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Consumer Generated Media: Evolving Marketing Opportunity for Consumer Engagement

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This paper examines consumer-generated media (CGM), (also called user-generated Web sites or social media) and the evolving and broad consumer behaviors associated with it. CGM Web sites have evolved rapidly during the last few years, but so have consumer behaviors and subsequently marketing tactics and future potential opportunities. Marketers should be aware of the characteristics of this type of website and understand how they are being used by consumers and other practitioners. CGM sites are primarily used by consumers to connect with others for many reasons. This connectivity, also called engagement, appears to be an opportunity for marketers to connect with consumers in a ways that are more relevant and targeted. The paper concludes with insights and recommendations for utilization of CGM by practitioners.

Introduction

This research paper explores some of the ways consumers (teenagers as well as parents) are using Consumer Generated media (CGM). Also explored are some of the ways that marketers can adapt their marketing communications to take advantage of the evolution of CGM sites, and integrate them into their marketing programs. This paper details the history and evolutionary development of CGM sites and the behaviors of consumers with regards to CGM.

Recently, considerable research has been devoted to investigating e-commerce marketing programs such as e-tailing, e-mail campaigns, blogs, online advertising, and even mobile commerce. (Luk, et al. 2002) It is clear, that research has improved our understanding of how these new and emerging technologies, as well as their related marketing tactics, are influencing customer behavior (West 2005, Palsler 2005, and Watson et al., 2002). On the flip side, marketing is being influenced by consumers and their behavior on CGM sites. Several studies have shown that online tactics may be effective in influencing customers in positive ways (Bierma 2002). Internet marketing is a subset of e-commerce that focuses on the application of the Internet to the marketing component in an organization. It is well-known that the Internet has many unique properties to assist organizations in performing marketing functions more effectively and efficiently (Hofacker 2001, Bierma 2002, Newsweek 2006). Many firms have realized that it is an effective method of differentiating goods and services (Trudell and Kolkin 1999), and a powerful tool to build relationships with current and potential customers (Kalakota and Robinson 2000). Other researchers have found that the Internet can be used for positioning the organization itself in the e-environment (Cho, Yong-Sauk and Jae-Chase 2002), tapping into global markets more easily (Donada 2002), and can fundamentally alter the way many companies do business (Krishnamurthy 2003). One

significant change is the ability to transform how companies communicate and establish relationships with their customers (Sterne 1996). It is well known that the Internet continues to provide an increasingly effective and lucrative resource for not only selling products and communicating with customers, (Bradlow and Schmittlein 2000, Hemple 2005), but also to gather useful information from customers, and provide after sales support or other customer retention efforts (Bakos 1997, Hoffman and Novak 1996). Blackshaw (2005) reports that CGM, like other forms of online communication, leaves a digital trail that is highly measurable. As such, the Internet is a rich source of managerial information that assists in market research and decision making (Vikas, Manz and Glick 1998, and Haubl and Trifts 2000). The value of an online presence goes beyond these more obvious benefits. On CGM, and most other Web sites, visitor and customer information can be harvested via metrics, providing insights into customer behavior, demand, customer perceptions, language, and so on (Burton and Walther 2001, and Maxwell 2001). Such rich information allows for individualized and customized marketing strategies, as well as the ability to target diffused and scattered customer groups (Dreighton 1996). For example, Kalyanam and McIntyre (2002) identified ways in which e-marketing might change long-accepted marketing practices. This research specifically addresses the growing attention of consumers and marketers to CGM sites. (Siegel 2004) It is important here to clearly define CGM. The need to better understand CGM is underscored by Watson's (Watson et al. 2002) contention that people use the Internet today to do more than just buy products. Increasingly, people are using the Internet, as well as CGM to be a part of special interest communities, to network with friends, to stay informed on various topics, to perform personal services (e.g., banking, trading stocks), to interact with various organizations and to entertain themselves. (Horrihan 2002) Consequently, in this paper we explore CGM sites and their use by consumers and their application in marketing programs. Specifically, this paper will define CGM, identify current and emerging forms of CGM, reveal the value and utility of CGM to consumers and marketers, consider related marketing applications, and finally address global efforts and implications in CGM. These findings and observations should be of interest to both marketing practitioners and academics.

CGM Overview

Smith (2006) suggests that the Internet is still evolving, with the latest "killer application" (killer ap) being social engagement. Social engagement is a key characteristic of CGM. Perhaps the simplest way to describe CGM is to provide well-know examples. Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Craigslist, Angie's List, and PhotoBucket are among the most used by consumers today.

Examples of CGM include blog entries, consumer e-mail feedback, message board posts, forum comments, personal Web sites, and personal e-mail. Other examples include wikis, raves, profiles, networks, and mailing lists (Hart and Blackshaw 2006). CGM is imprecisely defined and refers to "...just about any website powered by the user on a constant and mandatory basis" (Levy and Stone 2006).

However, CGM spaces are far different from a traditional website. The structural and interactive features of weblogs would seem to foster ongoing discussions between their authors and readers, making them more dialogic in nature than traditional Web sites, and therefore provide greater relationship-building potential (Seltzer and Mitrook 2007).

CGM is also referred to as Web 2.0 in the popular media. Unlike paid media, CGM is created and driven by consumers, and is advancing as a major consumer resource as well as an activity for socializing and connecting with others in order to obtain desired information. The central idea is "harnessing collective intelligence" (Surowiecki 2005, as cited in Levy and Stone 2006). A good early example of a CGM site is Craigslist, an online community bulletin board where millions of consumer go to peruse "classified-ad" listings to find jobs, apartments, concert tickets, buy and sell goods and services, and more. It operates like a flea market. In doing so, they connect with millions of people who provide postings in a self-service, community-moderated marketplace. Managed by a small staff of 19, Craigslist is the seventh largest website in the world (Levy and Stone 2006). Table 1 describes the most common forms or types of CGM.

Table 1. Most Common Forms or Types of CGM

Form or Type	Description
Blogs	Website where entries are written in chronological order and displayed in reverse chronological order.
Message Boards/ Forums	Web application for holding discussions, and posting user-generated content.
Review/Rating Sites	Website where product/company reviews are posted by experienced consumers.
Direct Company Feedback	Media vehicle allowing consumers to provide direct feedback to companies.
Third Party Web sites	Website where smaller yet active groups of consumers generate comments such as Complaints.com and My3cents.com.
Moblogs	Mobile-enabled blogs that let users post photos from anywhere.
Vlogs/Video blogs	A blog that contains video.
Podcast	A digital media file, or a series of such files, that is distributed over the Internet using syndication feeds for playback on portable media devices.

CGM and Consumer Behavior

To consider the scope of consumer usage of CGM, let us consider some of the most well-known sites. MySpace.com is visited by 65 million people, as well as a growing list of marketers wishing to connect with them (Levy and Stone 2006). Facebook has over 50 million members; and, each day, 35,000 videos are added to YouTube, with around 30,000 visitors viewing millions of videos daily (Levy and Stone 2006). Flickr is another popular CGM site, with 2.5 million members who have a passion for sharing photos. Flickr was recently purchased by Yahoo. CGM site Google Video lets users load videos; and even sell them.

It is well known that electronic communication is one of the most ubiquitous developments that has evolved on the Internet. The urge to communicate is a dominant human characteristic now made simpler with email, instant messaging, bulletin boards and other CGMs, as well as and other Internet services. These are fast, geographically unbounded, cheap, and reliable. Consumers and various organizations are using them at increasing rates (Siegel 2004). Information access, gaming and entertainment, and purchasing are among the most common reasons consumers go online. CGM can offer many of these experiences.

Hart and Blackshaw (2006) have identified key factors that determine whether consumers will adopt CGM. These factors include consumers' ability to learn about other consumers' product or service experiences, the availability of CGM sites of interest, the ease of finding appropriate CGM sites, and the odds that consumers will actually post their own product experiences on CGM sites. One benefit of GCM is that it satisfies some consumers' need for a sense of community (Dickey 2006). CGM can often provide a platform for such a need. The key to building a successful CGM is to create a sense of belongingness, or community among members (Old 2001). The concept of community includes a CGM site's ability to nurture desired relationships among participants. Hart and Blackshaw (2006), and Clark (2001) explain that, at the core of CGM sites are virtual communities, where, as in physical communities, members come to know and trust each other. Smith (2006) suggests that "...community and engagement might be accomplished if a site actually facilitates shared moments of self-expression." Rand (2006) reports that GDM sites grow because they provide information consumers might not otherwise find on their own. The sites are organized like a "superstore" with aisles that you just walk up and down, looking for products, information, and people.

In all of this communication and engagement, the consumer behavior that might be of most interest to marketers is that consumers communicate frequently about products and brands; and that information is of major importance to many marketers. In fact user recommendations and brand affiliations that are going on inside the CGM sites are of the utmost interest to marketers as they seek out methods to harvest and exploit this information (Klaassen 2007). Klaassen (2007) reports that marketers are already starting to recognize the frequency with which people report their affinities for brands on CGM sites such as social nets, blogs and personal web pages—and they understand that consumer reviews and trusted recommendations are increasingly important marketing factors. Indeed, CGM site Facebook has developed applications devoted to displaying consumers' favorite brands, purchases and tastes.

So CGM communities provide value akin to the value of word-of-mouth; but where that word can span the globe and is limited only by the size of the online network (Hart and

Blackshaw 2006). Lenhart (2007) reports that one of the most influential consumer segments propelling the CGM movement is teenagers. MySpace grew to 50 million members in a little over two years. Sites like MySpace, Facebook and PhotoBucket have between 50 percent and 90 percent more visitors aged 12 to 24 than the Web as a whole (Morrissey 2006).

On CGM, content creation is a common behavior and this behavior by teenagers continues to grow, with 64% of online teenagers ages 12 to 17 engaging in at least one type of content creation. (Duyn 2006) Girls continue to dominate most elements of content creation with approximately 35% of all teen girls blogging, compared with 20% of online boys, and 54% of wired girls post photos online compared with 40% of online boys. Boys dominate the posting of video content online, however, and are nearly twice as likely as online girls (19% vs. 10%) to have posted a video online.

Content creation is more than just about sharing creative output, it is also about participating in conversations based on that content. Almost half (47%) of online teens have posted photos in places where others can see them, and 89% of those teens who post photos say that people comment on the images at least "some of the time" (Morrissey 2006).

In response to this increased usage by teens, is increased usage by parents. 87 percent of parents of teenagers are online. This number is at least 17 percent more than average adults. The most common behaviors for parents of teens is to check up on and regulate their teens' media use, including the Internet, as well as television, and video games (Macgill 2008).

CGM sites are increasingly being used in the workplace, and with good cause. Indeed, Starcom MediaVest Group launched a network of their for their employees called SMG Connected, where more than a third of the company's workers (2,060) have created their own pages where they can post profiles that outline their jobs, list the brands they admire and describe their values by choosing from words such as "creativity" and "humor." The objective of providing such a space was to give employees a way to connect over the Internet, and around the globe. SMG Connected was created, in part, because these employees were already engaged in the same type of activity on their own. More and more internal networks are being created not only to connect employees, but to mine for in-house expertise, discover new recruits, and share information within their own walls (*BusinessWeek* 2007). Organizations not only hope to leverage their employees skills and contacts, but they also hope that all that collaboration will cut out time that's now spent mailing documents and e-mailing comments. The idea is that, in these spaces, employees can archive research documents, share calendars, chat, and blog; all the while saving time and money.

BusinessWeek (2007) reports that it is not just teens and Generation Y that is using CGM, but that more 30-plus employees are signing up with Facebook to trade daily updates with colleagues and friends. At Ernst & Young alone, 11,000 workers now have Facebook accounts, many of whom are over 30. LinkedIn, a professional networking CGM site is building lists of contacts from among the 13 million professionals.

There is little academic research revealing the state of CGM site usage globally, yet news of its emerging popularity and some of the threats that come with this growth continue to be reported in the media. The use of blogging continues to expand globally, with video-sharing spreading worldwide. These CGM sites are used by consumers globally to express ideas and exchange information and

are a popular and accessible medium that can accommodate many different types of people, opinions, and activities. A site similar to YouTube is Paris-based Daily Motion which counts approximately 9,000 new videos, and over 16 million page views daily. Although this site came online before YouTube, YouTube achieved 9.1% reach there, compared with 10.3% for Daily Motion (Carlin 2006). The Daily Motion site is now available in six languages and others similar sites have emerged, such as Germany's MyVideo and Israel's Metacafe. CGM in Japan appears to mostly mean text-based media. Recently, Japanese consumers have begun using YouTube to upload their favorite material. However, instead of creating home or self-produced videos to share with the world (as was the YouTube creators' original goal), the vast majority of material uploaded onto YouTube in Japan is comprised of pre-existing television clips. Globally, there are both similarities and differences among cultures in their adoption and use of CGM. Over the past decade the use of CGM on the Internet has substantially increased, resulting in the fact that American consumers have become more sophisticated and specific in their use. On the other hand, CGM is a relatively new phenomenon in Europe and Asia. While the number of users is less, many of the users in Europe focus on politics, or challenging traditional media (Johnson 2004). Examples include the EU Referendum Blog, and Biased BBC, which focuses on political skepticism and media inaccuracies, respectively. Much of the information about CGM in Europe and Asia focuses on political thought, and challenges to traditional culture. Clearly, there is significant opportunity to conduct additional research in the area of global CGM usage.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In order to use CGM as an effective marketing tool, marketers will need to analyze the value of this media by weighing the benefits versus the costs. It is clear that that their popularity for spreading information is growing rapidly; yet there are risks at hand. Marketers might successfully influence the consumer content and postings and also gain better understanding of consumers' attitudes toward their products, services, brands; and even the competition. On the down side, CGM tactics might be time-consuming, requiring regular management, as well as have the potential for candid, sometimes negative remarks about an organization or product. It is this lack of control that may be the biggest fear of marketers considering using CGM. While it is clear that CGM can be used to send and receive information, there is little substantiated research providing evidence as to their effective use. In the absence of valid studies, marketers must rely on cases and examples from industry to gauge their potential success. Although it would appear that the more a marketer enables person-to-person communication, the more opportunities there are for individuals to influence each other, but the nature of that influence might be questionable. As the business models for popular CGM sites morph into advertising business models, their media kits provide a substantial amount of information and metrics enabling marketers to make more informed decisions. Indeed, these media kits include information available for traditional media and span visitor profiles, frequency of visits, click-through rates and more. Such transparency before making decisions to participate in or advertise on such sites as YouTube, FaceBook and more, and the ability to monitor what is happening in real time, offers the advantages that come with the Internet. Future research needs to consider these and other strategic and

tactical variables so that marketers may develop a stronger understanding of CGM and their potential role in marketing programs.

Although global analysis is somewhat beyond the scope of this research, it was briefly addressed in consideration of the current usage of CGM in some international markets and in terms of future and related research.

It is predicted that CGM will continue to catch on with consumers, marketers, and with organizations, in general. Use of CGM by legitimate companies and groups will likely amplify the perceived validity of CGM as a viable communication medium. Advances in technology and user-friendly software will also undoubtedly lead to an increase in the number of CGM sites and posts. As competition on the Web increases and consumer usage expands, it will become increasingly important for marketers to consider the use of CGM as a viable marketing medium.

CGM usage is growing and might provide value to both consumers and to marketers, and therefore, marketing practitioners must continue to scan the environment for new developments that may impact the creation and use of marketing programs that include CGM. Again, CGM allows for customer information that can be harvested via metrics, providing insights into customer behavior, demand, customer perceptions, language, and more. It has been long known that such rich information allows for individualized and customized marketing strategies, as well as the ability to target the right customer groups with relevant messages that resonate. Marketing tactics in product development, pricing, and distribution can also consider the information obtained from CGM. (Dreighton 1996). Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important that academicians and practitioners consider identifying, monitoring, measuring and interpreting the consumer-generated sites that are relevant to their industry. This might be a challenge due to the rise of CGM sites and the metrics associated with all of them. Certainly, popularity (unique visitors) and any growth indicators are metrics that should be considered valuable. Qualitative measures such as "what are consumers saying about my brand, or my competitors' brands" can be easily obtained through various programs at a low cost, or no cost at all.

Future research possibilities are broad in scope. It would be highly relevant and substantial to identify key metrics that would be most useful to practitioners for decision making. Other research should focus on the evolution of CGM and specific sites and their value to practitioners and consumers. The author's have also identified a need to differentiate such value as it applies to general CGM sites as compared to niche or specialized sites.

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