Marketing Communications in a World of Consumption and Brand Communities

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Marketing communication has been seriously undertheorized for decades, but the ongoing telecommunications revolution has finally made it inescapably obvious that the field needs a much better model of marketing communications. The reasons for this state of affairs are many, but prominent among them are the intellectual insularity of the marketing field and the lack of any meaningful sociological tradition (or even awareness) that could be brought to bear on the study of a metaphenomenon that is inherently social. In addition, there is the small matter of reality: mediated communication itself has changed. Strategies and tactics considered marginal and radical just ten years ago have become the standard practice of many traditional marketers. Marketing theory has not kept up, and now the gap between theory and real world practice is more of a chasm. Because medium is inseparable from message (McLuhan 1965; Ong 1982), a major recasting of marketing communication models is essential.

This chasm should not be bridged by merely aping industry heuristics and tales of best practice. Scholars should not cede their role as crafters of theory, nor take theory entirely to ground. Understanding how the essential meets the new is essential knowledge, practical, and ostensibly the academic’s métier. We believe that a major problem with contemporary marketing communication theory is its singular obsession with the isolated individual mind (also known as ‘information processor’), and an outdated and impoverished view of human mediated communication and consumption. In this chapter we attempt to begin to address this critical need. This chapter is about marketing communication in the era of connected consumers, and more specifically about a particular form of social connectivity: the brand community.
We must employ the obvious in our theory: brands are important to the citizens of consumer societies. This reality must have a stronger presence in consumer communication theory. Consumers don’t just buy brands; they display them, use them as social markers, and talk about them (Ritson and Elliot 1999). Through this talk and other marketplace forces and behaviors, brands take their shape, becoming something negotiated in the space between marketer and consumer. In fact, brands are meaningless outside a notion of social construction and mediated communication. Unfortunately, marketing scholarship has been very slow to catch on to this reality, and has not advanced consumer communication theory significantly beyond what it appropriated as its basic communication model close to forty years ago. We hope to remedy this.

Today, everything from vehicles (Volkswagen), to computers (Macintosh), to soft drinks has a dedicated consumer base (generally small in numbers, but not in communicative properties) that interacts with other consumers. Through their interactions, members of these consumer communities enact consumption practices, influence product development, interpret the meaning of the brand (to users and nonusers alike), and otherwise fold within what used to be the corporate marketing agenda. They become part of the brand-building process. These consumers are drawn together by a common interest in, and commitment to, the brand and a social desire to bond with like-minded others. New modes of computer-mediated communication facilitate and favor communal communication, and thus influence both community and brand.

In order to develop these ideas, in this chapter we draw upon several years of research conducted by both authors on brand community and communication (Muñiz and Hamer 2001; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Muñiz and O’Guinn 1995; Muñiz et al. in press; Muñiz and Schau 2005; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2004; O’Guinn and Muñiz 2000; Schau and Muñiz 2002). Our effort is organized in the following way: We first offer some critical exemplars, many with touch-points to communication theory. These exemplars focus on consumer communication that is communal, computer mediated, and brand centered. We then present a basic model of contemporary marketing communication. This model reflects the active and prominent role of consumers in the creation of brand meaning.

BRANDS AND BRAND COMMUNITIES

To fully appreciate the extent of social change as it relates to branding and marketing, some historical background is necessary. As anthropologists, sociologists, historians, rhetoricians, literary theorists, and many others
well known, things and the meanings associated with things have always mattered to people. The human record consists of no place where materiality, social construction, and meaning were strangers (Schudson 1984). There are no purely utilitarian things (O’Guinn and Muñiz in press; Schudson 1984), and this certainly includes brands. Brands are particularly marked things, their power being derived from their social marking and meaning.

In the late nineteenth century, brands began to gain prominence in society. Between 1875 and 1900, thousands of newly branded products emerged. Through the early efforts of Procter & Gamble (P&G), Coca-Cola, Budweiser, and others, brands replaced previously ‘unmarked’ commodities (i.e. soap, soft-drinks, beer) and enabled the growth of modern market economies. By turning commodities into brands, critical demand inelasticities and resultant market share growth were achieved. Brands were invented by the thousands, the modern advertising industry was born, and mass magazines flourished. When this era began, relatively few things were branded. Today, virtually everything is branded, from universities to water to soil. One of the obvious hallmarks of the twentieth century was the rise of the brand in human existence and human consciousness.

A few years ago we became interested in brand communities (Muñiz and O’Guinn 1995). To us and a handful of others (Cova 1997; Fischer et al. 1996; Fournier 1998; Maffesoli 1996; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), it seemed obvious that some form of community surrounded brands. We were confident that this had been going on for quite some time, but were equally convinced that it was accelerating in the new communication environment. At first, we had a difficult time convincing some academics that what we were observing was community, but at no time did we have any difficulty convincing brand managers or marketing professionals. For example, shortly after our initial involvement in the idea of brand communities, a senior P&G marketing executive informed us that not only do communities form around big brands (such as Tide), but that P&G was very interested in managing the process. Clearly, professionals were ahead of the academic marketing community in acknowledging and addressing this new reality. What we were observing was community, and community has turned out to be very critical in the new communication era. Brand communities are now widely recognized as key actors in the new communications epoch. But what is a brand community?

Brand communities are nongeographically bound collectives of brand admirers who, through their ability to aggregate and communicate at very little cost, assert themselves as important marketplace collectives. Brand communities are similar to other forms of community, but have their own unique market logic and expressions. They possess three key community
characteristics: 

(a) consciousness of kind, 

(b) rituals and traditions, and 

(c) community responsibility (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). The ways in which these community markers are manifest greatly impacts several aspects of marketing communication. We briefly consider these three characteristics below before exploring the relevance of brand communities to marketing communications.

Consciousness of kind refers to the collective sense of identity experienced by members of the brand community. Members feel an important connection to the brand, as well as a connection to one another. They feel like they know each other, even if they have never met. Members also frequently note a critical demarcation between users of their brand and users of other brands. They feel there is some important quality that sets them apart from ‘the others’ and makes them similar to one another. Our research has shown considerable evidence of consciousness of kind in a variety of brand communities in several different product categories (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau and Muñiz 2002). These complex connections greatly affect the meaning and social construction of the brand.

Brand communities are also host to a variety of traditions and ritualized exchanges that serve to reify the culture of the community, including celebrating the history of the brand, sharing brand stories and myths, ritualistic communications and utterances, special lexicon, and the communal appropriation of marketing communications. The textual nature of the Web provides an excellent forum in which members share their knowledge of the brand’s origins, often replete with illustrations and photographs. It is in the expression of these rituals and traditions that these communities most powerfully and effectively challenge the marketer’s supremacy in creating brand meaning.

The third aspect of brand community is moral responsibility, which refers to a shared commitment to the brand, the community, and other individual members of the community. Moral responsibility is what produces collective action and motivates the provision of assistance to other members. Members work to help the brand, or at least their vision of it, and others who share the same appreciation. Members will help one another with repairs, modifications, and technical assistance. Responsibility also manifests via an apostolic function; that is, members of brand communities generally think that new members (but only appropriate new members) should be recruited to keep the community alive. This is seen as a group moral duty. Here again, the impact on the brand is obvious: the brand is promoted, supported, and made easier to use at no cost to, but also beyond the control of, the marketer.
COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

Brand communities are participants in the brand's larger social construction and play an important role in the brand's meaning. Electronic communication has facilitated a rapid growth in the number, size, and power of brand communities. Groups whose members rarely achieved critical mass (and power) due to their dispersed nature can now bring force to bear on the marketer. While not all brands are as purely communal (e.g. Apple Computer) as others, all brands are socially situated and all brands have communal aspects. This results in an increase in consumer power for all brands. This power may be to the benefit of the marketer, as when community members help one another solve problems with the brand, thus increasing the value derived from the brand at no additional cost to the marketer. However, consumer strength may manifest in ways less beneficial to the marketer. Members of a brand community may decide, with conviction and strength of number, that the marketer is wrong and actually try to drown out the marketer’s voice by talking back. They may reject the actions of the marketer and endeavor to impede them. Community members may feel that the marketer does not care about them or the brand and may make their displeasure known to existing and prospective buyers alike. In the following, we explore several relevant processes by which brand communities can impact marketing communications.

Communal Interpretation of Brand Advertising

Members of brand communities tend to have very well-developed ideas concerning the brand to which they are committed. This includes notions of what the brand means and what directions this meaning should take in the future. Many feel they understand the true essence of the brand better than the marketer does. As a result, they can be quite opinionated about branding and marketing efforts, spending a great deal of time analyzing and critiquing marketing communication in community forums. Ads for the brand are interpreted collectively by the community, with special attention directed to the degree to which the brand as presented in the ads corresponds to the brand as experienced by members. When the ads map onto the brand as understood by the community, the themes in the ads are embraced, celebrated, and elaborated upon (in stories and personal webspace). When the ads are at odds with the community’s conceptualization of the brand, the ads are likely to be rejected as members endeavor to create their own meanings for the brand (Brown et al. 2003; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001).
As an example, consider the nascent community centered on the Pontiac Vibe, a multipurpose vehicle introduced by General Motors in the USA in 2002. After only three model years, Vibe aficionados had developed some strong and well-developed ideas of what is appropriate for the brand. Some strongly rejected changes to the car’s appearance for the 2005 model year. Members of the Vibe brand community frequently discussed ads for the Vibe, sometimes subjecting televised ads to close, shot-by-shot scrutiny. Consider the following comments, in which a participant in a Vibe brand community Internet forum took issue with what he considered a less than optimal execution:

They've been running a 'stealth' Vibe commercial in central Indiana. I’m paraphrasing, because I can't type or write fast enough when the commercial comes on to get the full transcript, but here goes: A man is talking to a couple. 'Variable Valve Timing ... high performance ...' yada-yada-yada Obviously it's a reference to the VVT-i/VVT-L-i engines available to Pontiac buyers ONLY in the Vibe. Then another man approaches the three of them and asks the couple if he can help them. 'No, we're already being helped by this man' they reply. The (real) salesman says, 'He doesn't work here!' And the voice-over goes on about a great financing or leasing deal on a Grand Am! No actual mention of the Vibe models, features, or financing. What the h-e-l-l is GM thinking???

Such comments reflect a concern that the manufacturer is doing a poor job of promoting and developing a strong and unique meaning for the brand. These concerns are then communally explored, where they can be reacted to by current and prospective brand users alike.

The need for a strong and unique brand meaning is a powerful one. It is frequently reflected in the community quest for legitimacy. This occurs on two fronts: First, the community wants to ensure that the brand is sincere and accurate in the depiction of its meaning. Second, the community wants to make sure that particular brand users are legitimate and ‘appropriate’ for the brand (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). These understandings are often normative and possessive in nature. Through the added weight of Internet brand-talk, consumers come to form very clear opinions about who should and should not use the brand. Advertising and marketing efforts for the brand will then be judged by members of the community on these dimensions. Long- time members may resent new consumer segments being courted by the marketer, particularly if they fear these new consumers will be attracted to the brand for the wrong reasons.

A powerful example of this can be seen in the Volkswagen (VW) brand community (Brown et al. 2003; Muñiz et al. in press). Many long-time members of the VW community resent VW’s continued move upmarket and these sentiments frequently emerge in discussions of VW’s advertising. Consider the following message from a VW Usenet newsgroup discussion of ads for the VW Passat, a midsize car targeted to an affluent market segment.
[These ads] stink out loud. Obviously, they reflect VWoA’s [Volkswagen of America] attempt to take their cars upmarket, and in the process have lost any of the flair and humor which has been a trademark of their ads for years. I personally think it is an extension of how VW has lost its way and is going to end up alienating the very people they need to touch to buy their cars.

Many resent the new drivers being attracted to VW as well, labeling them ‘yuppies’ or ‘white preppy clients.’

The relevance of such brand community member tendencies is obvious. Content authored by members of the brand community is routinely consumed by users whose connection to the brand is less communal and by prospective users as well. A new buyer may conduct an Internet search on VW and immediately be put into contact with a vision of VW (and VW drivers) that is at odds with the vision management intended. Because the information created by the community is as easily accessible as that created by the marketer, the brand community becomes just as important a player in the marketing communication process.

**Consumer Stories and Narratives**

Much brand community talk is in the form of stories about personal experiences and the experiences of others. These stories are often transmitted at dealerships, random encounters, and on Internet forums. Communities recreate their histories, values, and meanings through communal stories, and brand communities are no different. These stories, which are frequently retold, are often well-written and replete with collages of images of the product (Brown et al. 2003; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau and Muñiz 2003).

Consider the story-telling culture of the Miata brand community. The Miata is a compact sports car produced by Mazda. Members of the Miata brand community like to share stories of ideal consumption experiences with the Miatas they own. Typically, these stories involve a beautiful day in which the windows can be rolled down and the top can be taken off. Such experiences have been termed ‘perfect Miata drives’ and are a frequently recurring theme in the Miata community Internet forums. A perfect Miata drive involves a deserted, sometimes hilly, frequently winding road, with breathtaking scenery. The following comments from a Miata Internet forum were posted under the heading ‘Seattle area twisties’:

There are good, short roads to the south off the Maple Valley Hwy—Jones Rd, Green Valley Rd, the west (steep) end of Lake Holm Rd, Tiger Mountain Rd, Lake Francis Rd, Auburn/Black Diamond Rd. The Issaquah/Fall City Rd is terrific. All of these have relatively high mailbox coefficients, unfortunately. There are also some unbelievable, twisty, tree-lined, two-lane highways up north around Mt. Baker State
Park. I don't recall the names or specific locations right now but some of them are very sparsely populated and little traveled. Chuckanut Drive is both exciting and beautiful. Lake Washington Blvd west (south of I-520) is slow but has a few great hairpins.

There is even a website devoted to this phenomenon (miatadrives.com), featuring detailed descriptions and maps. In this way, the community continually creates the perfect brand consumption experience. These ideals typically are influenced by the advertising for the brand, but are communally scripted. Their potential to influence the consumption experience and the meaning of the brand is great.

Consumer storytelling is not limited to manufactured goods. Consumers also like to tell stories about services, such as those experienced while traveling or on vacation. Several consumption-oriented websites offer consumers a chance to post their reviews of products and services as well (e.g. consumerreview.com; epinions.com; rateitall.com). Stories are often included with these reviews in order to justify or explain a rating of a product or service. These stories are probably easier for other consumers to appreciate, embrace, and pass along than are numerical ratings. Obviously, stories add to the value of the brand for both the consumers who tell these stories and those who read them. They may also make the brand attractive to those who are only just starting to consider a purchase. We have seen several instances in which prospective buyers have followed these conversations before buying the brand. Some consumers even appeal to different brand communities for experiences and advice before making a purchase in a product category. Once again, the brand community is approximating the marketer’s role in the brand communication process.

Rumor

A closely related narrative phenomenon is rumor. Much content in brand communities takes the form of rumor (Kimmel 2004; Muñiz et al. in press). The history of the brand and personal stories centered on the brand are often transmitted via communal rumor. Rumors can be distinguished from story-telling in that the experiences tend not to be personal but refer to an unknown other entity (e.g. ‘someone my friend knows’) or organization, and are often prefaced with ‘I heard’ or ‘I saw somewhere.’ As such, they allow for the expression of properties and attributes that might not be true, but what the community wants to be true or fears may be true. Rumors play an important role in the consumer construction of the brand.

Cultural capital and issues of credibility loom large in brand communities. Brand communities tend to be structured, with complex hierarchies. The contribution of a new and valuable piece of communal brand talk
carries status. The search for new information, such as modifications the manufacturer intends to make to the product or new line entries, can be intensely competitive (Muníz et al. in press). As a result, consumers sometimes share brand-related information from nonreputable sources. Such utterances are particularly relevant in the Internet age as they may be afforded the same credibility as official information owing to its referability (Schindler and Bickart 2002). Speculation becomes accepted as fact and the information becomes part of the brand’s communally accepted legacy. The multimedia nature of the Web provides an excellent forum in which members can share their knowledge of the brand’s origins, often replete with illustrations, photographs, and video.

Looking again at the Pontiac Vibe brand community, one can find several instances of rumor pertaining to a variety of brands relating to several dimensions of car ownership: possible modifications in design and styling of the brand, long-term performance and reliability, and safety. For example, brand community members posting on a Vibe Internet forum discussed issues relating to wiring and radios, speculating on possible consequences of replacing a factory radio with an aftermarket radio:

at one point I had my radio removed, completely disconnected, and the door chime still worked. I remember reading about some of the early wiring adapters people were using to put aftermarket radios in these cars, and they had wires to run to the stock radio. Even with the aftermarket radio in the dash, some folks had the stock unit buried somewhere still marginally connected. That was unnecessary. There was even a rumor that the airbags wouldn't work if you replaced the stock radio, as well as rumors that if you disconnected power to the stock radio, you would need to go back to the dealer to get it reprogrammed. I am glad the vibe radios do not include any of those ‘features.’

The focal brand for this thread was a competing vehicle (Mitsubishi Eclipse). In this way, members participated in the process of collectively constructing additional reasons to believe that the Vibe was superior to a competing make of car. They actively conceived and publicly rehearsed reasons not to switch to other brands, and the value of the Vibe was socially constructed relative to the Eclipse. Such a communally constructed vision then becomes available to any consumer of the brand.

Consumer-Created Ads

Members of brand communities sometimes endeavor to create something that explicitly looks like an ad and uses the conventions of advertising. In this age of advertising-savvy consumers, it is not entirely surprising that some brand community members recognize the power of advertising to create strong and unique meanings. What is striking, however, is the sophistication with which they may create such artifacts.
A good illustration of this tendency can be found in the brand community for the Apple Newton. The Apple Newton was a personal digital assistant (PDA) introduced in 1993. The Newton never did particularly well in the marketplace, but it did inspire a strong grassroots brand community. This community has persisted even since Apple abandoned the product in 1998. It continues to develop new software and accessories for the Newton, provides parts sources and technical support, and advertises the brand to various audiences (Muñiz and Schau 2005). Members take advertising themes and conventions from a variety of sources to create their own personal Newton ads. The following example from a Newton brand community website mimics Apple’s ads for another product, the Apple Powerbook laptop computer. Powerbook ads from the late 1990s featured testimonial data from different Powerbook users, including why they bought a Powerbook and how they used it.

Name: John  
Occupation: Student  
Newton: MP 110 (right now), getting an MP 2100 soon  
Why I bought a Newton: I saw the MP 110 in a pawn shop, and thought it looked cool. It was also cheap. =) I was thinking about a Palm, but the Newton is a lot better than the Palms I’ve seen. I then read about the MP2100, and started drooling. Luckily, I found a friend of mine who hasn’t used his in forever, and bought it off of him. =)  
What I love about the Newton: I love the laptop abilities in a smaller package. I will love the ability to use Ethernet.. What I dislike: Steve Jobs. =) No, I think Apple was stupid for canceling them. I’d like a smaller form factor, and I wish there were more device drivers. I wish the interconnect port was more available. =)  
Carrying case: The Apple Leather one for my 110.  
Strangest place I’ve ever used my Newton: None yet. =) I’m planning on doing an externship to Great Britain next year, and I’ll probably take my MP2100 along.  
What’s on my Newton: Mystic 8 Ball, SoloDX, and whatever the Othello for OS1.3 is (I can’t remember the name).  

Several Newton users have contributed their own versions of this ad, many of which are complex and with multiple pages of text, to a popular Newton brand community website. Similarly, several professional-looking, user-created ads have circulated among the Volkswagen brand community and there are Web pages for the Saab brand community that also look like advertisements for the brand (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001; Schau and Muñiz 2003).

Brand community members also engage in a competitive brand community process called oppositional brand loyalty (Muñiz and Hamer 2001; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Oppositional brand loyalty is a process in which community members derive an important aspect of their community experience, as well as an important component of the meaning of the brand, from their opposition to competing brands. Thus, many Apple
brand community members are not just fans of Apple, they are sworn enemies of Windows. In a similar way, Coke community members stand in opposition to Pepsi, and so on. Many statements evincing oppositional brand loyalty read like passionate comparison advertising, as is apparent in the following from a user-created Coke website that bills itself as the ‘Coke Army’:

This establishment is for the good of the people. It represents all which is true and right. Our mission: destroy Pepsi. Our weapon: Coca-Cola Classic. Yes! Why destroy Pepsi you may ask? Well, because it’s the evil soft drink!

Such content encourages loyalty to the brand, but is largely out of the control of the marketer. It also blurs the already fuzzy lines between marketer-created and consumer-created marketing communication content. Given the increasingly sophisticated creations of consumers in this regard, marketers not only face increasing clutter from competing brands, they also face an increasing amount of clutter, as well as potentially conflicting branding messages, from consumers. The content created by the brand community has become as easily accessible as that created by the marketer and is beginning to approach the level of professionalism as well.

AntiBrand Community Communication

Consumer-created websites do not always pertain to the consumer’s favorite brands. Sometimes brands are the center of community attention and action for what members believe the brands have done wrong. These sites represent a phenomenon that we have termed antibrand community (Aron and Muñiz 2002). The difference between this phenomenon and oppositional brand loyalty is that members of antibrand communities are not necessarily loyal to the competing brand; rather, they appear united primarily in their dislike of a particular brand. Many of these sites have loyal and active followings and appear to have the same three community markers as the brand communities we have encountered (Aron and Muñiz 2002). More importantly, they are just as sophisticated in their efforts to create alternative brand meanings, mimicking advertising and branding conventions for the brands that they target (France and Muller 1999). At the time of this writing, such sites existed for dozens of brands, including Best Buy (bestbuysux.org), Ford (fordreallysucks.com), Pac Bell (mikeandmabell.com), Pontiac (mypointacsucks.com), Starbucks (starbucked.com), United Airlines (untied.com), and Windows (ihatewindowsxp.com).

In addition to organized antibrand community sites, several other complaint sites exist, including thecomplaintstation.com, complaints.com, complaintbook.com, and complain.com. These sites allow consumers to
air grievances about any particular company. The impact these sites have
is subject to much debate and organizations vary wildly in how they
choose to respond to them. Some companies choose to ignore such
sites, while others work diligently to record and correct the problems that
lead to the creation of the site. United Airlines, target of one of the largest
antibrand community sites, Untied, takes the threat posed by such sites
very seriously and tracks the site to identify issues that need to be ad-
dressed (France and Muller 1999). Similarly, Dunkin’ Donuts recognized
the potential to capture valuable information from an attack site targeting
their brand and worked with contributors to a Dunkin’ Donuts attack site
to resolve the complaints they had posted (Warner et al. 1999). Neverthe-
less, all of these sites represent yet another source of the socially con-
structed brand meaning that impacts the marketing communication
process.

MARKETING’S RESPONSE

Recognizing many of the opportunities and challenges presented by
brand and consumption communities, many marketers have attempted
to devise appropriate response strategies and tactics. Often, these strat-
egies further blur the lines between consumer and marketer generated
content. For example, a campaign for the Ford Sportka, which depicts
the car killing a curious cat, was intended to look like a user-created
ad so that it would be spread via e-mail. In fact, it spread quite
rapidly, but it also generated controversy. The negative impact of this
controversy was increased when the ad was attributed to Ford and its ad
agency, rather than a Sportka user (Brier 2004). In the following section, we
describe some strategies by which marketing has attempted to manage
the influence of brand communities on the marketing communication
process.

Pseudo-Grassroots Marketing Communications

Marketing practitioners have long recognized the value of consumer word-
of-mouth (WOM) and several strategies have recently been developed to
create it (see Chapter 10). These strategies go by many names: astroturf,
buzz marketing, grassroots marketing, viral marketing, and word-of-
mouse. Through them, marketers attempt to create a buzz around their
product that does not look like active marketing communication. Much of
this buzz is intended to mimic brand and consumption community
discourse. Indeed, in some instances, marketers attempt to infiltrate an
existing brand community with an agent who will promote their product under the guise of a community member, further reinforcing the powerful role of these communities in marketing communications. Engineered WOM approaches have been employed to promote a variety of brands, including American Express, Burger King and Honda (Brier 2004), BMW, Mercedes and Renault (White 2004), and Kraft, Pantene, Pringles and Toyota (Wells 2004). The interaction of such contrived WOM, consumption, and brand communities, and the interconnected world of the Internet create significant challenges for marketers who utilize such approaches.

Another New Coke. When the Coca-Cola Company launched Vanilla Coke in 2002, it was the first new flavor from Coke in over fifteen years. Coke wanted a marketing campaign that would get consumers, including those in Coke’s brand community, talking. To achieve this, their introductory marketing campaign included a fictitious narrative component. Coke created a website called the VCoke Lounge. It featured a marketer-fabricated account of the historical origins of Vanilla Coke. The story told of a rogue researcher at Coke who anonymously received a sample of the original Vanilla Coke and managed to crack the formula. According to the story, the researcher then began selling his version of Vanilla Coke at a soda fountain and its sales were so great that it got the attention of Coke management and prompted them to ‘officially’ launch the flavor. The website presented the story as an illicit insider’s account and included several components common to corporate rumor: secret labs, stolen formulas, and promises of ‘the real story.’ Consider the following excerpt, quoted on BadAds.org:

You’ve probably heard that Coke is launching a new flavor—Vanilla Coke. What you haven’t heard is the REAL story behind this product, and why Coke HAD to launch the product when they did. There’s a long story behind why I’m building this website and you can find it all out here. What you do need to know is that the new launch of Vanilla Coke is shrouded in controversy and Coke is trying really hard to keep the real story under wraps.

The entire approach was explicitly designed to mimic consumer WOM and rumor in order to create a folklore around the brand that members of the Coke brand community could share and build upon (‘Coca-Cola Creates’ 2002). A message board on the VCoke Lounge website encouraged consumers to discuss the story and its details and offered a tool where visitors could e-mail their friends a link to the site.

Illustrating that the dangers inherent in this approach are the same as those associated with all rumors, Coke quickly lost control and the plan backfired. Many consumers were immediately suspicious of the story offered on the website and several of the messages posted on the VCoke Lounge forum expressed skepticism (BadAds.org 2002). This skepticism
turned to anger as consumers were able to quickly learn of the true origins of the website from a host of other online sources, including trade publications where Coke had discussed the strategy. The approach angered a lot of consumers, including members of Coke's brand community. Eventually, after becoming an undesirable part of Coke lore, the site was taken down.

The VCoke Lounge example illustrates a basic peril of using a contrived grassroots strategy: consumers can become very vocal when they learn they are being misled. In this interconnected world, it is now easier for consumers to find out when this is happening and it is easier for them to share their displeasure. These risks are even greater in brand communities where, as noted before, issues of legitimacy, sincerity, and cultural capital loom large. Brand community members are strongly motivated to identify and chase out marketer agents posing as members in order to keep their community pure. In some of the communities we've examined, members will apply the term 'shill' to anyone whose enthusiasm for a product or service is suspect.

Managing Brand Community and Marketing Communications

The Swedish car manufacturer, Saab, has done an excellent job of managing the marketing communication process with the Saab brand community. Saab works with members of the community who produce important community publications, giving some access to the company president to provide comments and feedback on behalf of the community (Cook 2003). Saab also sponsors an annual Saab owner's convention, which plays heavily on notions of brand history and legacy. By working with community information sources, Saab can gain awareness of, and to some degree affect, what information is being relayed to and by the community. By sponsoring community events, Saab makes it less likely that the Saab brand community will develop an adversarial relationship with the manufacturer.

Jeep has also been successful in interacting with and supporting its brand community. Several years ago, Jeep decided to leverage its brand community by organizing jamborees, weekend-long events where Jeep drivers get together and bond while having off-road adventures in their vehicles. Participants in these jamborees often emerge with a strong sense of community, even among those who felt little connection to their fellow brand users beforehand (McAlexander et al. 2002). Jeep understands that drivers who feel a sense of community through the brand are more likely to generate positive WOM. They become what Jeep officials refer to as 'ambassadors of the brand' (Christian 1997), becoming evangelical in their desire to attract others to the brand.
CONSUMER COMMUNICATION RECONSIDERED AND RECAST

Today, most academic marketing models of communication look very much like they did more than three decades ago. They are ill-equipped to deal with the social nature of communication, and appear largely unaware of recent advances in communication theory. To be fair, we should note that this problem is far more acute in the USA than in Europe, where the sociological imagination has more than survived in the marketing literature. (There are notable exceptions in the USA; see, e.g. Ward and Reingen 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

American marketing research flirted with the sociological communications tradition from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. During the mid-1950s, communication scholars and the nascent field of marketing became rightfully interested in the two-step flow hypothesis (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) and in tracking down the so-called ‘generalized opinion leader,’ a person who was thought to be broadly influential in all market matters (Robertson 1971). These ideas came on the heels of, and in reaction to, several stunning failures in mass persuasion and advertising (including the Ford Edsel launch), that had been based on asocial models of consumer psychology, which emphasized individual messages affecting individual consumers.

The two-step model of communication (see Fig. 4.1) posited that rather than flowing directly from the media to consumers, information (and influence) was more socially mediated. Influence flowed first to opinion leaders, who then had disproportionate influence on other individual consumers. Opinion leaders were presumed to interpret and then retransmit formal marketing messages to other consumers to great effect. This model pointed to something very important and seemingly obvious: that mass communication (including advertising) is a socially stratified process, and that there are systematic inequalities in information possession, access, flow, retransmission, and interpretation that result in significant differences in adoption, influence, and consumer response. It also pointed to the folly of trying to separate consumer communication from consumer behavior. If that fact was not clear then, it certainly is now.

Reasonable attention was paid to the notion of opinion leaders and social stratification of influence for about a decade. Marketing practitioners became completely convinced that this process was entirely real and important. The academic marketing discipline shortly thereafter turned its attention, training, and politics to acquiring legitimacy by adopting the laboratory methods of American social psychologists. Marketing diffusion research was ceded to mathematical modelers who have had considerable success at predicting diffusion rates, while keeping the behavioral ‘why’ question off the table. The academic marketing wisdom
(on the behavioral side of the field) came to be, that efficiently manipulating and tracking WOM communication was impractical due to methodological limitations. As a result, the American marketing academic field lost touch with virtually all things sociological, particularly human communication. What remained was a socially challenged consumer information-processing model, unequipped theoretically or methodologically to meaningfully study human communication in human ecology.

Online brand and consumption communities may finally force marketers to recognize the reality of consumer-to-consumer communication, and its ability to affect significant influence on the marketer, in rapid order and with the power of social mass. Before the advent of computer-mediated connectivity, the opportunity for consumers to easily connect directly to a multitude of like-minded people from around the world was limited. As a result, marketing communications were, to a greater extent, under the control of the marketer. The advent of consumer-controlled interactive electronic media has changed all that. Consumers can now congregate virtually and asynchronously to exchange complex notions of brand meanings and the details of their consumption practices and beliefs. Now, individually and within groups, consumers can exert considerable influence on how the brand is represented in the marketplace. Firms are faced with the challenge of integrating these consumers into the marketing process.
A Social Model of Brand Creation and Brand Communication

As an alternative to prior marketing models of communication, we present below a social model of brand creation and communication, which emphasizes both explicitly and implicitly that communication is a social process.

Production

This component of the model reflects the fact that brands are not made by marketers. Rather, brands can be understood as plastic vessels of meaning, which are cocreated by several key publics: consumers, marketers, advertising professionals, governments, lobbyists, NGOs, shareholders, the press, media, regulators, and so on. All of these stakeholders are also communication agents—they communicate with each other to varying degrees, through various paths, and with varying effects. To speak of the creation of brand meaning isolated from communication is pointless. Whether the marketing relationship is marketer-to-consumer, consumer-to-consumer, or consumer-to-marketer, none of these parties are socially isolated single actors; rather, they are socially immersed institutional agents, institutions, and social aggregations.

As an example, consider the marketer and the consumer. Marketers are organizations that collaboratively produce brands through social processes. They imagine their consumers, the users of their brands. Typically, they do not directly interact with more than a tiny fraction of their users, and very rarely in naturalistic environments; instead, they imagine legions of them. Their imagination is guided by survey research, focus groups, concept testing, sales data, previous experience, etc. The acquired data are themselves provided by social organizations with political and economic agendas, and structural facets that allow certain views of the consumer's reality, but which have blind spots as well. These data collectively represent an idea of the user, a representation, but not the user themselves. The user is thus 'constructed' by various forms of research and indirect experience. Brand histories are replete with competing visions of who (and what) the consumer is.

In his 1993 book, For God, Country and Coca-Cola, Tom Pedergrast revealed that even the world's most popular brand is itself a product of constantly competing personalities, palace intrigue, serendipity, political allegiances, and social dynamics, all hinging on an imagined consumer. And that is before a single bottle ever leaves the plant, or a single Coke ad is produced. Thus, even at the market's most proximal locus of control, brand meaning is anything but simple and overly determined. That brand meaning is still anything but simple, even within the marketing organization,
should be clear from the Vanilla Coke example presented earlier. Even in a highly contrived dyadic moment, brand meaning is negotiated. When one adds consumers, public policy institutions, and shareholders to the mix, complication is exponential. Multiple actors negotiate and accommodate the meaning of brands.

Reception

When the consumer’s domain is brought into the equation (the right side of Fig. 4.2) it is quite obvious that the marketer’s meaning of the brand is hardly accepted without question. Consumers react, talk back, make the brand their own, and add their own meanings to the brand. As suggested by the model, they also negotiate. Recall the discussions by Vibe and VW owners concerning the ads for those brands or of Coke drinkers to the Vanilla Coke campaign. Reception is an active and discursive social process, and not a simple ‘cognitive response.’ Consumers compare their reactions with each other and use them in creative and even playful ways (Ritson and Elliot 1999). Their reactions are affected, among other things, by their past history, their idea of what the advertisers and company representatives are like, and the perceived intent of marketing efforts.

Accommodation and Negotiation

To accommodate is to accept to some degree some other party’s preferred meaning. To negotiate is to work toward an agreed upon meaning between interested parties. Human communication involves both of these processes. In other words, meaning is not just delivered—consumers talk to each other, imagine each other, and observe each other. This plays out in reactions to ad campaigns, to net-brand-talk of all sorts, and ultimately to
active acceptance, rejection, or reinvention of the brand. Marketers do the
same: they talk to consumers and listen back. They advance their preferred
meaning, while accommodating the other. This is communication’s essen-
tial dynamic.

Sometimes, aspects of market meaning are accepted by consumers, and
thus the marketer is ‘accommodated,’ as when brand community mem-
bers put ads on their websites and respectfully acknowledge, repeat, and
celebrate them. At other times, the marketer’s meaning is partially
accepted, but the consumer contributes as well. Some aspects of brand
meaning are accepted (i.e. accommodated), while other aspects remain
contested and open for negotiation. Recall the stories of Miata drivers that
drew heavily from Miata ads. Marketer-created meaning (in the form of
ads) was being accommodated and combined with user-created content
(stories of the perfect consumption experience) in order to negotiate the
meaning of the Miata brand. On the other hand, the marketer’s meaning
may be rejected, and the consumer may put something else in its place
entirely; recall the Newton users and VW and Saab drivers who created
their own ads. The community created its own content to reinforce the
meaning that the members of the community had attached to the brand.

Marketers learn something about how the accommodation and negoti-
ation process is playing out for their brand through marketing research.
Focus groups and brand community tracking data can then influence what
marketers say in subsequent communications. Recall how Saab monitors
and supports its brand community or how Dunkin’ Donuts followed post-
ings on its antibrand community ‘gripe site’ for precisely these reasons. Such
companies observe the reactions of the community and respond appro-
priately, adjusting their marketing communications to accommodate and
negotiate brand meaning. As this process moves along, there is a fluid and
dynamic discourse.

Consider this social model of brand creation with the brand community
operating somewhat like the 1950s concept of ‘opinion leaders.’ Fig. 4.3
shows the brand community as a computer-mediated analog of the opin-
ion leader or market maven (Feick and Price 1987), operating between
marketer and other consumers. While brand communities may be small
in terms of absolute numbers, their influence is not. Consumers frequently
solicit feedback from brand communities before making a purchase. The
somewhat fluid aggregations of vested consumers that are brand commu-
nities function as communication agents. They are consulted by other
consumers and by the marketer in what is increasingly becoming a popu-
lation of considerable marketing surveillance. Unlike the 1950s, we are no
longer hampered by the methodological obstacles and we can now observe
and even model these networks in real time. These aggregations tend to
leave much electronic and textual residue, which provides unobtrusively
obtained data for the marketer.
The Computer Mediated Environment/Brand Community model depicted in Fig. 4.3, is also recursive. Interested parties constantly imagine, anticipate, react, assume, and create communication and, in doing so, the brand. Marketers who interact with their communities can then incorporate these understandings into subsequent branding efforts.

CONCLUSION

‘The mass-marketing model is dead. This is the future,’ declared P & G’s global marketing head when asked about his company’s peer-to-peer marketing efforts (cf. Wells 2004: 84). Significant changes in contemporary society float on a true sea-change in mediated human communication, and brands are among the most affected. Brands are social creations, creations of communication, and this reality has never been more important. In this chapter we have argued that marketing communicators must significantly rethink their views of brands, brand communication, and their obsession with the individual consumer. To be truly sociological, one must meaningfully consider milieu.

Brands are currently comingling with, or substantially emulating, the form and function of traditional social institutions. Our central thesis is that social forces, some of them nearly a century in the making, have only
recently met at a critical juncture—the brand. In this new marketing context, to not consider a socially embedded consumer, connected instantaneously and virtually at no cost to other socially embedded consumers, is unrealistic and unwise. These processes existed long before there was an Internet or World Wide Web, whether marketing academics understood that or not (although many practitioners did). But now that these new communication technologies exist, offering consumers fantastically greater power in the social construction process, it would indeed be foolish to conceive of communication as simple linearly delivered meaning. Now, connected nodes of consumers who can communicate at virtually no cost, and who can find each other almost effortlessly, are obvious and powerful cocreators of brand meaning. It is time to recognize that consumers have almost as much to do with socially constructing brands as do marketers, and that this agency will only grow in the years to come. It is time to see brands as more than summed attitudes floating in preference factor space, rather as bundles of meaning, where accommodation and negotiation between marketer and consumer is on-going and radically different than it was in the past.

Entities like brand communities matter because they look and behave like other forms of community. These are socially embedded and entrenched entities. Community is an essential human phenomenon, and it can be leveraged. Leveraged or not, brand managers will have to deal with such social forces. Social aggregations of empowered consumers are not going away; on the contrary, they will continue to grow, providing marketing communicators with heretofore unknown research and marketing opportunities. But, it requires new thinking, and conceptualizations. The old will not do.

Brand community is just one example of the sociological nature of contemporary branding and brand communication. While we fully acknowledge that it is but one, it would be unwise to diminish their collective significance. Even if one does not accept what is axiomatic in sociological circles, that nonmodal individuals are often important change agents, one must still acknowledge that even modal users of a brand are active participants in the social construction of that brand. Communication has to be part of brand theory, and the individual actor reunited with social reality.

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