where the media cannot be controlled by a single master or where one can get his misdoing concealed and condoned. Mighty marketers were taken aback when they realized that the erstwhile arm-twisting pressure tactics used effectively to manipulate traditional media will not yield any results, instead any diktat for forceful compliance may escalate their losses. Therefore any company that tries to preserve some standpoints which differ from their corporate demeanor can expect to be nominated for scrutiny and disrespect. But the very first question which appears on everyone's mind is- Are bloggers capable of building any meaningful influence at all?

- **Kotaku** a blog on electronic items had a face-off with the electronic giant Sony. Kotaku purportedly substantiated a rumor story on its blog revealing in the process about a possible announcement of a new technology coming to Sony's Playstation 3 what was touted as a big secret by Sony. It was reported that the "Playstation Home", would be a fascinating blending of digital customized avatars and their achievements, allowing gamers to create a virtual world and then decorate that space with items unlocked through game play.

Panicked by the premature parturition, Sony asked Kotaku to drop the story. Sony's American representatives accentuated that the story was a rumor and publishing it could harm their professional relationship. When Kotaku declined to genuflect stating veracity of the facts which were independently verified by them, the blog was told that denial to comply would likely blackball them. Sony said Kotaku may have to return their debug PS3, & they will be uninvited from all meetings scheduled with Sony at Game Developers Conference-GDC, including one on blogger relations, and that Sony would no longer deal with Kotaku. When Kotaku went ahead with this story, the internet imploded supporting its stance and disapproving Sony's browbeating. All the websites,

newspapers, magazines, i.e. the entire cyber voice along with mainstream media-MSM reacted in unison and there was a pronto response to come forward; supporting Kotaku's decision. The echoing condemnation caused the Sr. Director, Corporate Communications- Sony Computer Entertainment America to call up the bloggers at Kotaku and resolve the issue. This resulted in both parties agreeing to disagree on some facts and disagreeing on other. To conclude the story remained up and Sony had to re-invite Kotaku to the meetings and interviews initially scheduled for the GDC [6 & 7]

- *On September 12, 2004 a blogger affirmed that a **Kryptonite Evolution 2000 U- Lock and Kryptonite Mini lock** can be opened with a BIC pen. This \$50 lock was supposed to be one of the best for "toughest bicycle security in moderate to high crime areas"; Kryptonite used to claim that the locks are resistant to "bolt cutters, saws, hammers and chisels." Even after this goof up, the traditional marketers at Kryptonite underestimated the influence of digital medium and responded thoughtlessly through more traditional PR methods by stating that its locks were effective. Within days videos were uploaded to forums and blogs showing how it could be done. More than 900,000 people jumped online to watch the videos, and the story was picked up by "The New York Times". By September 22, 2004, 1.8 million blog readers had seen the video compelling the company to announce a free product exchange at an estimated cost of US\$10 million.*

Thus in merely 10 days the reputation of the company was crippled by the blogging community. Unfortunately, belittling of blogs efficacy and reach of digital medium was learnt at a heavy cost by the company [8].

Unlike the past, now it is very difficult to suppress or influence opinions in the wake of empowered customers having access to the CGM on cyber world. Now, even a diminutive entity can hold up its stand against an entrenched marketer which clearly shows the ascendancy of the medium. Again it needs to be accentuated that blogs cannot be considered as a fad but a phenomenon which is here to stay and affect the way companies used to communicate with its audience. Moreover the recognition of blogs could have gone unnoticed till now, but cannot be discounted anymore, therefore remember that all creatures great and small are holy. Be it a member of existing traditional media or an obscure blogger demeaning this new medium or its constituents may cost companies dear.

However another thing which needs attention is the immediacy of response expected in digital communication. But then the question arises, that with an ever-increasing growth in numbers of blogs, what should be the strategy to monitor and respond to happenings on blogs?

Count on Them or Get Discounted

Though many experts may dismiss online discussions as insignificant but ignoring them could be a blunder. In fact marketers can gain deep insights by paying attention to people talking online about anything on their minds. Basically to put it, “It’s unadulterated, unfiltered information, straight from people’s brains—as opposed to information from facilitator-led focus groups, surveys, and other conventional market research.” And therefore, if these strong behavioral feelings are ignored, they may bring disgrace to seasoned marketers.

In hindsight, blogs and their discussions have given us classic examples which cannot be easily forgotten by marketers. Voices through blogs which were left unheeded on blogs became hallucination for the strategist. A lot was learnt as inertia from marketers was not accepted quietly by these empowered consumers. It resulted in a severe backlash, informing and repulsing many prospective customers who could have otherwise acted favorably to these marketers. It also brought to the front, the level of vigilance brought by the introduction of digital medium and blogs.

- *An incredible phenomenon in June 2005 challenged the status of then “Numero Uno” Dell Inc. in the laptop markets. Dell received some major complaints concerning its customer support services, which were not dealt appropriately. A similar repugnant experience compelled blogger Jeff Jarvis to post a series of rants on his blog Buzzmachine.com, while addressing his ordeal as “Dell Hell”, about his struggle with a Dell laptop he’d recently purchased.*

In a post titled “Dell lies. Dell sucks,” Jarvis asserted that the company has delivered a defective machine and defaulted on its promise of on-site service, asking him to send the machine back to Dell. As Jarvis’ problems continued, he began to refer to the ongoing saga in additional posts as “Dell Hell.” Unprecedentedly all this customer issue eventually broke onto the online pages of traditional media such as the BBC News, followed by a feature in The New York Times within two days of the blog post. This tirade was further discussed by the Guardian Unlimited and Business Week. Jarvis’ posts stimulated other customers to express their dissent who also began lodging their own negative experiences with Dell’s customer service. As a result of the bad press and Dell Inc.’s baffling reticence on the issue, the computer industry giant’s reputation began to plummet [9].

- *In 2005 Vichy, a division of French cosmetics giant **L’Oreal** planned for promoting an anti-aging cream “**Peel Micro Abrasion**”. It incorporated blog as a part of its integrated communication strategy that linked the blog to advertising and PR efforts, etc. But the*

effort came as a cropper. They started with a fake character named Claire who whined about the difficulties of insomnia while attending too many parties in a tone that was conspicuously genteel and contrived. Claire, who grieved over her advancing years, looked stunning, unlike someone who should be anxious with wrinkles. To aggravate issues comments were filtered. Neither RSS feed nor permalinks were enabled. In fact, it was a misnomer blog, which blatantly seemed to be a creation for getting incremental revenue. In fact, the communication agency had the inane audacity to issue a press release, boasting their fictitious character. Within hours of launch, bloggers were “censuring the brand for presenting a fake character.” A few days following the launch, the story was lapped up by France’s two most popular national newspapers criticizing the misadventures of the company [21].

Although it is uncertain to conclusively state the outcome had the marketers have acted with more attention and foresight. But certainly these instances provide a puzzling scenario, where the marketer needs to shift away from “push” marketing even further, may be, by providing mechanisms for customers to self-educate at will through different channels. At the same time, marketers can expect an increase in customer-initiated contact, which will force companies to react in real-time based on customer insight. But there is absolutely no doubt that it is the medium which facilitated the domino effect which resulted in intensified campaigning.

Virtually Real Cyber Vortex

Blissfully all the covetable virtues that a communicator dreamt of in a media are proportionately placed in **CGM** on the internet. A direct impersonal contact with high credence virtues is definitely a boon for the communicators. Marketers have also hit upon a jackpot in this internet facilitated **CGM** for eliciting and stimulating behavioral response from target groups. Cyber presence facilitated gleaning of first-hand overtures from individual critique without any intervention in any form, therefore authenticating facts from the customers at practically no cost or endurance, in the bargain.

As it happens with all promising things, blogs were also fiddled with contrived, favored / fabricated opinions, which were insidiously meant to garner support for a marketer. With venom spewing blogs, which are hell-bent on tarnishing the image of a company, to company promoted blogs concealing the darker facet or company sponsored bloggers scripting favorably; customers have all reasons to doubt any substantiation available on the blogosphere. But abusing of the **CGM** has tarnished the image of both the media and the marketers alike.

Since communication on the internet is more like an endless echo chamber, any instance of misuse of blogs, may snowball for the company, ending up in uproar and outburst by all and sundry. Put anything on the search engine which has public eye set on it, and within a trice you will be surprised to find many unsolicited opinions along with the one sought. Now it is up to the reader to get influenced and from whom. Therefore new levels of transparency are being

demanded from disgruntled online users from the corporate, who are quick to uncover "flogging" (fake blogging) by unscrupulous marketers. But vigilant netizens don't seem to spare those errant loudmouth marketers, who anonymously flog for promoting vested interests.

Because blogging was an infatuation initially it was factual to the core, but as the mode metamorphosed into its present avatar the objectivity was lost to the vested economic interests. Just because people trust **CGM** doesn't mean all such information is correct, complete, or unbiased. Rumors often surface, and unless quickly and effectively dealt with, they can run rampant and create incalculable damage. This incorrigible entropy was furthered by the baits offered by industry in the garb of providing informational cues. True or not, a rumor about any company or one of its brands can become a scourge on the Web. Although the risk might be low statistically, the magnitude of the threat is high. It would be imprudent not to establish processes for managing a **CGM** attack.

- ***Wal-Mart** health care bill was criticized sorely by the mainstream media -MSM, and to counter it, the company wanted to spread positive news about itself. Therefore for obvious reasons **Wal-Mart** chose to opt beyond the mainstream media –MSM, while conniving with a group of bloggers who started participating in online conversation after being enthused by an increasing number of customers visiting internet. Wal-Mart facilitated bloggers with favored news, suggesting topics for postings and even appealed bloggers to visit its corporate headquarters. These bloggers wrote postings that either endorsed the retailer or challenged its critics.*

*The eagerness of Wal-Mart to develop ties with bloggers got exhibited clearly with the company inviting them to media conferences held at its headquarters. In e-mail messages, Wal-Mart asked bloggers for their self-paid consent to the trip. Wal-Mart's proactive reaction to the digital medium and blogging specifically was a public relations effort designed in consultation with Edelman – its PR firm- to help Wal-Mart, as two groups; **Wal-Mart Watch** and **Wake Up Wal-Mart**, relentlessly urged it to transform. These groups operated blogs that receive posts from present and former Wal-Mart employees, elected leaders and consumers.*

This devious relationship incidentally got disclosed in 2006 when few bloggers literally replicated the information provided by the company and seeded it on their blogs. But Wal-Mart had been forthright with bloggers about the origin of the communication; neither Wal-Mart nor its associate PR firm compensated the bloggers.

But this strategy raised questions about the actual allegiance of bloggers who pride themselves on independence- which should have been revealed to readers. Had the incidence of transplanting have not occurred, readers would have taken the information as genuine and trustworthy. Furthermore the skeptics got a sort of confirmation when these bloggers tried to cover-up their act by challenging an article

appearing on mainstream media **MSM**. Few bloggers even pleaded advertisers to buy space on their blog in anticipation of more traffic because of exclusive news on their blogs. A few of the bloggers acknowledged their linkages with Wal-Mart but without disclosing their connections with the company's PR representatives, whereas other bloggers had the courage to mention the company's and its PR firm bond.

Facing censure Wal-Mart warned bloggers against lifting text from the e-mail it sends them, but who could resist the temptation of feeding the audience straight from the horse's mouth. Though bloggers were discouraged to attribute the source their information either to Wal-Mart or Edelman, there was no amelioration in the behavior of the bloggers, and their unethical conduct continued [10]

- For corporations initiating their act on cyber world through blogs, the blogosphere is filled with cautions. **"JAMBA!"** a German provider of subscription-based ring tones for mobile phones, suffered an unlikable surprise in January 2005. After accusations of unscrupulous sales practices had surfaced on several private German blogs, **"JAMBA!"** employees responded by trying to seed those same blogs with company-friendly statements. IP address tracking revealed their true allegiance, revealing the company's artifice. This ultimately led to **"JAMBA!"** witnessing controversial publicity in the mainstream German press [11].
- In 2006 **Sony** was criticized for their fake blog, **"All I Want for Xmas is a PSP"**. This commercial in the form of a blog chronicled two target-demographic tweens named **"Charlie"** and **"Jeremy"** in their quest to get a PSP for Christmas. In reality, the site was a blatant and complaint-worthy ploy developed by Zipatoni, a marketing company. The site was full with text messaging misspellings and overuse of words like **"nxt"** and **"beatz."** The blog also had **"Cousin Pete"** who represented the teen-aged audience, and who rhymed like pop stars while dancing around in a hip living room. **"With its overly free thinking banter and the fact the domain was registered by a Marketing firm, it didn't took long for the gaming community to find that Sony was behind the blogging deception."** But the worst part was the PSP blog keeping the act, even long after readers publicly battered the ad agency behind it. On countering, the company reacted in an irresponsible manner by stating that it is fun doing this. Finally the company was forced to shut down its blog but Sony is still suffering from its ramifications. Its customer's are finding it hard to believe what they say anymore. But how could Sony forget that their **"tech savvy"** customers would discover their deceitfulness, were they not analyzing their audience correctly? [12].
- Any surreptitious but guilefully planned initiative is sure to fall short of desired achievements. A similar fate was realized in 2006 which featured a blog christened as **"Wal-Marting across America"**. It featured the journey of a couple, on their

maiden trip in an RV (recreational vehicle), capturing lives and stories as they journey from Las Vegas to Georgia, and park for free at Wal-Mart Stores parking lots.

Astonishingly every Wal-Mart employee that the couple met, from store clerks to photogenic executives, absolutely loved their work. Every one accustomed to Wal-Mart and its reputation of being tight-fisted with employee compensation disapproved such an optimistic representation with disbelief. Many critics even speculated that, to them it seemed to be a concocted story, a part of an elaborate publicity stunt.

The blog, was criticized severely after it emerged that the expenses for the writing and the trip were funded by Working Families for Wal-Mart, a group that highlights the chain's positive contributions to its workers. When matters went off on a tangent Edelman, which designed the initiative, apologized (through the PR firm's own blog) for failing to completely disclose the blogger's identity [13 & 14]

- *Adding to the list of brouhaha was **Microsoft's** attempt to receive favor with so-called "key bloggers", by sending them Acer Ferrari laptops loaded up with Windows Vista and Office 2007. These dual-core 64-bit AMD TurionT laptops were shipped by Microsoft & Edelman, their PR firm. Microsoft directly contacted a number of bloggers to offer their loaded laptops as "review units", which bloggers could choose to appraise, or not. Microsoft stated that bloggers can exercise options like returning the laptop, or giving it away as a prize, or just keep them.*

*Many bloggers grabbed it, because **a)** Vista has not been released at the retail level yet, and **b)** having a high-end laptop with everything pre-installed was too tempting. Recipients defended their editorial independence, arguing that journalism-style rules prohibiting such gifts are outdated. Recipients lauded the privilege of enjoying impressive software, and an access to hassle free ready to use machine, where downloading and installing Vista was done already.*

The laptop was described as cool, super compact, nice surprise, hot slick, by the recipients, whereas non-recipients described it as trashy looking.

This initiated a chorus of disapproval terming the Microsoft initiative and the receipt act as unethical. Many of the bloggers who accepted getting a gift from Microsoft received many negative comments. Non-recipient bloggers sarcastically termed the PR act as "payola" and "bribes". Dissatisfied non-recipient bloggers even commented that the recipient bloggers may find their credibility diluted.

With the following outrage Microsoft got perturbed and sent further notification to the beneficiaries that they should either return or give away the PC back; retracting from its original statement. This made few bloggers upset as many of them found

the entire episode silly and they started criticizing the machines and the software. The most puzzled was the audience which was left helpless to evaluate matters on their own [15, 16, 17, 18, 19 & 20].

These examples convey authoritatively that not only marketers but bloggers equally have a responsibility towards the medium as well as the audience. Thus the drubbing of promoters of online discussions about Consumer Generated Media- **CGM** seems to have taught them that one wonderful component of digital medium is an unbelievable amount of tracking and monitoring of consumer engagement. Therefore unknown is only till you initiate the domino effect, after that it may have uncontrollable ramifications.

Hence, to act providently the following facts need to be comprehended: In the near future customers may start demanding to know the source of particular information, to be convinced with the objectivity of the opinion. Moreover it would be difficult to mislead customers on the digital medium as the audience may comprise variegated resourceful individuals who are tech savvy and wise. However, merely extending the farfetched notion that the customers are passive and will rarely react is ill-conceived and ill-fated. Another very important fact realized is that customers are loath to accept that bloggers are vulnerable to corporate initiatives and may seemingly compromise their objectivity. But if the opinions on the blogs get listed, as sponsored feature than the customer are more accommodative and generous.

Now, it needs no special mention to comment that, digital audiences are built on transparency and authenticity, and therefore they need to have content which creates advocacy and evokes its patrons thought process. But with marketers obstinately declining to toe the line, is it going to be prohibitive for genuine efforts to fructify?

Accommodating the New Entrant

Apparently the transition process of weaning away customers from conventional time-tested media to a new media will take some time. But whether it is for making headway during a launch or hiding certain tainted aspects, marketers have started experimenting with blogs. It is now an acknowledged fact that blogs are here to stay and will have an impact on customer behavior. And that is what is being realized in the attitudes of marketers, bloggers etc. Even the strategic planners have cyber strategies for communicating with their target markets.

Weirdly but actually, for any genuine marketing initiative or something contrived, nuggets of information are planted on the internet as the insider technophiles of companies start building inquisitiveness in the minds of their potential prospects. And as this viral vector proliferates, the blogging community taking cue interprets it and initiates interactions making the entire effort worth millions of dollars in free advertising/ publicity to the marketer. That's why for any initiative of a company cyber presence is crucial. Ironically this cost benefit equation is being exploited in an internecine manner effecting both marketers as well as customers. Though the

repercussions have been felt but still much more is in the offing which needs to be realized. But it is now an established fact that cyber presence is essential for all. Though the misgivings of experimental phase should have been condoned by now, while giving due consideration to the naivety of communicators. But marketers deliberately continued erring which caught the consumers' attention, leading to strongly held reservations on the authenticity of the media.

But this does not imply that the digital media has only been handled inappropriately. Not only are there errant's playing spoilsport but a significant number of marketers are beaming with successful examples of online communications.

- *Vichy the division of L'Oreal was taken aback by the outrage received by its blog speaking for the anti-aging cream "Peel Micro Abrasion". This was humbly, followed by an apology to its patrons for slighting them. L'Oreal responded with the re-launch of the blog as **authentic transparent blog while seeking help as a neophyte on the digital world**. Emboldened by guidance from actual bloggers the company introduced the actual Vichy team with a photo showing the real people, who started to build conviction. Next, they sought advice from bloggers on how they could leverage blogs in conjunction with their new product. The bloggers advised them to establish dialogue with real customers and let the blog reveal all comments including negative ones. A French blogger with influence on cosmetics was roped in to blog alongside the Vichy team. With the authentic blog taking root, other bloggers started linking to it, admiring its reincarnation. Eventually the customers and prospects started reading it, accepting a company's invitation to try the product and comment on the experience. "The whole experience turned into a success as the customers were happy to get such a feedback and close relationship with Vichy and the Vichy team learned a lot" [21].*
- *The "Dell Hell" blogging incidence enlightened the top management at Dell which reacted prudently and proactively to fend off any similar occurrences. This resulted in a cross-departmental "blog resolution" team that was trained to offer both customer service and technical support. This team actively monitors blog posts, and on finding a disgruntled customer it reaches out to the individual, offering help to resolve the problem from start to finish, thus avoiding the painful inter-department connecting experiences that have become too stifling with telephone support. Moreover, to communicate proactively with customers, Dell created its own blog, "Direct2Dell," which was employed when the company had to recall millions of laptop batteries in the year 2006. Rather than seeking refuge behind a public relations wall, Dell conceded the issue in an unequivocal post called "Flaming Laptop" even before the severity of the trouble was known. As soon as Dell had established the magnitude of the problem and had designed a solution, the blog became a helpful channel for disseminating news of the company's battery replacement program. Dell thus minimized the impact of the problem, which by then was causing similar distress to other computer manufacturers.*

The Direct2Dell initiative was designed to facilitate Dell connect with its customers, but the company has learned through its experience that consumers on web immediately develop a symbiotic relationship by helping each other to help fix their problems. In fact, Dell's support forum has grown phenomenally in which a sizeable portion is to let each other know about the merits of Dell products. The effort has been quite salubrious to Dell as many of the visitors to the site having problems find the answers to their problems on the support forum — which saves Dell the cost of customer support calls [22].

Strategists felt that brands which try to disguise them as genuine consumers cum authors are no longer credible. Surprisingly true but these prodigious interactions were unpredictable having unprecedented levels of spontaneity, requiring remarkable maneuverability and transparency. But one learning which came readily from this experience was that a simple convincing approach is capable of capturing the attention of an audience and is more effective than traditional preaching's. Moreover, the activity should build from the consumers, justifying the core character of this user-generated media. The idea of using anonymity and manipulating the feedback in the Vichy experience needs strategic overhaul. But the final outcome of adhering to basic principles of transparency and authenticity was encouraging as the new medium was able to equate the voices of company as well as customers impartially. Thus the need which arises in response of growing influence of social media is that companies should keep a track of their image on the "blogosphere", the new communications arena. This can be established by the argument that substantial commercial and reputational risks can emerge if the companies misjudge the rapidly formed opinions in the blogosphere.

Though the learning has not been a simple push over, but to their surprise the rules to be followed were as simple as they could be. Marketers being perceived as experts should represent a true/ unbiased voice and should seek technical assistance to know the nuances of the new media.

Enterprising New Cyber-World [23]

Hosted on the cyber world, this "Consumer Generated Media" -**CGM** presents a unique opportunity, because of its distinctiveness. Certain radical facets of this new media are:

- **Limitless-** Cyber world is a boundary less- geographic, age-related or socioeconomic barriers, or editors.
- **Quick-** Consumers empowered with "reply to all" and "forward," have access to a supercharged, far-reaching variety of word of mouth. Now with "word of web, OR word of mouse", CGM reaches ever-growing sphere of influence. Consumers download, upload, vote, poll, and forward information throughout the world.

- **Anonymous-** Anyone hitting the “send” button can initiate an Internet rumor, campaign, or whistle-blowing declaration. With an alias and public Internet access point, he or she may do it in disguise and uncontested on reliability. This may have alarming consequences and make monitoring of the Web extremely crucial for dishonest postings.
- **Expressive and powerful-** Those who want to express out can carry out effortlessly in a community and in a highly fulfilling way, especially through blogs.
- **Effective-** At the moment, consumers, members of the media, financial analysts, competitors, and regulators are probably creating and analyzing opinions about organizations. Now it is up to the marketer to know and act.
- **Targeted-** Search engines enable people to instantly find CGM issues pertaining to their benefits.
- **Inclusive-** CGM information seekers often participate as CGM “speakers.” Consequently, this co creation adds to the feeling of involvement and ownership.
- **Trusted-** Studies show that consumers place more conviction in what other consumers say compared to traditional advertising.

Understanding Behavior on the Digital World

When people engage in dialogue, face to face or online, the dynamics are different from the one-way flow of traditional marketing information. Therefore it is important to know the facts behind online behavior of consumers.

- Online interaction reinforces an affiliation with people who share interests. For many, the Web has become a source of emotional sustenance in an impersonal, detached world.
- When people are actively engaged, they pay attention to other perspectives and develop stronger views than when passively exposed to marketing communications.
- Web messages are often blunt and to the point. One might dislike what someone has to say, but it is left open for interpretation.
- Experience based information—from user reviews, ratings on the retailer website, or opinions on consumer feedback sites—builds buyers’ confidence about what they can expect for their money.

- Mostly the people expressing views online have little to gain from being evasive, except revenge when they feel cheated.
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Conclusion

Now in order to establish its authenticity users need to utilize blogs responsibly, because if corporations engage in "blog-spin," where would marketers/ communicators rank on the public's trust barometer? Transparency and authenticity need to walk in lockstep if conviction is to be maintained. With the customers flirting with varied communication options and thanks to the choice available to them it is the relevance of the message which is more important than repetition: signifying that the customers need to sense pull towards marketing messages rather than being pushed for acceptance. In fact it is the matchless ability of the online medium to receive direct feedback to a marketing message and the following actions by the customer who has brought urgency for adoption to the on-line medium. Marketers should understand that certain sections of target customers have started referring word of web more than word of mouth. And if at all the web let them down, the wrath is going to be severe and long-lasting. Also, there are many examples, where marketers accepted flouting the expected norms, long after when there was no escape route left for them. Or else rectifications were made as soon as they were realized or made known.

This is to reaffirm that bloggers do not have major roadblocks when it comes to being recognized as a significant and lawful channel. While a majority of bloggers simply do not want any association with brands - and it is made explicit, in no uncertain terms, on their blogs. But the practice of marketers corrupting bloggers for favorable posts has also become widespread, putting blogs credibility under jeopardy [24].

Quaintly, how many businesses have practically learnt from the story of the golden goose wherein the goose was killed for a wayward thought? Apparently the reality has not dawned on most of the marketers, as attuning to the pulse of this skewed section of the web audience is quite dicey. Marketers are gradually realizing that this interactive medium perpetually plays chameleon act of cherub & devil and is more fickle than what has been perceived at any point of time. Paradoxically, proactive actions are required but if the marketers become overtly defiant or defensive, the situation may snowball. That is why the blogosphere needs to be understood first and then used for effective communication. Finally the marketers need to address different strategic issues and answer the query - **Is a blog a good fit for the company, its targets and its culture, and is the time ripe enough to adopt blogs as a medium to communicate?**

Case Review Questions?

1. Does the increasing acceptance of blogs have an impact on consumers making purchases?
 2. Do you think interactive marketing is expected to grow more significant and claim more share of the marketing budget?
 3. Analyze the current blogging status and their utility to marketers across the globe?
 4. Do you think that putting the authenticity of blogs on test repeatedly by communicators may have an impact on its credibility?
 5. With substantial commercial and reputational risks emerging from the misinterpretation of the rapidly formed opinions in the blogosphere, how is a company expected to handle the digital maze?
 6. Analyze the blogging fundamentals and what needs to be reworked for an effective communication strategy?
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