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Editors

Building a Competitive Edge through Social Media

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Abstract

Social media has become a necessity in today's information marketplace, so business executives can no longer ignore it. Many executives today are now more interested in how to get in on the social media craze, what kind of social media to utilize, and how social media will enhance their brand. Unlike traditional marketing where firms talk to consumers, social media has now created a new form of marketing where consumers now talk to both firms and other consumers. Consumers now have the power to define brands and leave firms powerless about social media. It is imperative that firms utilize social media tools to facilitate conversations about their brands in order to create competitive advantage. Social media can be used not only to acquire and retain customers, but also to build brand loyalty through social media conversations between firms and consumers. This paper presents four strategies to help researchers and firms to recognize the use of social media in building competitive advantage. The four strategies for using social media to achieve competitive advantage are (a) inviting customers on social media outlets, (b) marketing products good for social media, (c) having beneficial conversations on social media, and (d) developing the best attitude for social media success.

Keywords: Web 2.0, social media, competitive advantage, customer interaction, online strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media provide an avenue for firms to create a competitive advantage by facilitating consumers' conversations about their brand and even offering tips about their products and services. This paper discusses and explains how firms can build competitive advantage through the use of social media. Social media are Web-based and mobile technologies used to interact and dialogue with organizations, communities, and individuals. Social media are platforms and applications through which information is exchanged in order to keep consumers actively engaged and affect each other's behavior and decisions in any way (Thurau, Malthouse, Friege, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010). Social media have a lot of influence on consumer behavior and have empowered consumers in the areas of technology, business strategy, and marketing (Constantinides &

Fountain, 2008). While the fears of many top executives about social media are understood because they do not know how to use them, they have to see social media as an opportunity to converse with their customers in order to build a following for their brand. So it has become necessary for executives to make social media a top priority in their business strategy.

Firms can no longer dictate to consumers what they want their consumers to know about their brand. Consumers are now educating each other about firms and their brands before purchasing decisions are made. Firms need to be more proactive in deciding what social media their customers respond to best and how to present themselves on it competitively. Social media is a priority for many executives in the information and knowledge-based economy and companies are trying to identify the best ways to build a competitive edge on social media platforms such

as Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Internet blogs, and Second Life (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Before firms can be successful with social media and apply effective strategies, firms should understand customer behavior on social media and how these behaviors affect consumption (Durukan, Bozaci, & Hamsioglu, 2012). For social media to be profitable as an IT and business strategy, firms have to study what customers want, how they act, and what they want to know on social media sites. Change management has become crucial to firms in redefining and transforming their mission, based on customer demands and technological capabilities (Rockart, Earl, & Ross, 1996). In the flexible, dynamic, and adaptive business world of today, business executives need IT and business process strategies that conform to the competitive marketplace and meet the demands of the customers.

Social media is as flexible, dynamic, and adaptive as any business process strategy for any competitive firm in the 21st century that is interested in reaching its potential customers and retaining its current customers. For a social media outlet to be successful, it must possess an infrastructure provider and a content provider. These providers determine the success of any social network. The infrastructure is the platform on which users interact; while the content is the wealth of conversation the users create (Chai, Potdar, & Chang, 2007).

Social media should be used to know what customers are thinking and feeling during conversations, and also to find out what their competitors are doing for them in terms of customer satisfaction. Firms already understand the usefulness of customer feedback, but do not know how to take advantage of it on social media sites, a venue where customers are empowered. Customers' praise means excellence, and their dislike leaves an unwanted scare on the internet (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Web 2.0 and social media have empowered customers to define brands and influence the reputation of organizations (Mathur, Black, Cao, Berger, & Weinberg, 2012) and social media venue are great interactive places created by customers (Dwyer, 2007). Successful firms use social media to change the way they interact with their customers in order to meet customer demand in the new and competitive marketplace. For instance, through

dialogue on social media, firms may find out what customers want from their brand and their desired prices.

Unlike paid advertisements on mass media, social media provides a free outlet to reach millions of dedicated users to affect their buying behavior, shopping habits, and purchasing decision in favor of firms. Social media are changing how firms and their customers interact (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Social media constitute a modern outlet that can be used to affect the interest of goods and services in any way, as well as impact purchase decisions (Mathur et al., 2012).

Social media directly impact product ratings and sales. By the same token, negative product reviews do reduce the value of a brand (Durukan, Bozaci, & Hamsioglu, 2012). Social media is a strategy that firms must take seriously and take advantage of in order to have some input on how customers see their brand and products, as well as play an active role in helping customers make purchasing decisions to favor their brand. Firms should take social media seriously because the majority of their customers are on social media, spend a lot of time in this realm, and do impact purchasing decisions online.

Firms can never go wrong with social media, as long as their strategy is planned appropriately to improve customer satisfaction because dedicated social media users are increasing in number. In 2007, 56% of internet users were on social media through social networks, blogs, as well as contributing to online shopping reviews, and that number increased to 75% by 2008 (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Customers now gather consumer information through interactive communication on social media, which now constitutes about 25% users' online time, compared to gaming time of 10% and email time of 8% (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Twitter as of 2009 had 41 million users worldwide and its trending topics are ranked according to headline news and active period of user's account, while the retweets (responses to original tweet) are ranked by number of followers and popularity of account (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010). Numbers do not lie, and these numbers show that millions of customers are online sharing information and exchanging ideas. Some social media users are now so popular that they have huge followings in the thousands and millions listening to them online.

Firms need their own social media presence so they can defend themselves and express themselves through profitable conversations against what others may say. A firm's social media outlets should be a place where customers can come to verify information and offer suggestions while interacting actively as well as exchanging information freely with the firm and other customers.

Social media has now become the ultimate truth and purpose behind the creation of the internet, which was to freely facilitate the exchange of ideas and enhance communication. Social media is basically helping us realize the original intent of the internet, which was to create a platform through which users could share and exchange information freely (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media, unlike traditional media, allow both firms and customers to interact in both synchronous and asynchronous media, as well as to view the opinions of other customers towards firms (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Any competitive firm in today's competitive information marketplace has no excuse not to be on social media. The firm should be representing themselves and interacting with customers in spaces where customers spend most of their time while making purchasing decisions.

The first section provides a literature review that point to the organizational need for social media. The second section discusses the relationship between social media and competitive edge, presents the model of the relationship, and discusses the implications of the study for researchers and managers. The third section shows how firms can invite customers to participate in their social media, and products and services best suited to social media will be addressed in the fourth section. The fifth section discusses the type of conversations needed to make social media strategy a success. Lastly, the right attitude for social media will be presented before the conclusion and limitations of the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Today's companies have little to no control over what customers say about their brand to each other on social media and the firm merely acts as observer to customer communication and consumer behaviors (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Firms can now use social media to interact with and engage customers in real time, solicit innovative ideas from customers, correct error reports, emphasize positive and factual messages, fix damages, and disperse viral information like a giant word-of–mouth machine (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010). Social media functions like a giant word-of-mouth machine that accelerates distribution of information (Dellarocas, 2003; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Despite the fact that firms cannot control what people may say about their brand, their presence on social media will give them the opportunity to address any misconceptions or errors through dialogue with any customer that stops by to verify or inquire.

Social media include Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, Virtual games, and YouTube. Social media, such as Wikipedia (Online Encyclopedia), can be used for collaborative projects, where customers can create a source of information that they can depend on for making their purchasing and spending decisions (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This means that anyone can put negative information on Wikipedia about a firm and visitors might see it as credible information that may influence their purchase decisions later. Blogs are social media that are equivalent to personal Websites that allow others to participate through comments, links, texts, pictures, and videos (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Customers create information, dialogue, knowledge, and opinions about goods and services via social media. It is, therefore, in the best interest of firms to get on board to have direct access to their customers. A firm getting on social media is one thing, yet knowing what social media to get on is another.

Firms should be careful on how they implement their social media strategy and on what platform they choose to do so. This is because different social media attract different kinds of customers and appeal to different kinds of purposes as well as messages (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Firms should align their social media strategy with their corporate culture and strategy. While Wikipedia may be for customers who want detailed information about firms, Facebook is for people who like to know what their friends think, YouTube is for those that want to see and hear about a brand or products, and Twitter is usually for trendy people who like headlines and trending news. Firms must understand what kind of audience they cater to and how the audience likes to learn about things. Unattended issues left on social media by customers may become an embarrassment, and

firms should respond without emphasizing negative behaviors (Gallaugher & Ransbotham, 2010).

Firms that choose to use multiple social media must ensure that their activities are aligned. Social media activities should be integrated with other forms of traditional advertising (TV, radio, print, email blast), and should provide access to all, including employees (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media can be content communities, such as YouTube, through which users share large amounts of content by the minute through videos, text, slides, as well as pictures, and YouTube shares 100 million videos a day (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, allow users to create profiles, invite and accept friends, exchange emails and instant texts, share videos, pictures, and links. Facebook has over 250 million users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). There are a lot of users and markets on social media for firms to capitalize on, but they should align and integrate their conversations with traditional advertising in order to reach those that still respond to non-online interactions.

Firms can also reach customers through virtual games, which is also a form of social media. According to the Huffington Post (2008) and the New York Times (2008), President Obama utilized Xbox 360 games to reach out to male youth voters and players (ages 16-30) in 10 states during his Presidential campaign race in 2008. President Obama got 66% of voters below the age of 30 to win the 2008 Presidential election as his strongest voting age group (USA Today, 2011). Virtual game world, like Microsoft's X-Box, are social media that allows users to appear as three-dimensional avatars and interact with other users' avatar as if they were their real selves in the gaming world restricted by rules (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Virtual social worlds, like Second Life, are just like the virtual gaming world, but are free to behave in any manner and live as they like without the restriction of rules, as well as create content that can be exchanged or sold for money (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Multiple users in virtual games can be present at the same time, within the same screen, and viewing the same setting or scene. Any advertisement or conversation placed at that setting can be viewed by thousands or millions of users simultaneously. If President Obama could use social media towards winning his Presidential

election, then firms in need of maintaining or creating a competitive edge regularly need social media to target particular audiences with the right message at the right time.

3. RELATIONSHIP AND MODEL

The model below is based on the mix of literature outlined below, as well as author's experience in social media (Facebook) usage.

Figure 1. Model: Competitive Edge of Social Media
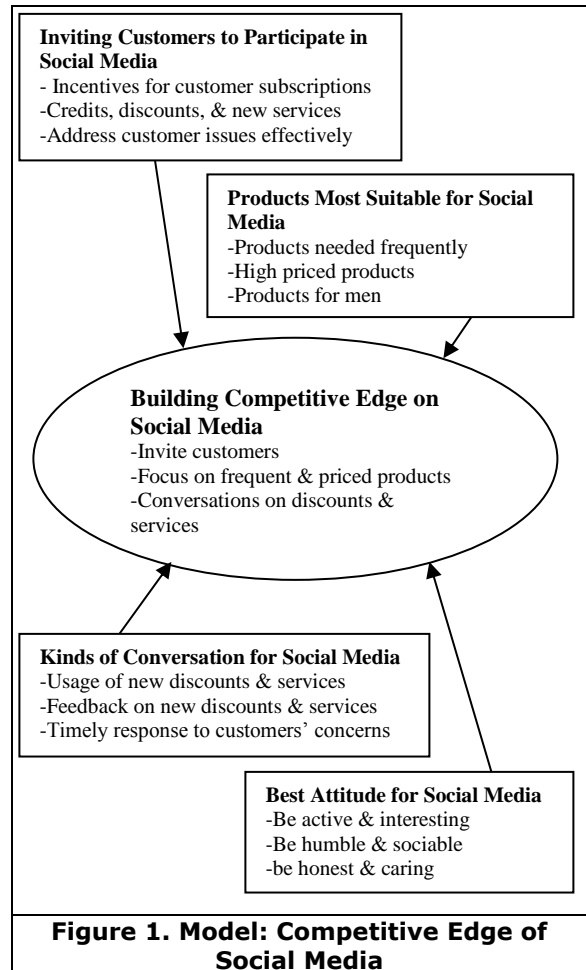
For a social media tool to be effective for a firm, it must have visitors and customers to engage with, products and content, conversation and feedback, as well as the right attitude to enhance its effectiveness. A firm must be able to acquire customers through its social media to even have a chance of interacting with them in order to have any impact on their purchasing decisions. While the customers are interacting on the firm's social media site(s), the firm must

offer some special products, services, or tips to make their brand appealing to the customers.

Through interaction and comments on social media sites, potential customers get to see what the current customers are saying about the firm's brand. Even if firms pretend to be satisfied customers, others customers have the option to disagree freely. This may even make the potential consumer now join the firm's social media or make the firm's brand favorable to others outside the social media outlets.

4. INVITING CUSTOMERS TO PARTICIPATE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media offer a platform for traditional marketing where firms talk directly to customers, and modern marketing, where customers can talk to each other and to the firms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). According to Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007), social capital is having people stay connected and sharing ideas within a community that is already inhabited. There is a need for firms to have social capital (i.e., retained customers on social media) in an attempt to promote their goods and services within a comfortable and trusted environment, such as social media provides.
Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007) state that Facebook provided some psychological well-being for users with low self-esteem and low life satisfaction that creates social capital. In so doing, ideas and involvement are shared without physical contact or individuals actually knowing each other. Many people who are shy in real life find comfort in social media to express themselves freely. In order to attract these kinds of customers and many more, incentives and discounts should be offered to customers in order to attract them first for interaction and dialogue.

Provide Incentives for Customer Subscription
Today, Wikipedia is one of the top five results whenever you search for many companies and products, and customers can read all the remarks that other customers have about that brand without any company's ability to defend themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Instead of firms expecting customers to utilize search engines to find all kinds of information about their brand, the firm can create their own social media, which can also be referenced by other social media and be found on the top search engine results as well.

Mass e-mail campaigns as well as a message on their monthly bills can be used to invite customers to join their social media for a little discount or coupon for a product or service. If they are already social media fanatics, they will easily join—often for free. These customers may not only verbally tell their physical friends about their new social media friend (the firm), but whenever the firm accepts their friendship, the social media friends of the user are notified (Facebook). On Twitter, users can search for the firm and request to follow their tweets or can view who their friends are following and decide to join the firm. On YouTube, users are allowed to search for firms and subscribe to their videos so that they get notified when new videos are posted. Users can also connect their videos to the firm's video(s) on similar issues and whoever finds the video on the list of "related videos" can also watch it. It is advisable for firms to use social media to converse about their coupons and new services.

Offering Credits, Discounts, and New Services
Customers are utilizing social media as a resource center and tool to research their purchasing options before they make their purchasing decisions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). As long as firms are frequently offering credits, discounts, and new services, this will always keep the firm's conversation on social media very interesting. Customers love to feel like they are getting more for their money. They will always visit the firm's social media to read their notifications or post on their own account to see what they can benefit from the following month or later. The more customers comment and share their opinion (like or dislike), the more their friends get to see firm's messages or postings.

Addressing Customers' Issues Effectively
Customers are now relying more on social media as a more reliable source of information than firms' commercials or traditional marketing when making purchasing decisions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Social media can be utilized to solve customer-related problems for free, thereby increasing customer service and quality while reducing service cost (Thurau et al., 2010). Customers are making purchasing decisions in real time, so the earlier firms respond to customer concerns and issues, the better for them. This is because for each comment a user posts, their friends get to see the firm's response too, like in Facebook. This means that

negative issues left unattended to can be very disastrous for the firm. On Twitter, a user's friends get notified and they can also see all the comments when they go on their friend's social media sites. On YouTube videos, anybody can leave a comment about each video and you do not have to be a customer or subscriber, and everyone can see each comment in real time, as in posted-article and blog commentaries. Firms should strategically use their postings to promote their products. For instance, McDonalds and Wal-Mart have a presence on Facebook, while TV stations have a presence on Twitter.

5. TYPES OF PRODUCTS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Products and services should be designed with talking points to emphasize their uniqueness, value, visibility, and use in order to promote emotional stimulation on social media (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Firms need to have products and services that are unique and interesting, which will make customers converse in order to generate emotional sensation as well as meet the needs of the customers on a regular basis.

Provide Products Needed Frequently
The higher the frequency of advertising on social media, the more it influences purchasing behavior (Mathur et al., 2012). Social media and E-marketplace should provide products and services that are needed frequently (Reibstein, 2002), such as snacks, coffee, and software. ReadwriteWeb.com (2008) reports that Skittles (snacks), Starbucks (coffee), H&R Block (tax), Oracle (software), Comcast (Cable TV), and Wal-Mart (shopping) are doing great on social media. According to Vatanasombut, Stylianou, and Igbaria (2004), the best online businesses are those that have products (and services) that need reordering due to frequent usage. Frequent usage equates to what customers need (i.e., high demand). There is need for product differentiation and affordable prices to generate continuous dialogue for the best products and price.

Provide High Priced Products
While low priced products and services had no influence in social media, high priced products and services above $300 were highly discussed on social media before customers made purchase decisions (Mathur et al., 2012). A look at Facebook on April 23, 2012, which is automatically set for Baltimore, Maryland with a global positioning system, shows cars, refrigerators, guitars, and houses as the new

postings above $300. This makes sense because people want other people's opinions on issues that cost a lot of money, which will lead to lots of discussions.

Provide Products for Men
On social media, men utilized social media more than women as a tool for communicating, opinion leadership, and negative word-of-mouth, as well as the higher the daily usage, the greater the consumption of interaction and behavior (Durukan, Bozaci, & Hamsioglu, 2012). It is unwise not to have products for women, but it is a strategic advantage to have products for men. This is because research shows that men seem to have a stronger impact on consumer behavior and decision in their usage of social media. Men's comments and experiences may bring a firm more buyers and visitors to their sites. The number of visitors to a site is related to the number of visitors that are converted into buyers (Hoffman and Novak, 2000). If high-priced products lead to more interaction and men utilize social media more for buying the higher priced products, then it will be wise for firms to target more men with higher priced goods in order to influence their purchasing decisions through adequate conversations. Since social media get millions of users daily, then they are ideal venues to convert millions of customers into buyers by conversing with them.

6. KINDS OF CONVERSATIONS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media content is intentionally crafted by customers in an attempt to educate and advise others about products, services, brands, and issues (Xiang & Gretzel, 2012). Customers are more bonded to firms (and their products) that openly accept their feedback (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Since customers are determined to use their interaction and conversations to influence each other's shopping habits, it will be business savvy for firms to openly invite customers to their social media sites in order to bond with them through excellent customer service.

Encourage Usage of New Discounts and Services
Social media content is updated frequently and indexed favorably by search engines in a more frequent manner (Xiang & Gretzel, 2012). So it is important for firms to update their social media with the latest coupons or sales. Brands that can persuade customers to fall in love with

their conversations in Web 2.0 will be successful (Meadows-Klue, 2008). Wikipedia and YouTube are usually the top-five favorites in search engine results on any topic they are affiliated with. So firms that have their social media results in search engines displaying interesting messages will spark active conversations from any visitor, such as videos on new services or frequent promotions listed by the firm. The aim of social media is also to convert these conversations into healthy feedback that encourages positive conversations between firms and customers as well as customer-customer interactions.

Encourage Feedback for New Discounts and Services

Firms must compete for consumer-related content on social media that has significant and persuasive effect on brands (Xiang & Gretzel, 2012). The ability to get customers by interacting with other Websites is a form of marketing and strategic partnership (Hoffman and Novak, 2000). Firms that have a presence in a cross or related Websites in an attempt to diversify and increase their customer base are more successful in term of marketing and strategic partnerships. Social media constitute a form of cross-related Website that can help to diversify, retain, and increase a firm's customer base through marketing and strategic partnership. Social media are used to have a positive effect on brands, products, and services through timely responses to customers' issues and requests. For instance, when visitors on a firm's social media realize that customers' issues have not been addressed for months and the comments are negative, this implies that the firm is avoiding the situation, or the firm does not care about their customers. Also, firms can request feedback on discounts to encourage used and conversation.

Provide Timely Response to Customers' Concerns

Search engine results are very favorable to social media information searches and play a great role in trip planning (Xiang & Gretzel, 2012) as well as other products and services decisions. Social media, such as YouTube and Wikipedia, are easily found and accessed through search engines. Any comments or statements made on these social media can easily affect customer's decisions. Since firms are not allowed to modify what is written on Wikipedia about them (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), they can at least respond to comments

on YouTube strategically. A firm having a huge following on Facebook or Twitter will be a great way to counter other negative remarks on blogs or Wikipedia because a good percentage of visitors on those other social media are also on Facebook and Twitter interacting with the firm. A company's reflexes is measured by how fast it can respond to emergencies and bad news, while listen to customers' feedback in order to learn from mistakes and improve products is the foundation for competitive advantage (Gates, 1999). It is in the best interest of the firm to have a great social media attitude while interacting with customers.

7. BEST ATTITUDE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be used to make customers feel special by giving tips and information about upcoming promotions, a new product or service, as well as supporting causes that may appeal to their audience, such as promoting education and fighting diseases (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Firms can use social media to stand for something socially, aside from profit-making. Firms promoting a cause on social media that customers feel strongly about, or giving them more for their money breeds a sense of loyalty from the customers. This shows that the firm has character and a good attitude.

Be Active and Interesting

Firms on social media must be active in real time in order to respond to all customer concerns and be interesting as well as innovative in the way they communicate with customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Firms should be very active on social media regardless of who it belongs to as long as it concerns their brand. They need to respond on time to have some influence on customers' decision making. Firms also need to be innovative in their interactions with customers. They can use links to games, surveys, trick questions, or even word-puzzles about their products and services.

Be Humble and Sociable

Firms must realize that they need their customers' candid feedback in order to have a competitive edge in their industry, and they have to be friendly to their customers in order to get the necessary information about their brand (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Firms must remember that they are only in business to serve their customers through adequate customer service. It is the customer that keeps

them in business and nothing else, so they need to be friendly and treat customers with maximum respect in their communication and reception of customers' feedback.

Be Honest and Caring
Firms should use social media to inform their customers about what they can truly do and provide with their brand and products, as well as show that the firm is determined to meet their needs on a timely basis (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Firms should never promise what they know they cannot deliver or give information on coupon and new services that they cannot fulfill. Firms should not leave customers' comments unanswered or focus too much on the money than the service. Firms dialogue on social media must make customers feel that the firm means what it says and the firm has their best interests at heart.

8. IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

The implication of the study for researchers and managers is to see the benefit of social media as a tool for adapting to the flexible and dynamic marketplace of today through the interaction with customers in order to meet customers at their point of need. Since one of the uses of IT is to free workers from doing work and instead focus their time and energy on customer service as well as quality (Gates, 1999), social media can be the exact tool to enhance customer service and quality.

By interacting with customers on social media, offering new products and discounts, having interesting and innovative conversations, and by possessing a good attitude in response to customers' feedback, firms appear caring and credible. Also, offering the right timely response on social media and providing the exact products as well as services that the customers are demanding (on social media) is also a form of improved quality. This paper is essentially about the utility of social media in enhancing competitive advantage through interactive customer service aimed to improve quality. For social media strategy to be effective, firms must first invite customers to their social media.

For managers, social media is a tool for customer acquisition and retention. Through dialogues on social media, managers get to know how customers are feeling about their brand, the improvements that customers want to see in their products, and what needs to be done to encourage customers to return for more dialogue. Social media can enhance the relationship between firms and customers if they are utilized effectively by firms. Firms may want to use social media to explain the benefits of their new products, new services, and the impact of new government regulations on their business or industry. Customers may utilize social media to inform other customers about how great a brand is, inform the firm on how to improve on their services, or even ask other customers about the benefits of other brands. Firms should utilize these opportunities to retain their customers and acquire their friends on social media. This can be done through their conversations; differentiation of their brand based on price and product desires of customers, and improves upon their customer service, as well as quality.

Researchers may be interested in what social media influences competitive edge more for various types of customers, what kind of conversation and products are various customers interested in on social media, and what types of attitudes brings out the most profits from various customers on social media. Researchers may also want to know if the loyalty of customers on social media lasts longer than that of other advertising methods, or if customers just stop by to talk with little loyalty to the brand. Also, researchers may want to know if social media marketplaces that allow users to sell their goods and services that may soon become more profitable that Amazon.com or Craigslist.com. Studies can be done to investigate if advertisements placed on social media are more profitable than conversing on social media to retain and acquire customers.

9. CONCLUSION

Social media is a necessity for today's competitive information marketplace where customers are empowered and are determined to educate as well as inform each other about brands and products. Many customers now rely on social media to get information as a credible source before they make their purchasing decisions, especially men and for highly priced goods. It is in the best interest of firms to engage with their customers already on social media in order to influence their purchasing decisions.

Customers should be invited to subscribe to or join a firm's social network in exchange for incentives. It is through interactions with these customers that other customers will be attracted to join in the interesting conversation of new services and new discounts that will give customers more value for their money. The aim of social media is to keep customers conversing while providing adequate customer service as well as quality products and services that meet customers' needs (determined through their feedback).

It is imperative for firms to provide products and conversations that are used frequent and very interesting to the customers. Products such as coffee, taxes, diapers, drinks, shopping items, snacks, cable TV, games, and latest software are great for social media. This is because they are needed frequently, people want the best offer for their money, customers are prepared to switch brands for better deals, and social media will keep customers conversing as well as giving productive feedback. Also, high priced goods such as houses, guitars, refrigerators, and cars are also good for social media because many people want to discuss with other customers about highly priced products before they let go of their cash.

Social media is not just a good way to get involved in customers conversations online, but it is also a good way to take charge of the conversation. By giving customers something interesting to talk about frequently, it keep them focused on firm's new deals, promotions, products, and services instead of letting them dwell on past issues. Regardless of what customers want to talk about, either the new deals or old complaints; firms must be ready and equipped to address all issues efficiently without focusing too much on the negatives.
Social media sites are also a place for firms to sell their customer service expertise by showing that they truly care about their customers and have a positive attitude. Firms must use the opportunity provided by social media to be social, humble, active, honest, and interesting. With humility, firms are to allow customers to always be right and use social as well as cordial languages to resolve issues. Firms should be active, present, and frequent on their social media sites in order to respond to customer requests in a timely manner. It is also wise to keep the conversation interesting and honest in order to increase credibility and give customers a reason to come back for more interesting conversations.

10. LIMITATIONS

Social media do not guarantee profitability or competitive advantage for a firm. Just because incentives are offered does not guarantee that customers will willingly join a firm's social media or just because they are conversing on the social media outlets does not guarantee that a firm can affect the customers' purchasing decisions. Even with the right products, conversations, and attitude, social media do not guarantee competitive edge in the industry, especially with the competitors doing some of the exact same things to get the same kinds of customers.

More research needs to be done on the most effective way to attract customers to join a firm's social media, what exact products and services do well on various types of social media, and what type of demographics respond positively in relation to competitive advantage on social media. Also, the type of conversation needed and in what manner the conversation should be facilitated to maximize competitive advantage for the firm needs to be researched further.

Another interesting area of research on social media is a study of companies that are successfully using social media, like Wal-Mart, H&R Block, Starbucks, Comcast, and Oracle to see what makes them successful. We need to know what conversations their customers are creating about them, how they invite customers to their social media sites, how they respond to customers' feedback, and how their products affect their conversations and attitudes on social media.

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