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Brand communities on the internet

A case study of Coca-Cola's Spanish virtual community

Brand
communities
on the internet

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255

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the virtual communities' phenomenon.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper reports a case study. It explains one of the most successful online strategies developed by a global brand, Coca-Cola, in Spain.

Findings – This study has shown that a web site can act as a marketing tool to develop a group of loyal consumers around the brand. The strength of the Spanish strategy relies on the creation of a virtual community, which provides functional, social, and experiential values.

Originality/value – The paper analyses the evolution from off-line communities to virtual communities. A uses and gratification approach is used to explain consumer participation in virtual communities. The paper offers some useful guidelines for the creation and maintenance of a virtual community.

Keywords Spain, Internet, Brands, Virtual organizations, Communities, Customer satisfaction

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Given the increase in the globalisation of the world's economies, coupled with the rise of the internet, new opportunities and challenges have emerged for marketing brands and products (Bellman *et al.*, 2006). In its early days, the internet was seen as an opportunity for marketers to communicate with consumers, and even to engage them in two-way communications. However, consumers are becoming overwhelmed by marketers' attempts to engage them in relationship marketing strategies. Only recently, it has become apparent that consumers are using the internet to communicate with each other (Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Cyberspace has become a new kind of social terrain, crowded with "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 2000). Over 40 million people worldwide are estimated to participate in some form of virtual community.

This evidence is forcing managers and planners to apply new ideas in order to make their web sites more effective. The traditional web site is no longer motivating customers to return to the site. An alternative strategy involves the development of a virtual community around the brand (Cova and Pace, 2006; Mathwick, 2006).

Virtual community is an issue that deserves special attention as it is still in the early stages of research (Claricini and Scarpi, 2007). Recent research has focused attention on the identification of those characteristics that lead consumers to value brand community and participate in communal activities (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Managers need to understand the bases for dialogue that can lead to strong relationships (McWilliam, 2000). In addition, interactions among members can influence the choice of brands and impact brand loyalty, making virtual



communities very relevant from both a theoretical and a managerial perspective (Claricini and Scarpi, 2007; Mathwick, 2006).

In order to get a better understanding of the creation and development of virtual communities in this study, we explain one of the most successful online strategies developed by a global brand; Coca-Cola in Spain. The paper analyses the key drivers of the well-established Spanish virtual community in order to learn what makes it thrive. This study also provide insights for the theory and practice of virtual communities.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, we review the literature about brand communities. Then, we study how the internet has made possible the development of communities in a virtual environment. Thirdly, we analyse in detail the Coca-Cola virtual community developed in Spain. Finally, we discuss the consequences and the effectiveness of this strategy.

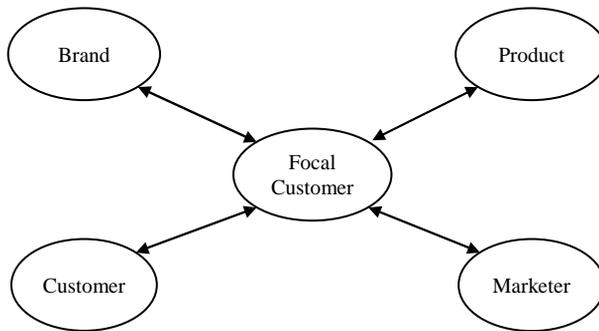
Brand community

Community is a core construct in social thought. A review of the sociology literature reveals at least three core components of community (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). The first and most important element of community is consciousness of kind, which represents the intrinsic connection that members feel toward one another, and the collective sense of difference from others not in the community. This factor is redefined as social identity by Bagozzi and Dholakia (2006). It consists of three interrelated parts: cognitive identification with the group, affective commitment towards it and collective self-esteem. The second indicator of community is the presence of shared rituals and traditions, also called group norms. The third marker of community is a sense of duty to the community and its members which is often, but not always, shared by group members.

Several authors (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006; Hoppe *et al.*, 2007; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001) argue that brand communities are in fact legitimate forms of community, which form around a brand. A brand community is defined as any group of people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy (Cova and Pace, 2006).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) envision a brand community as a customer-customer-brand triad formed by two types of relationships, those established between the brand and the customers, and those that emerge between community members. Without the relationship between community members it is impossible for the brand community to become successful. In fact, members feel an important connection to the brand, but more importantly, they feel a stronger connection towards one another. McAlexander *et al.* (2002) extended Muniz and O'Guinn (2001)'s model by including those relationships established between the customer and the firm and those between the product and the customer (Figure 1). According to this customer-centric model, brand communities enhance consumer identification with the brand and foster the development of a strong corporate feeling (Hoppe *et al.*, 2007; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002).

Research on brand communities identifies several dimensions on which they differ, including social context, size, temporality and geographic concentration (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; McAlexander *et al.*, 2002). Interactions within a brand community may be rich in social context or nearly devoid of it. Community members may have a great deal



Source: McAlexander *et al.* (2002)

Figure 1. Customer-centric model of brand community.

of information about one another, including such data as age, sex, and attractiveness, or they may know nothing of one another. Regarding the size, Dholakia *et al.* (2004) found interesting differences between big communities and small group-based communities in terms of motivation to participate. Another dimension of communities is their temporality, some are stable and others are temporary. The temporal stability can be an asset to marketers inasmuch as longevity equates with a long-term, stable market. Finally, communities may be either geographically concentrated or scattered.

A community is likely to form around brands with a strong image, with a rich and lengthy history, and threatening competition. Traditionally, only brands that operated in niche markets and required consumers to make major investments in time or money (i.e. Mercedes, Harley Davidson, etc.) had a noticeable brand community. However, recent research (Cova and Pace, 2006; McWilliam, 2000) has shown that brand community management might be an option for brands mainly offering convenience products such as soap, tools, toys or soft drinks (as for example Coca-Cola).

The appearance of the internet may further change some of the rules that have traditionally guided the creation and development of brand communities. In the next section, we will analyse the particularities of brand communities on the internet, as well as the crucial role of the company web site in their development.

Virtual communities

Virtual community versus off-line community

A virtual community is a specialized, geographically dispersed community based on a structured and dynamic network of relationships among participants sharing a common focus (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). Many virtual communities are explicitly structured around consumption activities (Kim and Jin, 2006; Kozinets, 1999). These virtual communities are able to stimulate the trial, adoption, and use of products and services (Okazaki, 2007).

We can define a virtual brand community as a group of individuals with common interests in a brand who communicate each other electronically in a platform provided by the company which supports the brand. Community members may establish a brand related discussion but they may also share opinions about any other topic of interest. Consumer interaction within the community may be stimulated by the company proposing different contents or topics around which the relationships between members are growth. Brand-based online communities can benefit of dialogue flowing between consumers. As it happens in offline brand communities, crucial

relationships arise among fellow consumers that are even more important than relationships established with the brand or firm.

On the internet, communities are no longer restricted to geographic co-presence of members, as interaction takes place through a technological interface, so physical context is not necessary (de Valck and Dambrin, 2007). Therefore, the internet overcomes the geographical limitations that have restricted the development of brand communities off-line. The absence of a physical contact may change the social context and the relationships among members. Figure 2 shows the evolution from off-line communities to virtual communities.

A theoretical explanation for consumers' participation in virtual communities: uses and gratification paradigm

People who participate in virtual communities are motivated to do so for different reasons (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). According to the uses and gratification paradigm, media help consumers in satisfying their social and psychological needs (Katz *et al.*, 1973; Rubin, 1983). Individuals often seek out media in a goal-directed fashion to fulfil a core set of motivations. A basic assumption of this paradigm is that users are actively involved in media usage and interact highly with the communication media (Luo, 2002). Gratifications are provided by the attributes, the content provided by the medium, and the social and physical contexts with which each medium is typically associated (Katz *et al.*, 1973).

Several researchers affirm that this paradigm may be very useful in understanding why consumers participate in virtual communities (de Valck and Dambrin, 2007; Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). As it happens with other media, people may be motivated to involve in a virtual community in order to satisfy different needs (Katz *et al.*, 1973). The gratification of individual motives and needs in a virtual community will depend on the perceived value of being a member (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2003; Mathwick, 2006). A virtual community enables their users to obtain the following values.

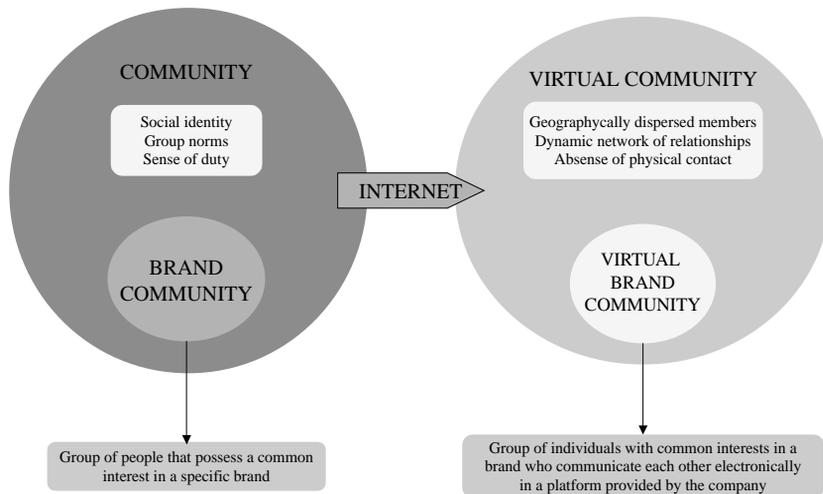


Figure 2.
From off-line community to virtual community

Functional value (e.g. advice, information, and expertise). A consumer may participate to obtain a purposive value, which is defined as “the value derived from accomplished some pre-determined instrumental purpose” (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). Of special interest from a marketing perspective is the sharing resources process. Virtual communities enable individuals to give and receive information on topics they may be interested in (informational value). Mathwick (2006) has recently demonstrated that web site traffic and brand loyalty are primarily a function of the informational value created through virtual interaction.

Social value (e.g. friendship, emotional support, self-esteem, social status, social enhancement). In virtual communities, we may find people with similar problems and experiences. The virtual community implies a social activity between groups of people interacting online, which delivers the consumer value of interpersonal connectivity (Mathwick, 2006). The affiliation with virtual community represents a social benefit to a consumer for reasons of identification and social integration (McWilliam, 2000). Consumers can even derive social enhancement value in virtual communities when they obtain social status within the community (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004).

Entertainment value. Entertainment stems from fun and relaxation through playing or otherwise interacting with others (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004). These experiences may include flow state (Shoham, 2004; Sicilia *et al.*, 2005), as it is very likely that consumers enjoy, show a high interest and involvement with other people, and feel a sense of time distortion during their common interaction.

The development of a virtual community in a brand sponsored web site

Previous research (Bellman *et al.*, 2006; Ghose and Dou, 1998; Sicilia *et al.*, 2005) has focused attention on what factors make a company web site more appealing and motivate customers to visit it repeatedly. Most of these studies show that interactivity is a key factor as it allows consumers to get in touch with the company or even to contact with other consumers (Cova and Pace, 2006; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006; McMillan, 2002). The creation of a virtual space for consumers within the brand web site can provide the perfect forum for sharing the community interests. Therefore, the development of a virtual community implies a step forward in trying to get consumers involved and participative with the site.

A corporate web site can allow the birth of a virtual community around a brand using different options (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004), though the most common utilities are real time “chat” and asynchronous discussions that play out over days, weeks, and even months in discussion forums, bulletin boards or product review pages (Mathwick, 2006). Through the creation of a virtual space, the site will become a meeting point where members develop their relationships but always inside an environment where the brand is present.

Companies have found mixed success in the creation and development of virtual communities. Global brands, that are resource-rich, should be more capable of fully utilizing the web, but that is not necessarily true (McMillan, 2002; Perry and Bodkin, 2000). Some of these large organizations have failed in launching or sponsoring their own social networking sites in their intent to create virtual communities. WalMart for example closed down its site, the hub, three months after its launch, as it was not performing as expected (Flavian and Guinaliú, 2005). On the other end of the spectrum is Amazon. The creation of a virtual brand community (in the form of product reviews) has been crucial for the success

of the company, compensating the coldness and impersonality of online distribution. Another interesting example is the case of Manchester United Football Club, where close relationships are created among sports fans (Flavian and Guinaliu, 2005). Furthermore, Gossett and Kilker (2006) recognized the arising of virtual communities around Counterinstitutional web sites, such as RadioShackSucks.com, where organizational members have a safe space to share their ideas, find solutions to problems, and have their opinions acknowledged.

A singular case of a virtual community of consumption is that which has been developed by Coca-Cola in Spain. Given its success, this study will examine in detail its main characteristics. This analysis will be useful to understand the key success factors used to create and support the community.

The Coca-Cola Spanish virtual community

Methodology

In order to collect the information, the authors have compiled the necessary data using several data collection techniques from September 2006 to July 2007. First, we made an online and off-line compilation of information about “the Coca-Cola Movement.” We obtained additional information through a telephonic interview with personal of the marketing department. Second, we repeatedly browsed the Spanish web site participating as members of the community. Finally, we conducted an analysis of information and opinions in forums and chats. A similar procedure was followed by Cova and Pace (2006).

Information about Coca-Cola

As a starting point, it is useful to know some information about Coca-Cola. At a global scale, it operates in more than 200 countries all over the world. The company and its bottling partners employ 49,000 persons. The net operating revenues obtained in 2004 were \$21,962 million (USA represent 30 percent of total revenues). The Iberian Division (Spain and Portugal) of Coca-Cola has 270 employees. It collaborates with seven bottling partners in this area including 16 factories, which overpass 6,000 employees. In 2005, the division generated €3,000 million in operating income.

Coca-Cola used first its site as a corporate placeholder (including links to annual reports), though Coca-Cola is currently favouring the building of interactive communities, which allows its consumers to express themselves (Hein, 2006). One would expect that the American web site would be the pioneer in the development of virtual communities around Coca-Cola. However, the Spanish strategy better represents the success of a virtual community within this company. The Marketing Excellence Awards recognized it in 2005 as the best digital media program all over the world.

The birth of the Spanish community

Since 2000, Coca-Cola Spain considers its site as one of the mainstays in the communication strategy. BetyByte Entertainment is the interactive agency that has conceived the virtual community. The new approach, called “the Coca-Cola Movement,” implies a complete change in the web site concept and has required an enormous content redefinition.

The creation of a virtual community around Coca-Cola was a very challenging objective, as convenience products are frequently questioned regarding their capacity to build a brand community (Cova and Pace, 2006). As we have aforementioned, three requisites are necessary to form a community (consciousness of kind, shared rituals and traditions, and a sense of duty to the community). If we think of Coca-Cola, all their consumers need to be united, aware of the fact that they constitute a different group. It is also difficult that they share rituals and traditions and even more unlikely, that they have any sense of duty to the community.

If the virtual community were to have to include all its Spanish consumers, the challenge would be even more complicated, because of the differences among the targets Coca-Cola addresses. As it is extremely difficult to get a virtual community with all consumers reaching these requirements, Coca-Cola has chosen a particular segment to build the virtual community, young people. The reason behind this choice is their high use of web sites as sources of product information instead of other traditional media like TV. Youth use the web as a place to go, sit there for a while (sometimes hours) and meet other people. The findings obtained by Kim and Jin (2006) support this thesis. They show that virtual communities are predominately formed by youngsters, because they are more open to giving and receiving information through non-traditional forms of communication, and are more accustomed to forming social relationships using technology.

A second difficulty stems from the characteristics of virtual communities of consumption, where traditionally, people explicitly share their enthusiasm for, and knowledge of a specific consumption-related activity (Kozinets, 1999). As an example of this type of virtual community, Cova and Pace (2006) show how consumers who belong to "My Nutella Community" share such enthusiasm. This is not the case of Coca-Cola. Consumers do not talk about their experiences with the product; their members are instead mainly friends sharing opinions and leisure activities in a virtual space supported by Coca-Cola. As McAlexander *et al.* (2002) state, the existence and meaningfulness of the community is in the customer experience rather than in the brand around which that experience revolves.

Group members act as if the community is meeting in a physical public place with shared rules, values, and codes of behaviour. Thus, in the virtual community of Coca-Cola the social context (relationships between members) is more important than the relationships between members and the brand.

How to attract members to the virtual community? The loyalty program

To become a member of the community, a registration process with a login username and password is required. Once registered, each individual provides his/her e-mail and password to access the different sections. Through this "log in" procedure, Coca-Cola obtains an explicit monitoring of customer information. In addition, the company obtains one of the most complete databases in the Spanish market. As shown in Figure 3, customer information on product usage, purchasing habits, feelings, attitudes, personality and demographics (age, sex, and e-mail address) must be filled in the registration form.

On entering the site, the user is invited to actively participate, a necessary condition to hold together the community (McWilliam, 2000). Coca-Cola stimulates participation through the development of a loyalty program. Since the early 1990s, organizations

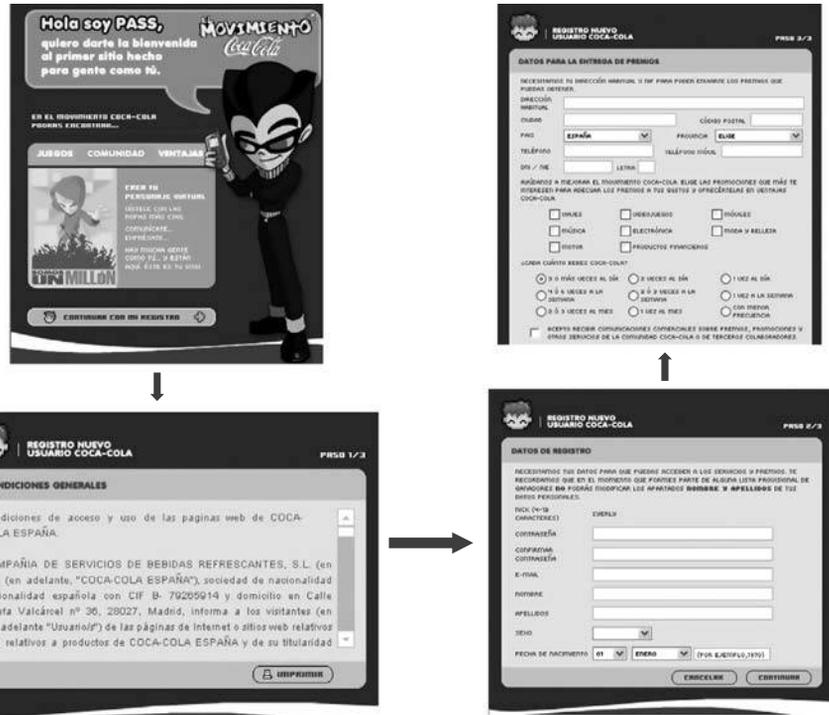


Figure 3.
Phases in the
registration process

have been encouraging customer participation through loyalty programs in which consumers are offered incentives in exchange for “frequency repeat business” (Roehm *et al.*, 2002; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2005). This is also the case of Coca-Cola, which motivates participation with messages like “Amuse yourself”, “Get friends”, “Communicate”, “Play” or “Win prizes”. In fact, the loyalty program is the main incentive that motivates consumers to register and become members of this community.

The efficacy of a loyalty program depends on several aspects such as timing of rewards, the ease of use, or the ability of the company to process effectively program data (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2005). Coca-Cola uses a digital purchase test, named pin-code. Customers first collect the codes from specially marked Coca Cola products. Then, they enter the codes online in a personal online point accumulation account. When points are exchanged for the desired reward, they are deducted from the customer’s account.

Several advantages can be highlighted from this loyalty program. Firstly, the brand overcomes most of the inconveniences of traditional loyalty programs, whereby the consumer had to collect points and mail them to the company, which resulted in a tedious and costly process (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Secondly, with this strategy, brand consumption is stimulated. Coca-Cola can even direct consumption towards low-demand products by allocating a high number of points to them. Thirdly, the pin codes strategy allows Coca-Cola to get loyal and participative consumers in the community.

How to maintain an active participation in the virtual community? The uses and gratification approach

By means of the uses and gratification paradigm, participation in the community depends on the benefits or values that members perceive. We next analyse the extent to which this virtual community provides functional, social and entertainment values.

Functional value. The sharing resource process that usually motivates consumers in virtual communities is also present in this site. Communities require a space where members create the content, and are, responsible for it. One of the most popular venues for creation and dissemination of contents are the forums, a web-based application that allows people to post messages and share information. They provide a space for supporting debates that go on for an extended period of time (McWilliam, 2000). The Spanish community can participate in 17 distinct forums where members can find out other members' opinions about topics of interest. Nine of them are game-related. Other forums deal with literature, music, cinema, sports, current issues, relationships and networking.

The possibility of downloading further motivates consumers to become members of the community, as it provides unique benefits that are otherwise unavailable in traditional media environments (Ghose and Dou, 1998). The web site offers a huge number of downloading options: 49 wallpapers, 11 screensavers, 21 emoticons, 13 display pictures, six background items, 28 desk icons and two videos for computers. It also provides 53 tones, 36 wallpapers, and one game for cellular phones. In sum, members can obtain information or other resources (by downloading) in reward for their participation in the community.

Social value. The Coca-Cola virtual community provides different options for primarily social purposes rather than for commercial aims. All members have a personal card containing their personal information, hobbies and likes. This idea of providing room to post personal profile information increases the attractiveness of the platform as a social space (Henning-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Such information is available for other users to view and may serve to increase familiarity among the users and increase the sense of community.

Members can use the site to meet people with specific characteristics (age, sex, and geographical location) by using the "find people" option in order to establish relationships with other members. Members can create friend lists by adding people they find interesting. Once connected, any member can contact other members through the web, which helps people in the community to get to know each other. Members can also participate in chats to satisfy the need for affiliation with the community (Lee *et al.*, 2003; Shoham, 2004). As in the messenger system, it is possible to invite several members to participate in the conversation at the same time. Most games include online chats where consumers have the chance to talk with other players while participating in the interactive experience.

Some members of the community have formed clans (smaller groups formally recognized in the web) in which they can talk, play against others as a team, or share opinions and interests. The community has also a ranking for the most highlighted members of the week, with regard to several aspects (the sexiest, the dullest, the tenderest, the hardest, and the most original). For instance, in Figure 4, we show the personal card of Xikita, the girl of the week (July 10, 2007). She is a 22-years old girl, from Madrid, 1.50-60 metres in height, green eyes, dark hair, and she is looking

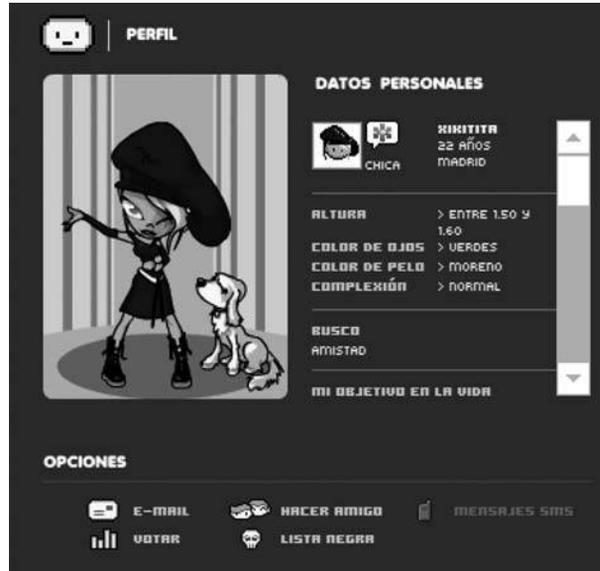


Figure 4.
Girl of the week
(XIKITA *)

for friends. To become the girl/boy of the week, other members have to vote for you during the previous week.

The community also provides the option to ask other members for a real meeting, thus connecting the virtual and the real world. By doing this, members may become more united, and share some kind of rituals, both contributing to the enhancement of the virtual community (Armstrong and Hagel, 1996). Therefore, this community is very rich in social context (Dholakia *et al.*, 2004) as consumers have a great deal of information about one another along with the fact that it helps to maintain an interpersonal connectivity among its members.

Entertainment value. The idea of linking the brand image to entertainment has traditionally guided the company's communication strategy. The site reinforces such an idea. In traditional communication, companies can create entertaining messages (i.e. humorous ads). However, the sensation of entertainment is short-lived. Coca-Cola aspires to provide entertainment for the community members while surfing through the site.

The site has become an authentic leisure place where customers have the possibility of playing online. The company uses games as incentives to attract consumers since the target audience of Coca-Cola, young people, are known for their fondness of computer games. The game section is one of the most successful of the web site. Although many visitors may recognize that games are part of the firm's advertising, they may still love playing because games provide escapism, diversion, and possibly emotional release (Ghose and Dou, 1998). It is interesting to highlight that the average connection time is 55 minutes.

The inspection of the site reveals that there are a variety of games (Figure 5) dealing with different issues such as sports, pastimes, or relationships. Consumers can play both individually or by teams. Each game has its own winner ranking and allows participants to obtain prizes (by winning points for their personal accounts).

<p>Condor Hurricane</p>  <p><i>Feel the vertigo of the more spectacular free fall</i></p>	<p>Letra-2</p>  <p><i>The most amazing word game</i></p>	<p>Empareja-2</p>  <p><i>Do not be shy and try to find someone special on this game</i></p>
<p>Football 11</p>  <p><i>Play in the most competitive football league</i></p>	<p>Tunnel of love</p>  <p><i>Challenges in the city</i></p>	<p>Portaventura</p>  <p><i>Build your own virtual house</i></p>

Figure 5. Games on-line

Prizes such as trips or tickets for concerts may provide important hedonic or experiential benefits to recipients (Chandon *et al.*, 2000). There is also a chat window for talking to your team or rivals while playing. Therefore, playing online provides an entertainment value and reinforces social interaction within the community.

Results obtained

The data obtained from different sources (Cocacola.es, Marketing Department of Coca-Cola Spain, and BetyByte Entertainment) give us an idea of the success of the Spanish community. According to the marketing department, it is the best site in the world addressed to young people. Registered users have spectacularly increased since June 2001, when there were only 100,000 users. The virtual community, created in April 2002, reached 500,000 members by September that year. It finished June 2007 with just over 1.5 million members.

Most members are between 14 and 25. There are about 50,000 daily accesses and 2,000 new members a day. According to Hugo Giralt, Manager for e-Marketing of Coca-Cola Spain, the “Movimiento” means lower costs in market research, promotions and logistics, and a greater and more effective advertising impact. The virtual community increases the company’s capacity for advertising and selling its products in well-defined segments. In fact, sales have grown by around 15 percent since 2000 because of this online community. The size of the community along with the achievement of an important sales growth has led the campaign to be one of the most successful in the global marketplace.

Given its success and the experience accumulated, the virtual community created by BetyByte was extended to other countries using the denomination of Redzone (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) in February 2003. More recently, the company has decided to apply a similar strategy to other products. In 2005, it introduced Fanta “Fun & Wave,” which has reached 48,000 members in 2007.

Discussion

The analysis of a successful virtual community has allowed us to understand that consumer-to-consumer interaction facilitated by brands online, might offer marketing opportunities and satisfy both the company and its consumers. In addition, virtual communities are not subject to many of the problems increasingly associated with traditional marketing approaches such as fragmentation of media or the resistance of consumers to receive marketing communications posed by direct marketing campaigns (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). The strength of the Coca-Cola strategy in Spain relies on the creation of a virtual community, which provides functional, social, and experiential values.

From a functional perspective, members may find information about their topics of interest in forums provided by the community. Members can post their opinions and perspectives, and share information and expertise. The community may also offer downloading options to its members. Different incentives may stimulate different people. In the case of young people, downloading (e.g. the latest tones for their cellular phones) appears to be the most appealing strategy in order to capture their attention and interest.

However, offering a functional value is not enough to maintain a virtual community alive. Members could end up using the web site only to obtain information or downloading without actually participating in the community. In order to succeed, a virtual community must also support social interaction (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). Connecting online for friends has become the corner stone of the rapidly growing social networking phenomena, especially between young people. For that reason, the Spanish web site is designed to allow consumers to socialize and network online by posting a profile, looking for and networking with friends. Community members create their own identities and can meet others in a virtual space supported by the brand.

The social value also resides on the volume of communication and interaction generated between consumers. As Henning-Thurau *et al.* (2004) state, the writing behaviour signifies consumer participation in and presence with the virtual community and enables them to receive social benefits from membership. Consumers also benefit from their ability to recognize in each other "people like me" and to form genuine relationships with like-minded people (McWilliam, 2000). As a result, virtual communities become venues where intense relationships emerge voluntarily among members (Mathwick, 2006).

Finally, a virtual community should allow its members to explore new worlds of fantasy, entertainment and fun. Coca-Cola provides this experience through online games, sweepstakes and prizes. Games not only entertain consumers, but also reinforce consumers' impressions about the products by appealing to the emotional and sensorial benefits experienced by participants. The values inherent in play create memorable experiences that strengthen relationship and influence consumer attitudes towards the site, as well as towards the brand (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004). In addition, sweepstakes and prizes are intrinsically fun to watch and to participate in (Chandon *et al.*, 2000).

In summary, virtual communities are not valuable mainly for their informational value, but they may be even more valuable for the social support and entertainment options they offer. Thus, in contrast to Dholakia *et al.* (2004) results, it is also likely a

large virtual community, where people do not know each other personally, attribute more value to entertainment and social interaction instead of a more informational value. Both, the entertaining content and the possibility of forming relationships with others draw members back to the site on a frequent and regular basis.

However, some limitations should be considered. The findings of this study are limited by the fast-paced nature of the internet. The virtual community may have changed since the study was conducted. In addition, the analysis developed is qualitative and restricted to the Spanish community. This analysis could be improved with a quantitative study in which members were asked about the degree to which their functional, social and entertainment needs are satisfied.

Managerial implications

The virtual community of Coca-Cola offers many useful lessons for those who wish to accrue brand benefits through an online community. Connecting the brand site and the social aptitude of community participants potentially creates a new marketing tool (McWilliam, 2000). This case study has shown that the development of a web site with proper contents and options is crucial for the creation of a virtual community around a brand.

The development of a loyalty program to support the virtual community is a good starting point to increase members' interest in becoming part of a community. It will generate traffic to the site, and will turn visitors into members. The incentive chosen is very important for consumers to return to the site regularly. Prizes are the most frequently incentive used by brands to stimulate consumers (*Promo Magazine*, 2006). Therefore, marketers must find out what may motivate their targets to register in the virtual community.

Once individuals are registered, the maintenance of lively and interesting contents for members is crucial to retain members participative. Downloading options and the creation of common spaces to give and receive information (e.g. forums) help in maintaining the community active. In addition, the site must offer members a sense of involvement or a social identity (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2006). Finally, virtual community management should provide its members with entertainment options. Entertainment has a powerful influence in creating memorable experiences that can positively influence consumer attitudes towards the site, as well as towards the brand (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004).

In order to success, marketers need to do a perfect analysis and response to community members' wishes (Lee *et al.*, 2003). Sharing resources, establishing relationships and living fantasies are very appealing to youngsters, as we have observed in the Coca-Cola community. Other targets may be stimulated with different venues, therefore, each brand needs to identify what options may appeal the most to its target. In addition, the company should generate reports and statistics about most visited sections and visit durations. Less visited sections can be swapped for new ones of more interest for members. Thus, information obtained is useful to redesign the communication strategy, and to improve the relationship with consumers in the long term.

A virtual community supported by a web site will serve to improve the relationships between individual consumers, as well as among the consumers and the brand. As a result, intense relationships will emerge voluntarily fostering both consumer loyalty and trust (Mathwick, 2006). The experiences lived by members in the virtual space will also boost brand loyalty by increasing the commitment and

emotional ties with the brand (Kim and Jin, 2006). Ultimately, it is very likely that the virtual community strengthen the attitude towards the company and the corporate image (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2005).

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