EMERGING COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES AND BRAND OFFERINGS WITHIN THE NETWORKED SOCIETY

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RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the brands place within the networked society?

INTRODUCTION

The Cluetrain Manifesto proclaims that the Net is a real place, a place where real people interact in real time around real issues and real conversations (Locke et al, 2001)

This is the networked society; the new social paradigm that has been shaped by major social, technological, economic and cultural transformations (Castells, 2009, p. xvii). In this paradigm, social media and the connected consumer have fundamentally altered how advertising narratives and brands are received. Consumers are no longer manipulated by what advertisers say, but instead choose what messages and activities to participate in (B. Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007). In this structure consumers may be deemed instead as 'brand users' as they do not just consume, but actively participate and engage with brands.

Rather than celebrating new freedoms, In the network society brand users have become adept to replacing functions of traditional community with a network of social ties (Castells, 2009) to re-establish communal embeddedness (B. Cova & V. Cova, 2002). This is due to new possibilities and structures in social interaction that are changing the ways individuals participate within communities and also how they interact with brands. The overall aim for this project is therefore to understand the brands potential within the personal and social lives of brand users. Can brands create a new communication structure or offering in order to build strong self-perpetuating relationships with users in order to place the brand within the networked society?

CONTEXT / THE NEW COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE

Within the networked society changes in technology, economic structures and cultural production have created an open network in which individuals can construct and exchange their own relative or democratically ordered information, knowledge and culture (Benkler, 2006). The integration of social media into dominant com¬munication structures has detonated an explosion of conversations, connections and communities – as The Cluetrain Manifesto proclaims: "a global conversation has begun" (Locke et al., 2001, p. 67). This is facilitated by vast and almost instant connectivity which has empowered the individuals ability to find relevant information, inform others and self-organize. It has also given birth to 'non-market production' as the networked economy is structured by the economics of information, and the formation of communities (Benkler, 2006, p. 4).

The most significant shift within the communication industry is a change from the 20th century model of an attention economy to a new conversation or participatory culture. The communication structure has changed from predominantly receiving messages to having conversations; including sharing positive and negative brand content or experiences (Hurman, 2009; Moffit, 2007). People are turning away from sweeping broadcast media described by Seth Godin as interruption and clutter (2009) towards a two-way communication structure where they can choose which messages they receive. They are seeking "lean-forward (participatory) media" rather than "lean-back media"(Battelle, 2006).

THE COMMUNICATION INVESTIGATION

This project proposes that the role of a brand is changing due to the affects of the networked society. The communication or design issue is therefore; how can brands utilize the emerging communication structures to successfully position themselves within this new social structure. The project will explore how this may be achieved by unearthing new potential in the brand (its' product / service) to facilitate transformational personal engagement, conversation and the communities that surround it. It will investigate enhancing or extending the consumption process of a brand to become a socially participatory experience that transverses the user's digital and physical world. Heuer advocates that "marketing has for too long been focused on manipulation, not value creation" (2009), therefore can the brand develop a communication and social value within the individual's social sphere by helping them navigate particular parts of their lives?

METHODOLOGY

This working paper is based on qualitative research and analysis of leading literary texts and design / communication precedents. It identifies and explores three key strategies that are suggested to authentically harness the brand's place in the networked society: the brand community hub, creating a sense of belonging and extended transformational offerings. Concept mapping as well as design and strategy experimentation has been undertaken to investigate / gain an enhanced understanding of the potential of theories and concepts.

THE AFFECT AND SIGNIFICANE OF SOCIAL CHANGES

In reaction to the networked society and the new brand user David Amarno coined the term 'conversation economy' (2007). He theorized that communicators need to ditch traditional models and become "conversation architects" (2007). That notion is supported by what the Cluetrain Manifesto observes as a return from marketing to markets. The trend is towards a resurgence of the traditional marketplace; a place where "conversation between people was sought out with others who shared the same interests" (Locke et al., 2001, p. 73). This acknowledges that the networked society has enabled endless person-to-person conversations and has created a global marketplace where brands must now find their place.

The internet has enabled and empowered people to act as individuals and they are now more inclined to drive against the accepted ways of thinking to seek their own truths (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). As a result individuals develop their identities or "mosaic lives" through a construction of multiple, simultaneous relationships, lifestyles and involvements within different communities (Aarts & Marzano, 2003).

The networked society has enabled diversely motivated individuals to connect and develop into tribes or communities of practice that share particular values and beliefs. "The word 'tribe' refers to a re-emergence of quasi-archaic values… where social order was maintained without the existence of a central power" (B. Cova &

V. Cova, 2002, p. 597). What is different now is that traditionally community was geographically sanctioned, but contemporary communities are more likely to be imagined (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The imagined community refers to a community formed on a shared mindset; built on an imagined or constructed closeness within a network of connections.

In this environment the individual's ability to find the most pertinent or relevant information and collaborate has never been greater; 'peers' are now playing a greater role in knowledge formation (Moffit, 2007). Individuals now spend the majority of their time with user-generated content and bypass brochure-like (corporate homepages) information in search of real conversations (Moffit, 2007). Amoarno declares that the new brand currency will be "fuelled by conversation and founded in meaningful relationships"(2007). A brand's future place within the networked economy should therefore be ruled by its ability to earn this currency from the brand users.

Individuals are increasingly looking to select the appropriate communication system relevant to the message or knowledge they are trying to find out. "Individuals can switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, support, sociability and a sense of belonging" (Rheingold, 2002, p. 195). Rheingold here identifies that people hold network capital – the communication value a network permits the user - and they switch fluidly between their networks depending on what network suits the moment or communication (Rheingold, 2002). Individuals are now more inclined to actively engage with brand, product or service that facilitates a particular communication or use value; seeking tools that enable different and specific parts their everyday lives (Aarts & Marzano, 2003).

WHO ARE BRAND USERS

The exact target audience of this project will be defined by the brand / brands that are used as a vessel to implement this research; however it should be noted that there are two social groups that should be addressed - the "Net Generation" and "Net Adopters". The Net Generation (N-Geners) have helped the new paradigm take shape as their motivations, attitudes and behaviors depart from previous generations. They are demographically considered to be 14-29 years old, however better characterised as those who adopt new media, disperse themselves across a range of media and often consume multiple media simultaneously. Most significantly, they are "happy to collaborate or even to evangelise with companies that make the effort to establish a meaningful two-way relationship"(Moffit, 2007). Their expectation of products and services is that they will offer freedom, customisation, entertainment and something special beyond the first three (Horowitz, 2006). Net Adopters are those people who have not grown up with the deep connection to the Internet however have adopted, learned and enjoy new media / technologies. This project will give some consideration to this group as they also make up a significant part of the networked population.

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF BELONING

The emerging social trend is a need to form and enhance new or existing relationships and connections. Networked individuals are not celebrating freedom from social constraints, but rather re-establishing communal embeddedness (B. Cova & V. Cova, 2002). Vernon's Philosophy of Friendship (2005) stands as evidence that the networked society has renewed our interest in friendship. Current social capital theory asserts that 'relationships matter' and that social networks can be an asset for building a sense of belonging (Smith, 2010). The future of marketing is therefore in offering and supporting a renewed sense of community as individuals

are seeking alternative forms of belonging and support (Aarts & Marzano, 2003). Brands have the potential to develop themselves in order to offer such support.

FUTURE OF THE BRAND

"A brand may be defined as the extended product values [both measurable and imagined] associated with a product beyond its functional use"(Andersen, 2005, p. 47). This indicates that a brand should no longer just trade tangible products or services. They are now considered living entities that can offer brand users personally and socially transformative consumption experiences.

In the 20th century a brand was deemed "a collection of perceptions in the minds of consumers"(Ries & Trout, 1981), but thanks to a "new ethos of brand participation emerging, consumers now increasingly see brands as shared cultural property" (B. Cova & Pace, 2006, p. 1089). Brands are no longer inanimate 'things' that rely on top down brand narratives, they are thriving conversations, communities and belief systems (Roll, 2002). It could therefore be suggested that a brand - within the networked society - is in part made up of its embededness within the mosaic lives of its' brand users.
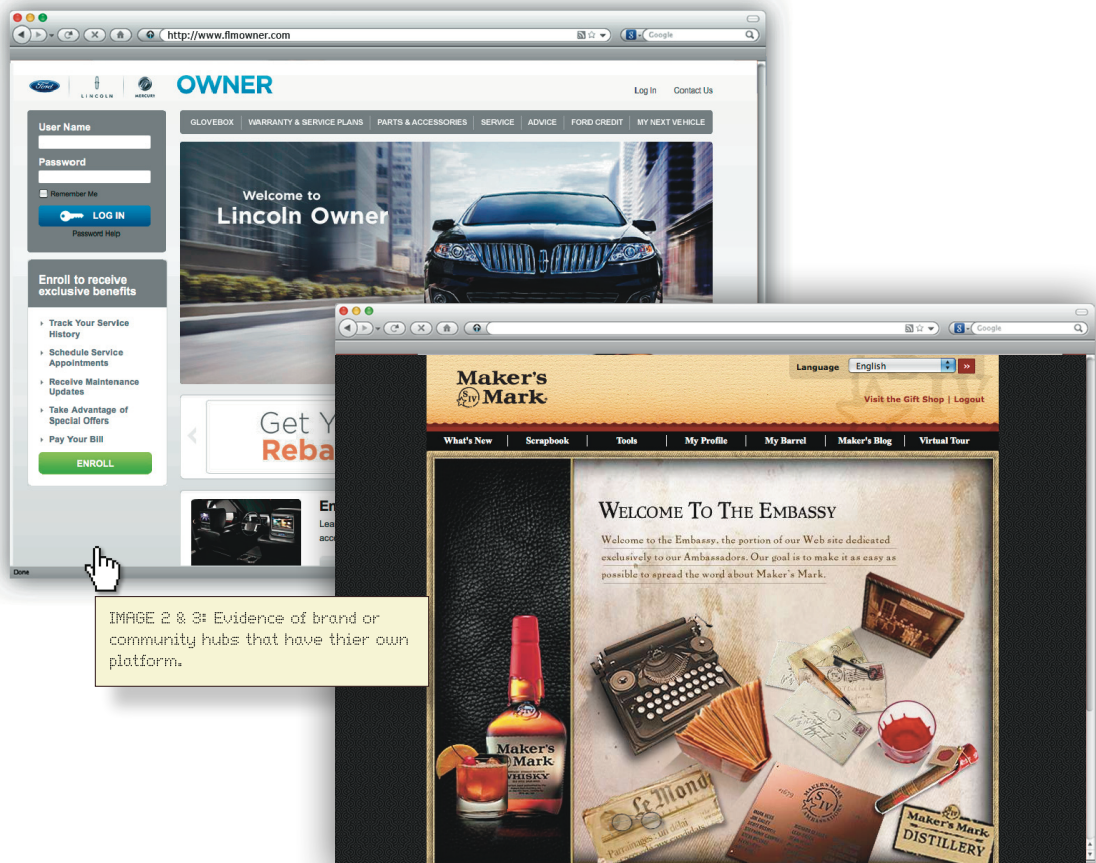
CENTRALISED COMMUNITY HUB

It is argued that the community building ability of the internet is its core quality (Andersen, 2005; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997);

"The internet provides the infrastructure for enhancing the development of brand community activities, by expanding the reach of communities (reducing barriers for interaction), by increasing communication effectiveness, and by providing additional possibilities for interaction among community members." (Andersen, 2005, p. 40).

Andersen suggests that the future for brands should be to develop communities where the physical consumption or interaction will be dramatically enhanced by the new possibilities and interactions online.

Future potential for brands is therefore to become centers for communities to form around. Moffit's Wiki-Brand theory suggests this can be achieved not by controlling the brand, but rather "authentically presenting shared ownership between the brand, employees and customers" (Moffit, 2007, p. 3). The critical issues should be to develop a setting where brand users are inclined and willing to engage in dialogue (Andersen, 2005); Brand hubs can exist either as brand specific websites or can live within existing social media platforms. The commonality between these two models is that they adhere to what Moffit calls "marketing without fingerprints" (2007, p. 19), where you don't invade people's air space until the brand is invited to. Many precedents exist to ground this model; Volvo [IMAGE 1A] and Hewlet Packhard have Facebook hubs with over 70,000 members. MakersMark.com [IMAGE 2] and Ford, Lincoln and Mercury's FLMOwner.com [IMAGE 3] have over 250,000 members in their community websites.

These hives should be built around a brand's core values, where "content, conversation, entertainment and information can be actively sought by users in a clutter free environment"(Moffit, 2007, p. 19). This means the hubs can facilitate the different conversation and narratives (campaigns) that surround the brand and offer a source for real information to be found. An example of this can be found on the Vovlo Facebook hub; The Volvo 'Drive Around the World' application's [IMAGE 1B] was a designed initiative which's purpose was to spark conversation around their new range of diesel cars, however it was only one of a number of conversations that Volvo was having with its brand users.

IMAGE 1A: Volvo's online community hub from which it facilitates many conversations and campaigns.

IMAGE 1B: A socially intertwining conversation that challenged Facebook members to navigate the world by passing the car on to a friend, thus building a network of friends and their friends and so on.

IMAGE 2 & 3: Evidence of brand or community hubs that have thier own platform.

IMAGE 4A: This initiative ran for three months on Facebook and in a physical space, the result was to connect people who appreciate the consumption craft beer.

IMAGE 4B: Declaration of Beer Independence proves how a designed process can amplify a core belief structure, here being a dedication to superior quality beer.

CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS AND A SENSE OF BELONGING,

The development of belonging and community has been the subject of considerable scholarship - three core components are identified as crucial notions of a community; (1) A Consciousness of kind, an intrinsic connection that members feel towards each other. It is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity, but a shared way of thinking (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). (2) The presence of a shared repertoire or rituals and beliefs to define the communities culture, character and conduct (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Smith, 2003); this component is crucial for brand communities as they usually spur from the usage, consumption or history drawn from the brand (Roll, 2002). (3) A commitment or sense of moral responsibility towards the community as a whole and its individual members (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This often manifests through consumption of the brand where brand users are obliged to support or be a part of another's consumption of the brand (Roll, 2002).

When Marmite UK wanted to launch a new stronger Marmite, they did it by activating a community of marmite eaters [IMAGE 5A/5B]. To do this they then developed a community called the Marmarati that was designed to activate the shared rituals, beliefs of Marmite users. It featured a Marmarati Oath [IMAGE 5C], Marmarati Elders [IMAGE 5D] and Marmarati historic documents. To become a member you had to prove your commitment to the group by becoming a Marmarati Ambassador through proving how much you love Marmite [IMAGE 5E].

The Declaration of Beer Independence [IMAGE 4A/4B] was a campaign designed like the Marmarti to become part of the brand users mosaic life. The Declaration itself manifest the idea of a commitment or duty towards a group of like minded people. This created an imagined intrinsic connection between the thousands of people who signed it, both on and offline. Both these designed initiatives show how community can be formed by activating and facilitating the development of a consciousness of kind between brand users
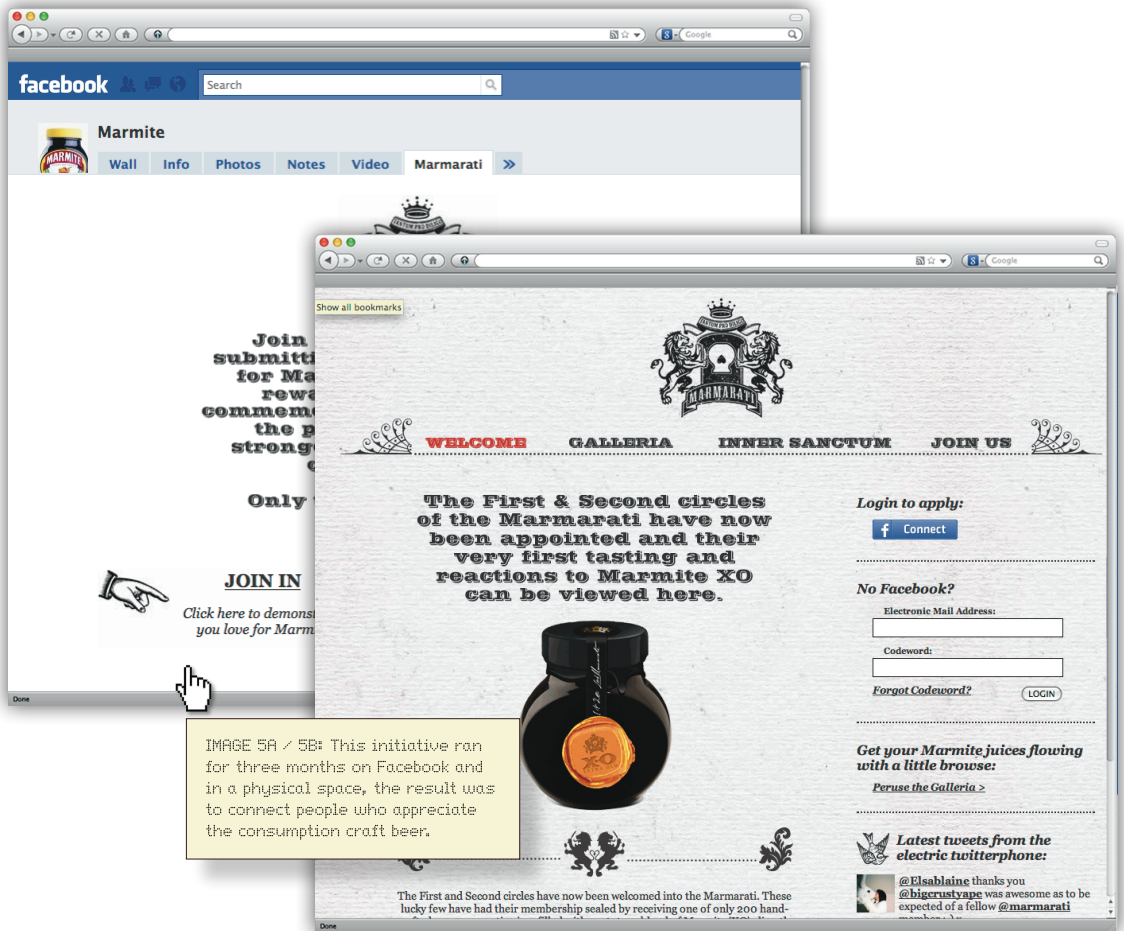
IMAGE 5A / 5B: This initiative ran for three months on Facebook and in a physical space, the result was to connect people who appreciate the consumption craft beer.

The Marmarati Oath

Should you be invited to join us, you will be required to take this solemn promise.

I hereby and hereon solemnly swear on celery, yeast extract, riboflavin and vitamin B12 to keep the following oath and agreement.

I promise to do my duty to Queen, Country and Marmite.

I swear to be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Marmarati.

I will defend the ebony elixir against conspiracies, protect it's distinctive honour its orb-like ja

I will reject any second-rate

I promise to spread my dark and sticky mistress throughout the land, as well as on toast.

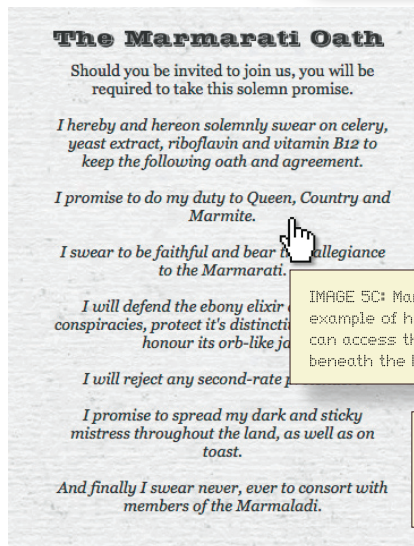And finally I swear never, ever to consort with members of the Marmaladi.

IMAGE 5C: Marmarati Oath, an example of how brand communities can access the belief structure beneath the brand community.

IMAGE 5D: Two of the 10 Marmarti Elders who are charged with maintaining the community and spreading the word.
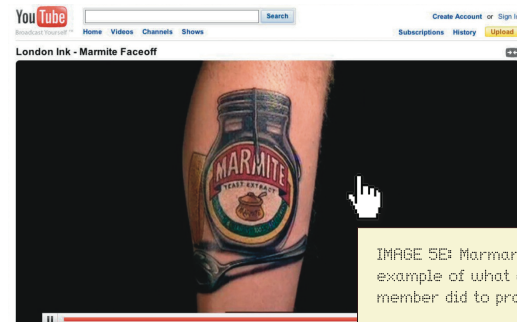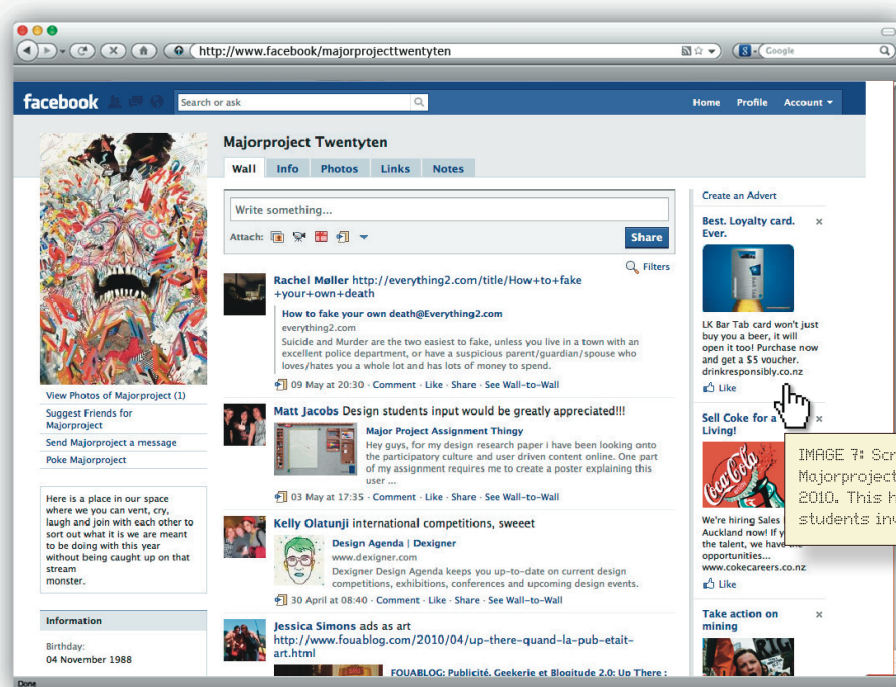
Welcome to the Inner Sanctum, home of our most precious documents

the Marmarati through the annals of time - from the birth of the modern toaster, to the creation of our strongest Marmite ever.

Cast eyes over glorious history
Downlower historic documents

Meet the Marmarati elders

Without these men, your beloved spread Marmite would cease to be. Your toast would lie limp and naked on your breakfast plate. Your oatcakes would die of loneliness. And your bread rolls would declare themselves naturists.

Marmite Alchemist
Scours the four corners of our fair land for the finest ingredients.

Master Blender
Oversees production, ensuring perfection prevails at every turn.

IMAGE 5E: Marmarati Tattoo, an example of what one Marmarati member did to prove his loyalty.

IMAGE 6: The Nike+ community
facillitates users interaction with
a common activity and the brands
products. In the hub there are
many parts that stimulate social
interaction. Forums, challenges,
goal setting and organised events
(physical and digital).

Mapit facilitates the user to user
interaction and enhances use of the
product by transversing physical
and digital communities.

TRANSFORMATIONAL OFFERINGS; TRANSVERSING OUR PHYSICAL / DIGITAL AND PERSONAL / SOCIAL LIVES

Through transformational brand experiences a brand can become a more sought-after and a permanent part of an individual's day-to-day life (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Transformational offerings work because, as Pine and Gilmore state, humans have always sought out "new ways to learn and grow, develop and improve" (1999, p. 163). Furthermore the emerging participation culture is, as Aarts & Marzano state, seeing the birth of 'deep customisation' where people seek specific tools to facilitate different moments (2003). The strength of transformational offerings is that they would be missed if it was gone.

Nike+ represents a new generation of transformational offerings, as it exists within a socially transformative structure. This offering transverses the user's physical and digital life as well as their personal and social consumption of the brand. This is a deeper layer of transformation that explores how individuals share and com-

IMAGE 7: Screen shot from Majorproject TwentyTen on 10 May 2010. This hub is a collection of students involved in 222.453.

municate by changing the individual's social landscape (Aarts & Marzano, 2003).

It is evidence that Individuals are seeking brand consumptions / experiences that stimulate, permit and support social interaction (B. Cova & V. Cova, 2002; Himpe, 2008). As supported by Martin Roll;

"Enhancing consumer experience... is effectively possible by creating communities around brands whereby consumers have an opportunity to experience consumption not only with the brand but with also other users of the brand in a community setting." (Roll, 2002)

The Nike+ experience [IMAGE 6] is one of the strongest illustrations of how a brand has used this social interaction and community to enhance the consumption experience. Nike+ has many features that facilitate social interaction which develop a sense of belonging, conversation and community around the product (Himpe, 2008). Members can create and share their running routes; set and share goals; train and take part in local challenges; and create competitions between 'friends'.

From the precedents set by Nike+ and Martin Roll we can deduce that even though consumers are content to develop deep relationships with brands, facilitating consumer-consumer communication is essential to developing a complete brand consumption experience. This is of great significance to the outcome of this project, as it suggests that adding social dynamics to a brand is a way of locating it within the lives of users; and hence the networked society.

COMMUNCATION AND DESIGN EXPERIMENTS

MAJOR PROJECT TWENTYTEN

Major Project TwentyTen [IMAGE 7] is an investigation into Rheingold's statement that networked individuals use different communication tools for their perceived and potential communication value. The Facebook group was developed as an online extension of the student community and designed as a platform for conversation, inspiration and help to be sought. The hub was initially targeted at a small selection (12 individuals); they were

IMAGE 8: CraftBeerNZ is a designed
initiative and stratergy based
on creating conversation and
extending the user participation
with the craft beer market.

It acts as a socil facitator as well
as a personal tool to help navigate
you through the diiferent beers,
by learning what you and your
friends like.

It is a source for real information
and conversation on each beer and
bruwery.

those identified as the "special breed of word of mouth influencers"(Moffit, 2007, p. 8). Within one day the hub had been joined by 55 students; the community now has 95 members. The use of the hub over the last 2 months has grounded the Rheingold's statement within my project.

CRAFTBEERNZ

The CraftBeerNZ website [IMAGE 8] explores how a combination of a personal offering could integrate within the users "online social fabric is by adopting the role of social facilitator" (Himpe, 2008, p. 323). It is currently not an exercise in creating belonging, but an investigation into the potential of a brand hub model as a facilitator and activator to an existing (but currently unconnected) community of practice. It is designed to connect drinkers and industry members and allows users to play an active role in creating and sharing their own value by commenting, rating, joining or starting conversation among their friends or the entire community. The result is an enhanced experience that extends the users interaction within the community, generating a more involved brand user.
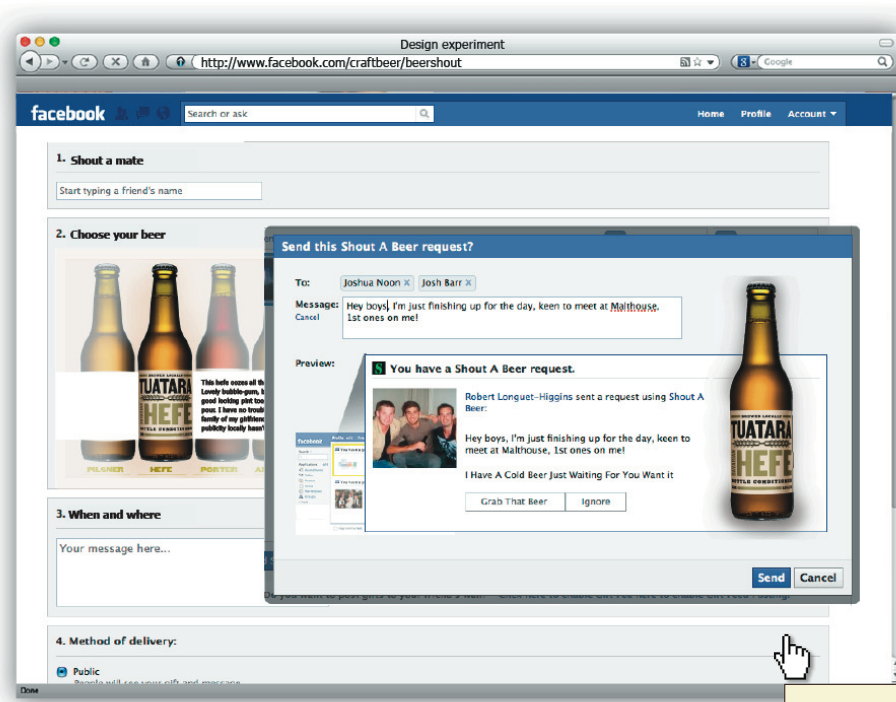
IMAGE 9: The beer shout would link into the CraftBeerNZ Hub so that the conversation could then continue and expand online.

BEER SHOUT

The Beer Shout [IMAGE 9] investigates how consumption can be enhanced / extended by facilitating the consumption and conversation around a brand as it transverses the digital and physical. Designed as one conversation stream for the CraftBeerNZ website, the application explores the notion of a 'beer with mates' as a conversation. By applying a social innovation lead by websites such as Friendster, Meet-Up and Facebook and adding a online social dynamic to event planning it creates an extended engagement period, spanning before, during and after the physical consumption. This develops potential for comments, beer ratings and any further conversation to return back online within the CraftBeerNZ community hub

DESIGN INTENTION

The intention of this project is to consider the social context and current trends in today's communication structures in order to investigate ways to develop a relevant place for a brand within the networked society through activating / developing a brand community. The desired result of this will be to gain meaningful, self-perpetuating relationships between brand and user.

The intended outcome of this project will reflect that designed initiatives have become the most powerful tool in an advertising saturated era (Springer, 2007). Through the synthesis of three elements; the brand hub; activating an intrinsic sense of belonging; and developing specific transformational offerings, the outcome will locate and develop a brand's potential place within the networked society.

For the brand user the outcome should be an offering that will act as a tool to activate and facilitate their interaction / participation within a community. The project will be brand focused and potentially begin as an investigation into the belief structure shared between the brand and its users. Emphasis will be given to

unlocking new potential in the brands product / service to offer more than a personally transformative offering, but develop a socially transformative structure that could offer a relevant communication and use value to the brand user.

The most crucial component is that is should enhance the consumption of the brand by acknowledging that brand users should "have an opportunity to experience consumption not only with the brand but also with other users of the brand" (Roll, 2002). This may manifest in a community hub that would encompass the brand's placement in the new communication structure. It will consequentially address the potential conversation and communication value that the brand may develop or already holds.

The end product should be a transformational brand offering that locates the brand both socially and personally in the brand users' digital and physical lives; and hence the networked society.

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IMAGE LIST

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Image 1b: Volvo Drive Around the World. (2010). Facebook. Retrieved March 2010, from http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/Volvo?v=drivearoundthe world&ref=ts

Image 2: Owner homepage. (2010). Ford, Lincoln and Mercury's Owner.com. Retrieved April 2010, from http://www.flmowner.com/servlet/ContentServer?pagename=Owner/Page/HomePage

Image 3: My Maker Mark Profile. (2010). Marker Mark website. Retreved May 2010, from http://www.makersmark.com/LegalAge.aspx?Referrer=http%3a%2f%2fwww.makersmark.com%2findex.aspx%3fpgid%3d23

Image 4a: American Craft Beer Week Wall. (2010). Facebook. Retrieved April 2010, from http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/AmericanCraftBeerWeek?ref=ts

Image 4b: The Declaration of Beer Independence. (2010). American Craft beer Week. Retrieved April 2010, from http://www.americancraftbeerweek.org/

Image 5a: Marmarati Facebook discussion. (2010). Facebook. Retrieved May 2010, from Marmarati: http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/Marmite?ref=ts

Image 5b: Marmarati Homepage. (2010). Marmarati Website. Retrieved May 2010, from Marmarati: http://www.marmarati.org

Image 5c: Marmarati Oath. (2010). Marmarati Website. Retrieved May 2010, from Marmarati: http://www.mar-marati.org/inner_sanctum

Image 5d: Marmarati Elders. (2010). Marmarati Website. Retrieved May 2010, from Marmarati: http://www.marmarati.org/inner_sanctum

Image 5d: Marmarati Fan Tattoo. (2010). Marmarati Website. Retrieved May 2010, from Marmarati: http://www.marmarati.org/galleria/reactions

Image 6: Nike+. (2010). Nike+ Dashboard. Retrieved May 2010, from NikeRunning: http://nikerunning.nike.com/nikeos/p/nikeplus/en_NZ/plus/#//dashboard/

Image 7: MajorProject Twentyten [personal work]. (2010). Facebook. Retrieved may 2010, from http://www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/profile.php?id=100000907122752&ref=search&sid=SQwormFOdk3X-ASVnUFtzQ.1170710976..1

Image 8: CraftBeerNZ.com [Personal work]

Image 9: Beer Shout [Personal work]

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