The importance of timely social media responsiveness

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Abstract   Social media marketing has become a very popular way for brands to attract and interact with consumers. To realise the benefits of social media marketing, companies should understand and apply best practices. Using an experimental (A/B) design, this research compares what happens when brands respond to consumer posts and enquiries within one day and when they do not. This is a very practical scenario. When being asked to do more with less, marketing managers and small business owners oftentimes do not have the bandwidth to stay on top of social media every single day. This study examines the consequences for brands that are unable to respond promptly to enquiries made via social media. This research measures and highlights the fact that Facebook page visitors pay attention to a brand's responsiveness, and that delay has negative consequences. In

particular, the results from this experiment show that responding to posts and enquiries within one day results in significantly higher outcomes for consumer engagement behaviour intentions compared with not responding to posts and enquiries within one day.

KEYWORDS: social media, responsiveness, Facebook, consumer engagement, marketing communications

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, have become popular channels for brands to attract and interact with consumers. In its 2020 Social Media Marketing Industry Report, Social Media Examiner found that 94 per cent of the 5,200 marketers it surveyed used Facebook, with 59 per cent listing it as their most important social platform.[1] Facebook is equally ubiquitous among consumers, with 2.6 billion monthly active users as of the first quarter of 2020, making it the biggest social network worldwide.[2]

Although marketers acknowledge the value of social media, they struggle to maximise its full potential. This may be due to mixed messaging and a steep learning curve. Traditional marketing and advertising, such as billboards, newspapers, flyers, radio and television, represent one-way communication tactics. Clients simply purchase paid space, design the marketing campaign and advertising message, then wait for the impact on sales.

Social media advertising doubled from 2014 to 2016 and continues to rise now, with nearly US$38bn projected for 2020 in the USA alone.[3] Unlike traditional marketing and advertising channels, social media are interactive 24 hours a day, every day. With managers and marketers being asked to do more with less, it can be difficult for them to understand best practices in order to leverage this new form of interaction.

Today's customers can ask live questions, complain, praise, build community, and engage at all hours of the days. Marketers and managers are left wondering if they should respond, when, how often, and what they should say. Marketers need direction — 89 per cent want answers on the best social media strategies.[4] To assist marketing managers in their quest for the best social media strategies, the present research peels back one corner by examining the importance of social media responsiveness, and how it impacts consumer intentions to engage with the brand in a variety of multichannel ways.

Social media responsiveness is the extent to which brands reply to posts made by consumers on their social media platforms. Examples include answering questions, such as 'what time do you open?' and 'do you take appointments?' While it may seem obvious that brands should be responsive to consumers on their social media platforms, some brands struggle with the concept that communication is a two-way street. Although managers, marketers and associates would not ignore customers standing in front of them, this is exactly what they are doing online. Surprisingly, 80 per cent of consumer enquiries are ignored on social media;[5] and 70 per cent of brands have no interaction with consumers on social media at all, with some completely shutting down the capability for consumers to make posts and ask questions.[6]

Consumer posts are an opportunity to connect directly with individual consumers. When a consumer posts on a Facebook wall, for example, the brand has an opportunity to pitch important marketing calls-to-action, like 'attend our event', 'take advantage

of this coupon', 'like our page' or 'refer a friend' to each individual consumer, based on what makes sense given the particular conversation. However, keeping social media open and available for consumer posts requires timeliness in tending to social media pages. The scope of what defines 'timeliness' can be drawn from a 2019 global survey in which 5,000 respondents were asked how quickly they expect a response to a social media question or complaint: 37 per cent same day, 28 per cent within an hour, and 18 per cent immediately. The remaining 17 per cent did not expect a response at all.[7] With an ever-growing to-do list, marketing managers and small business owners oftentimes do not have the bandwidth to stay on top of social media every single day, let alone every minute of every hour.

Given that consumers have high expectations of timely responsiveness, and as Facebook is a ubiquitous platform used by both marketers and consumers, this research investigates the following question:

RQ: What is the difference in consumer engagement behaviour intentions when brands respond to consumer posts within one day versus when the brand does not respond within one day?

THE EXPERIMENT

An experimental, between-subjects (A/B) test was deployed. A total of 125 students enrolled in an introductory business course participated in the study (100 per cent between 18 and 25 years old; 48 per cent female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions manipulating social media responsiveness: (A) responsive within one day, and (B) nonresponsive within one day.

A fictitious service business, Trims Hair Salon, was used as the business of choice. Creating Facebook pages for a fictitious hair salon ensured that the brand itself would be unfamiliar to participants, but the service category would be familiar to participants. The two Facebook page stimuli represented a two-day period of time on the Trims' Facebook wall and both were identical, with the exception of the social media responsiveness manipulation (see Figures 1 and 2).

Participants reviewed their randomly assigned Facebook page manipulating social media responsiveness and then immediately answered survey questions regarding their attitudes and intentions toward the brand. Survey questions measured the participants' likelihood to engage with the brand in a variety of ways based on their initial impression of what they read on the brand's Facebook wall. Both the Facebook page and the survey questions were printed and provided to participants in a classroom setting. Seventeen engagement behaviours with the brand were measured and collectively identified as 'consumer engagement behaviour intentions' (see Table 1).

One 7-point Likert scale item (strongly disagree to strongly agree) was included in the survey to measure perceived social media responsiveness: 'Trims is responsive to requests for information by Facebook guests'. Before conducting analyses on the 17 consumer behaviour intentions measures, it was confirmed that the Facebook page with the business responding to consumer posts was perceived as more responsive ($M = 6.43$) than the Facebook page with no business responses to consumer posts ($M = 1.95$; SE $= 0.19$, $p < 0.01$). This manipulation check is an important step in experimental design as it confirms the experimental conditions were perceived as intended and allows for causal explanation between the independent variable being manipulated (ie social media responsiveness) and the dependent variables being measured

Figure 1: Facebook manipulation (A) — Responsive within one day

(ie 17 consumer engagement behaviour intentions).

FINDINGS

Two-way independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare means of each engagement behaviour intention between the two responsiveness conditions (see Table 2).

As can be seen in Table 2, 13 of the 17 consumer engagement behaviour intentions were statistically significant when comparing the mean differences between the two Facebook pages. The results are striking: not responding within the same day clearly has negative consequences. When a brand delays a response, consumers are less likely to: refer a friend, like posts, post positive reviews, post a question, share tips, participate in contests, share information about the business, visit the Facebook page again, attend a branded event, provide their e-mail address for future communications or use a coupon. They are also more likely to post negative comments.

Clearly, it is not enough to approach social media as one might with traditional

Figure 2: Facebook manipulation (B) — No response within one day

Table 1: Consumer engagement behaviour intentions

Seven-point Likert scales were used for survey questions (strongly disagree to strongly agree):
1. Refer Trims to a friend
2. 'Like' the Trims Facebook page
3. Post a positive comment on the Trims Facebook page
4. Post a negative comment on the Trims Facebook page
5. Post a question on the Trims Facebook page
6. Respond to a Trims Facebook post
7. Share (on the Trims Facebook page if they asked) your own knowledge, tips, or stories of a past haircut experience
8. Participate in a Trims contest
9. Sign up for the Trims monthly newsletter (it has hair care tips and coupons)
10. Visit Trims website for more information
11. Share information about Trims on another social media website (eg Twitter, Foursquare, etc)
12. Provide a review of Trims on another website
13. Repost a Trims' Facebook post
14. Visit the Trims' Facebook page again
15. Attend a free Trims event, given the opportunity
16. Give Trims your e-mail address for future communications and offers
17. Use Trims coupon if they sent you one

Table 2: Consumer engagement behaviour intentions

Level of responsiveness				
	Version A: Responsive		Version B: Non-responsive	
Engagement behaviour	*n*	**Mean**	*n*	**Mean**
1. Refer Trims to a friend	61	4.36*	64	2.9
2. Like Trims page	61	4.05*	64	2.7
3. Post positive comment	61	3.77*	64	2.69
4. Post negative comment	61	1.71*	64	2.98
5. Post a question	61	3.79*	64	3.11
6. Respond to a Trims post	61	2.95	63	2.75
7. Share own knowledge, tips, stories	61	3.13*	64	2.5
8. Participate in Trims contest	61	3.87*	64	2.64
9. Sign up for Trims monthly newsletter	61	2.85	64	2.3
10. Visit Trims website	61	4.84	64	4.25
11. Share Trims information on another social media website	61	2.82*	64	2.27
12. Provide a Trims review on another website	61	2.54	64	2.72
13. Repost a Trims Facebook post	61	2.57*	64	1.94
14. Visit Trims Facebook page again	61	4.07*	64	2.73
15. Attend a free Trims event	61	4.16*	64	3.17
16. Provide e-mail address for future Trims communications and offers	61	3.41*	64	2.23
17. Use Trims coupon if they sent you one	61	5.30*	64	3.89

*Mean values are significant at $p < 0.05$.

advertising; that is, with no expectation of dyadic communication. Brands must (1) respond to consumer posts, and (2) do so as soon as possible.

DISCUSSION

Experts agree that it is a best practice to respond to consumer enquiries on social media. What is not intuitive or clearly laid out in the literature yet, until now with this research, is defining quantitatively the negative consequences to social media engagement behaviours when brands do not respond within 24 hours on their social media platforms.

This research highlights a very important fact: Facebook page visitors pay attention to a brand's responsiveness, and delays of 24 hours in responses can have serious effects. Brands must respond, not only for the benefit of the consumer making the post, but also for the benefit of capitalising on what other Facebook visitors think about the brand. In short, consumers clearly pay attention to brand responsiveness. Positive engagement behaviour outcomes by Facebook page visitors can be expected by ensuring that consumer enquiries, such as those highlighted in the experiments (eg specific and neutral, or positive–sentiment questions related to products and services) are answered within one day. Future research to investigate the impact of social media responsiveness to negative-sentiment comments and questions would be interesting.

Senior executives can use this research to inform their social media and crisis management communication strategy.

Marketing managers, social media managers, contributors and small business owners do not always know what to say when consumers engage with the brand using social media. A good rule of thumb for those in charge of social media accounts is the norm of reciprocity.[8] Customers will respond back the same way they are treated. As this research illustrates, when brands ignore consumer questions, shout-outs or engagement, there is a risk that their customers may stop engaging with their brand.

Cheer on consumers when times are great, and acknowledge their posts and enquiries — even if the response requires more information. However, even more dangerous than not knowing what to say when consumers are happy is not knowing what to say during a crisis. Unfortunately, rather than responding within 24 hours, teams may work to design a social media communication plan specific to the situation from scratch, debate what the outcomes might look like, wait for senior managers to weigh in and approve, or avoid joining the conversation altogether when it comes to complaints or problems. This kind of delay in responsiveness can increase the likelihood of consumers posting negative comments by one-third, reduce engagement with the brand, decrease the likelihood of doing business, and make an already inflamed situation worse.

To establish responsiveness, senior executives should ensure they have a crisis management plan in place to ensure that their team is equipped with tools to respond quickly even during challenging or stressful situations. At the very least, let consumers know they have been heard and an answer is on the way. This must be done at the earliest opportunity, and certainly within the first 24 hours.

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