

Proactive Communication Mode (PMC) of Zappos: The Success of Consumer Engagement

ABSTRACT

The internet is filled with successful stories, but not all successful stories we learn from. Zappos build a strong brand based on proactive communication. Zappos is a success story not just because of the financial gain, but also because the proactive communication model (PMC) company used. The proactive communication model refers to the degree of which employees anticipate the consumers' needs and desires. We emphasize the important of consumer engagement on that communication model and how this model helped the brand to success. The brand starts the communication process from the moment the company chooses the employees. We propose the flow of the PCM at the end. Critics of the brand strategy, conclusions, and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Zappos, brand, communication, brand building, customer engagement, engagement

INTRODUCTION

The turning point for Zappos – an online retail shop - was when the brand decides to go beyond selling shoes to create consumer engagement. The company success is an inspiring success story. Zappos has a successful brand story not just gaining financial profit, but also delivering happiness to consumers and employees. The name started with Nick Swinmurn in 1999 after trying to find a pair of shoes in several stores. He believed that the internet is the solution for finding the right shoes in the market at the right price. Moreover, around the same time Tony Hsieh – an American internet entrepreneur- and Alfred Lin – an American venture capitalist - sold Link Exchange, ad-banner business, to Microsoft for \$265 million. They join Zappos in 2000 as co-CEO and CFO [1]. The idea of Hsieh is to build a happy culture and proactive communication in the company. Moreover, Hsieh wanted to create an environment that could be a success in today's competitive market. The two entrepreneur want to build a new concept of retailing. The company brand evolved in 2009 from "personal emotional connection" to "delivering happiness" [2]. Zappos went beyond marketing brands to sell happiness by creating proactive communication. The company builds the brand depending on e-commerce, social commerce, and proactive communication.

Brand's life cycle, a good relationship with consumers' depend on communication. PCM helps the company understand consumers and employees. In general, there is no type of communication: passive and proactive communication. The proactive communication provides relevant information to consumers based on the anticipated needs of the consumers [3]. Also, the ability to anticipate information needs of consumers is highly important [4]. This type of communication may provide more information than what consumers asked. Whereas passive communication refers to provide a reply to the question the consumers ask [3]. Therefore, consumers used to be passive when they interact with employees and brands. However, as technology became more social, consumers expect to be more engaged with the brand and the product they are interested in.

Brand engagement refers to the level of an individual customer's emotional, cognitive and behavioral activity in brand interaction [6]. Consumer brand engagement is the core concept of PCM because engagement can be seen as the repeated interactions and communication with a

brand that strengthen the emotional, physical, and psychological of consumers [5]. Also, engagement is a prospect's interactive with marketing communications to predict sales effects. The brand engagement refers to the interaction between the brand and the consumers. Consumers' engagement goes beyond managing different marketing channel to motivate the consumer to invest into the relationship with the brand [7]. Engagement in general refers to the relational resources (e.g. trust) are optimized within the virtual social network. The resources motivate consumers to share information to reduce uncertainty, gain insights and obtain services [8]. Many scholars emphasize the critical of engagement experience in the virtual environment [9]. Moreover, the online engagement defined as cognitive and affects commitment to an active relationship with a brand [5]. As we have seen above, Zappos is engaging the consumers into the brand by personalizing the brand via proactive communication.

Therefore, this paper examines the success factors of Zappos emphasizing on how the company succeeds in building the brand engagement via proactive communication. The author uses few theories to criticize and analysis Zappos brand strategies. The author also uses consumer engagement and e-WOM to explain the consumers' behavior regarding the brand. The significance of this study is to propose proactive communication model (PCM) and to tell the hidden side of Zappos success story.

Therefore, this paper has three essential goals first: examine the success factors of Zappos emphasizing on how the company succeeds in building the brand engagement via proactive communication. Second: explain the consumers' behavior regarding the brand. Third: criticize and analysis Zappos brand strategies. Accordingly, the author uses few theories of consumer engagement and e-WOM to accomplish the study goals. Finally, this study has a significant contribution by proposing the proactive communication model (PCM) and to tell the hidden side of Zappos success story.

SUCCESS FACTORS OF ZAPPOS

In 2000, the internet bubble was the end of many companies during that time [2] tried everything possible to ensure Zappos survival, and he did make it survive. [2] even focused on costumers, and he commented "We realized that the biggest vision would be to build the Zappos brand to be about the very best consumer service" [2]. He believed that creating a culture inside the company would lead to building the brand to be the very best in consumer service by its own. The company co-created with their employees the core values. In 2006, they listed ten core values as follows: 1. Deliver WOW through Consumer Service; 2. Embrace and Drive Change; 3. Create Fun and a Little Weirdness; 4. Be Adventurous, Creative and Open- minded; 5. Pursue Growth and Learning; 6. Build Open and Honest Relationships with Communication; 7. Build a Positive Team and Family Spirit; 8. Do More with Less; 9. Be Passionate and Determined; and 10. Be Humble.

Zappos has a unique culture, and the company hires unique employees to maintain that culture. For example, the job interview included funny quizzes, personality/fit questions, and crossword puzzles that focused on Zappos business. Also, each employee has to start from the consumer team member (C.L.T) regardless of his/her role in the future to build a strong PCM. They spent at least two weeks talking to consumers on the phone to understand their need and desire. Moreover, the top management needs their employees to communicate and understand the consumers' requests. The call center in the company was the starting point for everyone.

In 2007, [2] read many books about happiness including "Happiness Hypothesis" by Jonathan Haidt and he invited the author for a training course in the topic. "Science of happiness101" is one of the most popular classes in the training program. Moreover, the concept of happiness in the company does not evolve around [2]. He explains "For

any company or movement or religion or whatever, if there's one person that personifies it, then that puts that company or vision at risk ... that's why it needs to be about a movement, not about a person or even a specific company." Alexandra Jacobs, [1]. Thus, [2] wants Zappos to communicate happiness to consumers. The company brand evolved in 2009 from "personal emotional connection" to "delivering happiness" [2]. The company went beyond marketing the brand to sell the idea of happiness and proactive communication to make the ideas viral. So, [2] wants to deliver happiness beyond Zappos doors, and he wrote a book about happiness "Delivering Happiness." In the late 2000s, companies started to contact Zappos to learn how to apply happiness in their environment. Therefore, the concept that he applies to the brand went beyond business to touch the consumers' life [2].

The core value number 6 is: build an open and honest relationship with communication. Also, all employees start from CLT to understand and communicate with their consumers. The company has unique consumer service and communication model. For example, consumers have 365 returning policy, free shipping both ways, 24/7 consumer services, toll-free phone number, and assistance in reaching competitors if the company could not satisfy the request. As the company grew, the happiness culture became more important. Also, seventy-five percent of Zappos sales are from repeat consumers, and they ordered 2.5 times the amount that new consumers ordered in 12 months [2].

Facilitating the Proactive Communication Model with SNS

The emergence of social media has spurred the growth of electronic word-of-mouth communication (e-WOM). Consumers, especially the younger generations, are spending an unprecedented amount of time online. Therefore, the online environment has become an important channel of communication, gaining prominence in the recent years. The company used the new concepts to their advantage and built a strong brand around that. For instance, e-commerce market has high competition and many companies want to get a market share of that market. For example, Facebook, the online social networking application, has more than 175 million active users- as of January 2009 - and every minute, ten hours of video content uploaded to YouTube [10].

Zappos depend on social commerce, social communication and social networking sites (SNS). SNS is changing the online market in which consumers can be more involved and proactive [11]. Many companies offer their products through social commerce which allow the product and the consumer to connect through Facebook, Twitter, etc. Moreover, social commerce has been defining as "the use of social technologies to connect, listen, understand, and engage to improve the shopping experience" [12]. These SNS and social commerce have transformed the shopping experience and provide shoppers a platform to advocate for their favorite product or service. For example, a recent study revealed that 62% of the US consumers read consumers reviews and 80% of these consumers said that these reviews had affected their buying intention [13]. Also, among the top 100 companies 79% has a Facebook page, 69% Twitter, and 59% have both [14]. Moreover, 47% of the consumers said they would visit SNS to search for and discuss holiday gift ideas, and 29% of them stated that they would buy the product there in a survey conducted by American Marketing Association [15].

We should note that SNS users are not familiar with purchasing through these mediums. For example, Facebook users are not familiar with buying products on Facebook. They see the product, like it and recommend it to friends. However, companies (i.e. Zappos) direct consumers to their shopping site where to make that transaction. Moreover, according to [16] internet users spend more time on Facebook than they spend on Google, Yahoo, YouTube, Wikipedia and Amazon combined. Also, the authors mentioned that 33 percent of Facebook

users are a fan of a brand, and 60 percent of these consumers are more likely to purchase or recommend to a friend after "liking" the product. A recent report found that 60% of all retailer sales in the US will involve the web by 2017 [17]. The total online retail sales will reach 370\$ billion (10% of the total retail sales 3.6\$ trillion) by the end of 2017. Companies are paying more and more attention to advertising and communicate with their consumers online. However, consumers tune out several messages a days because they are either not interested, or bombardment of messages [18]; [19]. Focusing on consumers who are most likely to listen to messages online would improve the communication effectiveness. Distinctive messages can be distributed to have the maximum impact.

Call center

Zappos did not use fancy and expensive tools to create and build their brand. The company used the call center as a strategic branding tool [20]. In addition, call center helped the company to serve the consumers and to spread word-of-mouth. For example, Zappos fielded 5,000 to 6,000 calls a day. Also, their policies are not scripted, and calls have no time limit [i.e. 5 hours' record]. [21] comment "our best branding tool, as unsexy and low-tech as it may sound, it telephone. And if we get that interaction right, it's something they remember, maybe for the rest of their life, and tell their friends and family about [21]. As mentioned earlier, the new employees would spend two weeks at the call center to understand the brand and to know how to respond to different situations. Therefore, Zappos is using the call center to build the brand.

Twitter

Twitter helped Zappos to connect with consumers and employees. The company launched Twitter accounts (@zapposemployees) and followed all staffs who have a Twitter account. Also, the company wants to get closer to consumers. When clients follow employees on Twitter, that increase the time consumers spent with the brand. Moreover, people felt a personal connection with Zappos through Twitter. In 2010, 499 employees were using Twitter and 1.6 million people were following [22] account. The company went the extra mile and created a website called Twitter. Zappos.com where people can look at Tweets and browse through them. The company policy in blogging and micro-blogging is to use the best judgment – meet the standard of behavior. The company does not care about employees' negative comments. The company wants to know the complaint and address them. Any employee in the company can post a tweet. This technique empowers the employees to communicate with consumers and give them the freedom to tweet and spread e-WOM on Twitter. Thus, this proactive communication channel allows consumers to observe the company's internal environment. Also, twitter gives the consumer look at the company's ethics and humanize the brand as well. Therefore, Zappos utilize Twitter and empower their employees to communicate with consumers.

Videos

The company used blogs and other methods to broadcast videos about the company from inside to humanize the brand and to make it a tangible brand. The first few videos were to answer questions about the life at Zappos. The company has now 187 videos that been viewed two million times [22]. The videos are blowout among consumers and none-consumers. Also, the videos show the employees answering calls and fulfilling orders. Moreover, consumers can see the employees' work, answer phones calls and enjoy the time to work day and night. Consumers can also learn more about from where they buy the product and how employees handle the phone calls. Thus, the videos are windows into the internet

187 company's work environment

188 **Zappo's Proactive Communication Model (PCM)**

189 There is no precise definition of proactive communication [5]. The researcher defines the
190 proactive communication as the communication process that anticipates the consumers' needs
191 and desires. Zappos uses internal and external methods to proactively communicate with their
192 consumers.

193 *Proposition 1: Internal method: Zappos recruit high skilled employees and have fun,*
194 *productive environment, and clear reward programs*

195 Zappos has exceptional ways to build their brand name. The CEO, Tony Hsieh, is trying to
196 build the brand inside and outside the company as well. Zappos starts from inside by hiring
197 the right employees who fit the job requirements. For example, one of the questions in the
198 interview is "do you consider yourself lucky?" If the answer is no, the employee might not
199 get the job because that sort of question determines the person happiness in his personal life.
200 Then, Zappos give the employees the appropriate training for the job. For instance, all
201 employees are trained for consumer service and answering the phone for two-four weeks'
202 even if the job does not require working to answer phone calls. The aim of this training is to
203 understand the business and get the core value of Zappos. At the end of the training, the
204 employees are giving the opportunity to leave the job and get \$2000 to show how much the
205 employees are enthusiastic about the job. After that training, the employees have the freedom
206 to be on Social Network Sites (SNS) such as Twitter and they do not have restriction about
207 what can they write. They should use their best judgment as for the CEO directed [1]. Thus,
208 the company starts from inside before they go beyond that.

209 The employees have free food and recreation center inside the company's campus to provide
210 the best environment for the employees. It is a dream for many people to work in that
211 environment. Consumers can see and engage in that great environment through the videos
212 that have been posted on Zappos channel and the employees Twitter accounts [22].
213 Consumers can comment on the videos and re-tweet and reply to employees' tweets.
214 Moreover, these videos and tweets attract consumers to visit the channels, and that would
215 create a sense of community among consumers [23]. Zappos want consumers to come back
216 not only to see the new products offering but also to see the newest videos and tweets about
217 Zappos. The company wants to allow consumers to feel emotionally connected with the
218 brand [24]. Thus, Zappos utilized the work environment to build the brand.

219 Zappos has many different programs for employees to grow and to reward. All of the
220 programs that Zappos offers are compelling to the employees. For instance, the most taken
221 course is "Science of Happiness 101". The goal of this course is to deliver the WOW factor
222 to the consumers. The success of Zappos to build the brand is to make the consumers come
223 back after purchase. Zappos, as mentioned earlier, does not manufacture any product "yet, but
224 the services they deliver exceed the consumer expectations. For example, repeat consumers
225 had higher average orders than the new consumers in the 12 months following a purchase [1].
226 Also, managers are required to spend ten-twenty percent of their time hanging out with their
227 team members to recognize the problems early and react quickly. All these factors help
228 consumer to get the optimal experience and to go beyond consumers' expectations
229 because the interact with skilled employees

230 *Proposition 2: Outside method: Zappos is building the brand through delivering the highest*
231 *consumers experience*

232 Consumers experience products in Zappos risk-free by offering free shipping both ways and
233 356 days' refunds. Zappos want to reach consumers at their convenience time, and they
234 provide 24/7 consumer service. Moreover, Zappos does not manufacture any of their
235 products yet. However, they deliver the highest consumer service, and that drive many
236 consumers to switch from their local store in the corner to Zappos. Most of consumers can

find the same products at different offline and online store at bargain prices, but they choose Zappos for the experience. Therefore, Zappos differentiates itself with the level of experience, communication and the service it provides.

[25] specified six dimensions of "experience rooms": physical artifacts, intangible artifacts, technology, consumer placement, consumer involvement, and interaction with employees. The authors defined consumers experience as the consumer's interpretation of their experience with the brand. Zappos want to co-create consumer experience by engaging them every day workday. physical artifacts exist when the company has physical signs and symbols necessary to create the experience. Zappos website and the logo can be physical artifacts. The second dimension is intangible artifacts. This aspect includes brand reputation, mental image, and norms. They lead consumers to have a positive feeling towards the brand. If we apply this concept to Zappos, they are building happiness culture as their intangible artifacts. The third dimension is technology and it refers to the technological methods and tools for consumers to interact. In this dimension, Zappos has features for consumers to have the optimal experience. For example, consumers can watch a video for the product in the move, and also they have appropriate measures for shoes to ensure consumers get the right size. Consumers' placement is the fourth dimension in this model, and it means how consumers are positioned in the brand. Consumers' placements related to the presence of consumer around the brand. For example, Zappos is presenting actual consumers in their Twitter account and YouTube videos to increase consumer placement. The fifth dimension is consumer involvement and it refers to the interaction between the consumer, stimulus, and situation. For example, Zappos is showing consumers reviews and comment to increase consumer placement. The last dimension is interaction with employees, and we can see that in every action Zappos does. They empower consumers to have the highest interaction with the employees via social network sites. Thus, all of these dimensions make the proactive communication stronger.

DISCUSSION

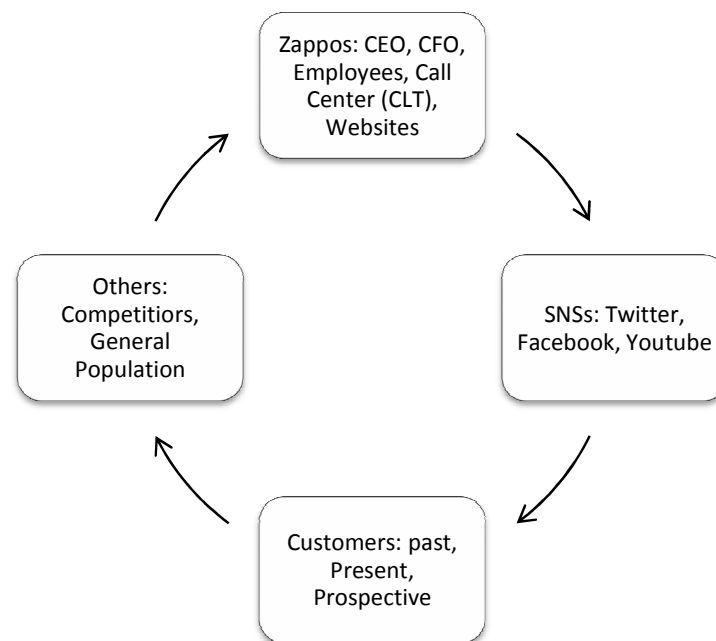
PCM can occur in a different setting when consumers search, evaluate, consume and dispose of the brand. In this paper, the researcher has analysis consumers' proactive communication with Zappos brand. the researcher draws his analysis from prior research such as [26] brand experience and [25] dimensions of experience. Also, we looked at electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) [18]; [19] model to critically evaluate the brand. All these concepts helped Zappos empower consumers to co-create the experience.

Zappos brand not only creates communication between the consumers and the employees, but also it promotes this culture outside its doors. Zappos built a strong brand with proactive communication. One of the core values of Zappos is: to build open and honest relationships with communication [1]. The CEO added that they increase efficiency by increasing communication, building trust, and creating friendships [1]. Moreover, the company formulates their consumers experience on proactive communication.

Zappos transfers the PCM to advertise the brand. It is an inexpensive and efficient way to promote the brand. That is why all the employees have to know basic skills in communicating with all consumers. Many papers discuss happy culture, and not many articles emphasize the importance of the brand's communication model. We argue that Zappos built their brand experience on happiness and communication as well. We think that communication mediums such as Twitter, YouTube, and call center help consumers engage with the brand. These different mediums capture different dimensions of the consumers' life and can use multiple mediums to increase their engagement.

We also argue that the communication does not usually start from the company as the traditional communication model proposes [27]. We think that the proactive communication could start at any point and from the consumers as well as the employee. Also, the direction of that communication is not uni-dimensional, it is multidimensional. Figure 1 might give a clear view of how this model works. The communication in this model does not start from top to bottom or from one point to another. It could start from any point and feedback is embedded in the process. In this model have noise as it was introduced in the traditional model. However, due to consumers' high engagement the sound is less effective.

Figure 1: proactive communication model (PCM)



IMPLICATION / CONCLUSION

PCM can be duplicated for another company and another industry. Zappos created many points of contact rather than signal contact. That decreases the time to response to consumers and creates a variety of responses. For example, if a consumer sends a question through Twitter, one tweet from an employee answers part of the question and another tweet from another employee gives the consumer beyond his question. The employees are anticipating the consumer's needs to achieve the proactive communication. The answer not always from the employee, consumers can answer the question too because it is in public domain and anyone can answer the question. As we mentioned that the consumer's experience defines as the consumer's interpretation of their experience with the brand [25]. The brand experience could be shaped based on this communication process [28].

It is crucial for online brands to be humanized and live as human being. Being human that means the brand has to have personality and consumers view the brand based on that personality. Brand personality defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with the brand" [29]. PCM process could build and shape the brand characteristics. The consumers can see, hear and communicate with the brand in two ways directions. They know they can rely on one Zappos because there will be someone to answer their questions 24/7. Also, they can watch what is going on inside the brand by looking at a couple of videos on YouTube. [30] explain that virtual consumption fits nomadic

characteristics people and enable global consumers to gain access to products and services without transport. Thus, the consumers can see the brand as a person as they see themselves in the online world.

While the present study contributes to the emerging body of literature on online communication and buying behavior, this study is not without limitations. The author reviewed one case and in future research we would include more brands. We believe there are many brands and companies who are trying to imitate that model, but there are not visible as Zappos. We also want, in future research, to know brands and stores who imitate their model and replicated this model. As we mentioned above, there are many companies contacted Zappos in late 2000 to learn about the happiness model, and we believe there are other brands who are copying the communication model.

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