Customer Communications Management in the New Digital Era

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The world today is increasingly digital. At work, home, and play, people are constantly connected through the internet via a variety of devices and networks. This digital connectivity raises new opportunities--and challenges--for organizations striving to manage their customer communications to create customer and brand value. While marketers now have more means than ever to reach, engage with, and influence customers, knowledge of and expertise in managing these data-intensive tools is essential for success.

In this discussion paper we explore the new digital era of marketing communications, an era dominated by mobile information and social media accessibility. We describe how marketers can leverage various social media platforms and services to touch customers at various stages of the buying process. The importance of brand community building, in particular via digital tools, is then examined. We also describe the significance of emotions in marketing, and how emotional appeals are increasingly employed, both on- and off-line, to drive loyalty and build relationships. We conclude with insights on managing customer communications in the new digital era.

The remainder of this discussion paper is organized as follows:

1. A new era of marketing communications
2. The consumer decision process in today’s digital world
3. Leveraging social media
4. Brand communities
5. The increasing significance of emotions in marketing
6. The impact of emotions on loyalty and consumer-brand relationships
7. Managing customer communications in the new digital era

1. A new era of marketing communications

The marketing communications environment has changed enormously in the last decade. Technology and the Internet have fundamentally altered the way the world interacts and communicates. Via technology, consumers have more ways to interact with companies and brands, and importantly, have many means for initiating these interactions that never existed less than a decade ago. Gone are the days of the passive consumers who were largely dependent on companies’ success in reaching them for engagement. Traditional approaches to branding that put emphasis on mass media techniques are less and less effective in a marketplace where customers have access to massive amounts of information about brands, products and companies, and in which social networks have, in some cases, supplanted brand networks.

In the new media environment, consumers are increasingly in control. Not only do they have more choices of media to use, they also have a choice about whether and how they want to
receive commercial content. In response, marketers are employing more varied marketing communications techniques than ever before. But these activities must be integrated to deliver a consistent message and achieve strategic positioning. Marketers also need to consider several factors in developing their communications mix, such as the type of product market, consumer readiness to make a purchase, stage in the product life cycle, and the brand’s market share and positioning.

To communicate effectively and efficiently, marketers have to go where the consumers are – and this is increasingly online. There were over two billion Internet users in 2011, up from one billion in 2005, 420 million in 2000, and 45 million in 1995. Two-thirds of the population in North America and Europe regularly go online. Much of current and future Internet user growth is coming from populous countries such as China, India, Brazil, Russia and Indonesia. The following table lists the top 15 countries in terms of Internet users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Internet Users (000)</th>
<th>Share of Total Users (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. China</td>
<td>310,900</td>
<td>17.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. U.S.</td>
<td>244,780</td>
<td>13.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. India</td>
<td>125,110</td>
<td>6.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Japan</td>
<td>102,320</td>
<td>5.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Germany</td>
<td>60,360</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Brazil</td>
<td>51,130</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. UK</td>
<td>47,010</td>
<td>2.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Russia</td>
<td>43,020</td>
<td>2.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. France</td>
<td>42,880</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Italy</td>
<td>40,050</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Indonesia</td>
<td>38,410</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. South Korea</td>
<td>38,260</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Mexico</td>
<td>27,760</td>
<td>1.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Canada</td>
<td>27,120</td>
<td>1.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Spain</td>
<td>25,220</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 15 Total</td>
<td>1,224,330</td>
<td>67.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worldwide Total</td>
<td>1,825,409</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Internet use has grown not only in total numbers, but also in terms of per capita usage. The chart below shows the rapid increase in Internet users in the U.S. and worldwide, indicating greater opportunities to reach customers via the Internet.

In the U.S., mobile phone and wireless laptop Internet use have each grown more prevalent. In 2010, nearly half of all adults (47%) went online with a laptop using a Wi-Fi connection or mobile broadband card (up from the 39 percent who did so as of April 2009) while 40 percent of adults used the Internet, email or instant messaging on a mobile phone (up from the 32% of Americans who did this in 2009). This means that 59 percent of adults now access the Internet wirelessly using a laptop or mobile phone. The chart below shows the rapid ascent of wireless Internet use worldwide and in the U.S. as a percentage of total usage.
The latest evolution on the consumer technology front is the widespread use of smartphones. These mobile devices are used 24/7 by consumers for many functions in addition to phone calling. While Europe took the lead with their early and widespread adoption of text messaging and higher smartphone penetration compared to the U.S., the U.S. has now eclipsed Europe in terms of penetration of mobile media, with 47 percent of American mobile audiences using connected media in 2010 compared to 34 percent of Europeans. The following table lists some of the now common uses of mobile phones by U.S. consumers.

### Common Mobile Phone Uses (U.S.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Users</th>
<th>Who Used Their Mobile Phone For...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>64%</td>
<td>Sending photo or video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Post video: 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55%</td>
<td>Accessing social networking site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Watching a video</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Purchasing a product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Making charitable donations by text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Accessing Twitter (of Twitter users)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pervasiveness of mobile technology is creating what MTN, the South African-based telecommunications and mobile finance brand, calls a whole mobile lifestyle. Providing accessibility to banking and credit facilities, insurance, utilities services, as well as voice and internet connectivity, is revolutionizing where, when, and how we communicate personally and with businesses. And the multifunctional use of smartphones is not limited to select demographic groups. Rather, as shown in the following chart, consumers across various categories make extensive use of their smartphones for many activities.
All of this widespread use of technology by consumers is moving marketers much closer to one-to-one marketing. The web not only offers merchants the ability to communicate instantly with each customer, but it also allows the customer to talk back, and that makes it possible for companies to customize offers and services. The Internet also allows organizations to provide 7-day, 24-hour service response. The main reason consumers have adopted the Internet is that it enables them to shop 24/7 in the comfort of their home with no time zone worries. Ease of navigation is then the primary reason for variations in purchase decisions between different online products.

Many consumers, too, are looking to build relationships on the Web. One example is the concept of permission marketing, in which consumers volunteer to be marketed to on the Internet in return for some kind of reward. This type of marketing uses the interactivity offered by the Web to engage customers in a dialogue and, as a consequence, in a long-term interactive relationship. Permission marketing is based on the premise that the attention of the consumer is a scarce commodity that needs to be managed carefully. Its emphasis is on building relationships with consumers instead of interrupting their lives with mass marketing messages.

Selective marketing, whereby consumers are shown advertising and promotions related to their browsing interests, is also on the increase. For example, the use of online coupons is rising rapidly, by more than 50 percent a year, as Internet giant, Google, is joining companies like ValPak and CoolSavings by bringing new technology to the business of marketing national or local coupons over the Internet. Digital coupons typically must be printed and physically turned
in at a store so there is still some paper handling. But with the spread of digital mobile phones with location tracking and automatic short-range communication technology, electronic coupons can now be delivered to mobile phone owners on demand and redeemed by whisking the phone past a cash register, eliminating all the paper.

The Internet has upended how consumers engage with brands to the extent that consumers are promiscuous in their brand relationships. They connect with myriad brands through new media channels often beyond the marketer’s familiarity or control. In the past, marketing strategies emphasized brand awareness and ultimate purchase. However, after purchase, consumers may remain aggressively engaged, actively promoting or assailing the products they have bought, and collaborating in the brand’s development. The touch points when consumers are most open to influence have changed, requiring a major adjustment to realign marketers’ strategy and budgets with where consumers are actually spending their time. In the table below, we summarize some of the interactive marketing communication options that are now available.

**Digital Marketing Communication Options**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Option</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Website</strong></td>
<td>Companies must design websites that embody or express their purpose, history, products and vision. A key challenge is designing a site that is attractive on first viewing and interesting enough to encourage repeat visits. Dedicated websites for mobile devices are on the increase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Media</strong></td>
<td>Companies are embracing social media because of its potential for engagement and collaboration with consumers. Social media advertising will yield relatively stronger results because of its ability to tightly target audiences based on social media activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobile Marketing</strong></td>
<td>Mobile phone marketing will become increasingly important. Smartphone use in particular is growing amongst travelers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internet-Specific Ads and Videos</strong></td>
<td>With user-generated content sites such as YouTube, MySpace Video and Google Video, consumers and advertisers can upload ads and videos to be shared virally by millions of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Display Ads</strong></td>
<td>Display ads are small, rectangular boxes containing text and perhaps a picture that companies pay to place on relevant websites. The larger the audience, the more the placement costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Microsites</strong></td>
<td>A microsite is a limited area on the Web managed and paid for by an external advertiser/company. Microsites are individual Web pages or cluster of pages that function as supplements to a primary site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Search Ads</strong></td>
<td>Paid-search or pay-per-click ads, represent 40% of all on-line ads. Thirty-five percent of all searches are reportedly for products or services. The search terms serve as a proxy for the consumer’s consumption interests and trigger relevant links to product or service offerings alongside search results from Google, MSN and Yahoo! Advertisers pay only if people click on the links.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Online Communities</strong></td>
<td>Many companies sponsor on-line communities whose members communicate through postings, instant messaging and chat discussions about special interests related to the company’s products and brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interstials</strong></td>
<td>Interstitials are advertisements, often with video or animation, that pop up between changes on a website, e.g., ads for Johnson &amp; Johnson’s Tylenol headache reliever would pop up on brokers’ websites whenever the stock market fell by 100 points or more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blogs</strong></td>
<td>Blogs are usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Most good quality blogs are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and even message each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E-mail</strong></td>
<td>Email uses only a fraction of the cost of a ‘d-mail’, or direct mail campaign.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As more aspects of everyday life converge toward digital, opportunities for organizations to interact with consumers expand dramatically. A serious challenge exists, however, for media companies, agencies, and brand marketers who have constructed a sophisticated infrastructure to send messages to target audiences through media channels, but do not have the mindset or the technical expertise to master the data analysis and modeling of the digital media world.

2. The consumer decision process in today’s digital world

The Internet has fundamentally changed the consumer decision process. In the past, marketers assumed that consumers started with a large number of potential brands in mind and methodically narrowed their choices until they had decided which one to buy. After purchase, their relationship with the brand typically focused on the use of the product or services itself.

A more nuanced view of how consumers engage with brands has emerged called the Consumer Decision Journey. As depicted in the following diagram, rather than systematically narrowing their choices until they have decided what to buy, consumers add and subtract brands from a group under consideration during an extended evaluation stage. After purchase, they often enter into an open-ended relationship with the brand, sharing their experience with it online through social media. The four stages of the consumer decision journey are: a) consider; b) evaluate; c) buy; and d) enjoy, advocate and bond. New media make the ‘evaluate’ and ‘advocate’ stages increasingly relevant.

Source: Adapted from Court et al. 2009, McKinsey Quarterly. 
Consumers’ outreach to marketers and other sources of information is much more likely to shape their ensuing choices than marketers’ efforts to persuade them. Online marketers have coined the term “Zero Moment of Truth” (ZMOT) to describe the new reality where marketers have to compete for shoppers’ attention online long before a purchase decision is made\(^\text{14}\). As consumers progress through the four stage decision journey, “consumer driven marketing”--word of mouth, online research, offline and/or print review--has increasing impact\(^\text{15}\).

Interestingly, after purchase, a deeper brand connection begins as the consumer interacts with the product and with new online touch points. For example, research found that more than 60 percent of consumers with facial skin care products conduct online research about the products after purchase\(^\text{16}\) -- a touch point not entirely captured in traditional purchase funnel models of communication. Therefore, marketing efforts that help consumers navigate the evaluation process and then spread positive word of mouth about the brands they choose can be as important as building awareness and driving purchases. Thus, it is vital that marketers be able to communicate with customers during--not just before--the purchase process (commonly referred to as “shopper marketing”). Along with paid media, marketers should therefore consider both owned media (channels of brand controls, such as websites) and earned media (customer-created channels, such as brand communities). The following customer touchpoint model can serve as a template for considering the customer communication strategies to keep a brand prominent in customers’ pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase cycles.
3. Leveraging social media

Today, 65 percent of online adults use social networking sites\textsuperscript{17}. Social media include a host of technology platforms. Some of the most commonly used are captured in the following diagram:

Many companies have embraced social media because of its potential for engagement and collaboration with consumers. Sites such as OPEN Forum (American Express), Beinggirl.com (Procter & Gamble), myPlaNet (Cisco) and Fiesta Movement (Ford) tap into participants’ expertise and creativity for product development. Through social media, marketers can also gain rich, unmediated consumer insights, faster than ever before. Others see the value of social media in its networking. According to Facebook, the average user has 130 friends on the social network, and when people hear about a product or service from a friend, they become a customer at a 15 percent higher rate than when they find out about it through other means.

The social media landscape expands daily. Some of the most common social media services used by marketers\textsuperscript{18}, all with over 5 million estimated unique monthly visitors, are shown in the following diagram:
Social media provide rich opportunities for interactivity between organizations and their customers. American Express launched its Link-Like-Love social commerce program in July 2011. The free service provides AMEX cardholders with relevant deals and experiences based on their likes, interests and social connections on Facebook. In this program customers provide, directly and indirectly, marketplace data and AMEX responds with money-saving communications. See a screen shot below of this highly customized initiative.
Within product categories, competing brands are using similar social media platforms, but in exceptional ways, to create and reinforce their distinctive brand identities. Take toothpaste, for example. Colgate-Palmolive’s “Colgate Smile” Facebook site evokes feelings of happiness. The company encourages customers to post and share their “happiness” pictures. From its site on Facebook:

Every day millions of people around the world trust Colgate-Palmolive to help care for themselves and the ones they love. From oral care to personal care, from home care to pet nutrition, Colgate-Palmolive makes the products that make you smile.

Throughout the world, smiles are the language of happiness, universal expressions of joy. The happiness, health and confidence that come from a bright, well-maintained smile dramatically impact quality of life. As a trusted partner, Colgate offers quality oral care products, including toothpastes and toothbrushes, as well as expert dental health information.

What makes a Colgate Smile? It’s your smile at its best: beautiful, healthy and bright. Share your Colgate Smile with the world.

In contrast, Crest’s site on Facebook provides very comprehensive product information. It also promotes its image of a confidence-building brand. From the site:

With a confident smile, you’re ready for anything!

When your smile is at its best, you’re ready to embrace any opportunity that comes your way. And when you’re a fan of Crest, you’ll get access to the latest product innovations, contests, coupons, and more — all
to help you keep your smile looking great and you feeling ready for anything. Crest’s Facebook page is intended to be a fun space for you and other Crest fans.

Crest also promotes its Life Opens Up project on Facebook, where site visitors can upload their Crest smiles pictures for a chance to win $25,000. The site offers not only information on its products, but also coupons for P&G products and dental care health information. It also encourages visitors to post their information and share their experience with Crest products.

Yet another approach is taken by the Tom’s of Maine toothpaste brand. The company is similarly present on Facebook, where it promotes the conscious, responsible, green living, environmentally friendly lifestyle of its customers and employees. The company also promotes its Fifty States for Good campaign, in which it awards $150,000 to non-profit organizations around the country. From the company’s site on Facebook:

Like you, we believe our actions have an impact on the people and the world around us. That’s why we try to do a little good every day. It’s also why we believe you deserve to know how we do business. Let’s get some goodness going on!

It all began back in 1968 when Tom and Kate Chappell moved to Kennebunk, Maine on a mission to simplify their lives. Unable to find natural personal care products, they decided to sell their own. The rest is history.

We try to make people’s lives better every day—naturally! We believe truly natural products are better for your body and the environment. That’s why you’ll never find potentially harmful ingredients in our products and why we’ll never test our ingredients or products on animals.

Tom’s of Maine creates natural products, never tested on animals, for the entire family. These include toothpastes, deodorant, mouthwash, dental floss and soap.

Twitter is another social media platform gaining traction for consumer relationship management. Bank of America, for example, has developed a personalized Twitter strategy. The bank uses Twitter as its one-to-one consumer service channel. An actual employee, complete with his picture (not the bank logo) appears on their Twitter site. This personalization highlights the bank’s “one-to-many” and “one-to-one” capabilities. The employee amassed about 1,630 followers within four months of his BofA Twitter launch in January 2009, and has posted more than 700 responses since. The bank noticed that customers actively seek out information about the bank and its products on the Twitter website, evidence that customers see the bank as highly visible and easily accessible via its employee Twitter brand presence.

Such activities are happening worldwide. Take India for example. Madura, a leader in the branded apparel, garments and lifestyle segment in India and has made distinct forays into the Indian apparel and lifestyle sector, also monitors online conversations on Facebook and Twitter. So too does SpiceJet, an Indian low-cost airline. Foreign companies operating there also engage customers digitally, such as Audi’s live tweets from the Audi Quattro Cup golf tournament it sponsored and Volkswagen’s use of LinkedIn where members can endorse their favorite VW model.
However, research suggests that most companies are not engaging consumers on Twitter in a meaningful way. A Weber Shandwick study found that even though 73 Fortune 100 companies had registered as many as 540 Twitter accounts, 76 percent of these accounts were virtually inactive. Those that were active essentially followed the old school top-down approach for communication. Nearly 26 percent of Twitter accounts were for serving news to followers but lacked a feedback mechanism to encourage engagement (see the diagram below). Another 24 percent used Twitter for brand awareness, but in actuality it could be called ‘brand squatting’ rather than engaging as these accounts were just ensuring an online presence, and blocking others – those not affiliated to the brand – to claim ownership. All this may be one of the prime reasons why nearly 50 percent of the Twitter accounts of Fortune 500 companies had fewer than 500 followers.

**Twitter Account Purpose at Fortune 100 Companies**

![Pie chart showing Twitter account purposes at Fortune 100 companies]


Alongside the growing popularity of social networks and Web 2.0 platforms, user-generated video contests have become an increasingly popular and less expensive communication tool for many organizations. Destinations, in particular, are resorting to user-generated video contests to engage consumers and prompt them to become digital ambassadors for their brands. A good example occurred in 2009 when Tourism Queensland embarked on a global search to find an Island Caretaker to explore the Islands of the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and report back to the world about their experiences. The campaign was called the ‘Best Job in the World.’ With a salary of AUD $150,000 on offer, over 34,000 would-be caretakers from Azerbaijan to Zimbabwe and everywhere in between uploaded a 60-second video showing their creativity.
and skills. The job went to "ostrich-riding, bungee-jumping" charity worker Ben Southall from Hampshire in England, who was still, in 2011, reporting via blogs on his adventures. The campaign generated $80m of global publicity for an investment of just $1m.

By giving out an opportunity to win a free holiday, marketers create excitement, interest and commitment among competitors and hope to raise awareness of their destination by generating free media coverage. In the same year of the Queensland campaign, the Orlando Convention & Visitors Bureau initiated a 67 Days of Smiles contest, promising two lucky winners the chance to visit Orlando for 67 days. The idea was that it would take a tourist 67 days to experience everything the Orlando area has to offer. Kyle and Stacey were chosen for the job and recorded their trip on a 67 Days of Smiles blog. By the end of their experience, the Days of Smiles website had recorded over 67,000 hits and their Twitter account had almost 1,000 followers. The traveling duo was also featured by several media outlets including the New York Times.

Social media are being used in international expansion efforts as well. Li Ning, the Chinese athletic shoe and apparel company (think Adidas or Nike – Li Ning does when describing its global ambitions) recently launched its Brand eCommerce business to begin penetrating the U.S. athletic apparel market. Rather than a brick-and-mortar entry strategy, Li Ning’s approach is fully digital. American athletes and consumers can purchase Li-Ning sportswear by visiting Digital Li-Ning at www.li-ning.com, and can connect to the brand via Facebook and Twitter.

An increasing number of organizations are using tools that show them the influence that online consumers wield with their words. A recent survey of U.S., European, and Asian companies found that 23 percent used social media analytic tools in order to identify and reward key influencers. Palms Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, for example, mines online data to give amenities and discounts to customers with the best social media footprint. Quasar Expeditions, a luxury cruise operator, similarly studies its Facebook page to find fans who have posted the most photos and positive comments, and then offers them discounts on future trips.

Marketers use free online tools such as Social Mention to locate brand mentions in social media, and online subscriber services like Klout to find and evaluate individuals based on their value as an online influencer. Klout scores, which range from one to 100, with higher scores representing a wider and stronger sphere of influence, are based on list memberships, message reach, unique Twitter and Facebook mentions, and messages re-tweeted. Influencers are sorted by topic on the Klout site so companies can connect with people who can influence on their behalf.

Of course, the success of many social media campaigns often depends on the virality of the online content. Using a unique dataset of all the New York Times articles published over a three-month period, research examined the link between integral effects (i.e., the emotion evoked) and whether content is highly shared. The results suggest a strong relationship between emotion and virality. Affect-laden content – regardless of whether it is positive or negative – is more likely to make the most emailed list. Further, positive content is more viral.
than negative content; however, this link is complex. While more awe-inspiring and more surprising content is more likely to make the most emailed list, and sadness-inducing content is less viral, some negative emotions are positively associated with virality. Anxiety- and anger-inducing content is more likely to make the most emailed list. In fact, the most powerful predictor of virality is how much anger an article evokes. The findings shed light on how to design successful viral marketing campaigns and craft contagious content. Given that affect-laden and awe-inspiring content is more likely to be shared, for example, campaigns that strive to evoke these emotions may be more successful.

A number of companies are leveraging social media in order to unearth consumer insights that will propel their businesses forward. The activity has been called “crowdsourcing”. Crowdsourcing-led innovation means opening the door to allow customers, employees, or the general public at large into the innovation process to help improve products, services or marketing efforts. Consumers get a direct line to the company and the opportunity to steer offerings to reflect their needs better, while companies benefit from getting more insights, opinions, and wisdom that can be translated into actionable innovation ideas for less money than a typical R&D initiative. Dell, for example, created an online venue called IdeaStorm to give customers a central location where they could share ideas with the company. In the first three years, IdeaStorm crossed the 10,000 idea mark and implemented nearly 400 ideas. Websites like Lego Mindstorms, MyStarbucksIdea.com and MySearsCommunity.com also solicit and capture consumer feedback to inform product pipelines and advertising agencies.

4. Brand communities

Just as the growth of the Internet has encouraged companies to embrace social media, so, too, has the nurturing of brand communities become more prevalent. Brand communities are defined as “specialized, non-geographically bound communities, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand”\textsuperscript{23}. The emergence of brand communities has coincided with the growth in consumer empowerment. They are venues where intense brand loyalty is expressed and fostered, and emotional connection with the brand forged in customers. Research on such communities has found that commitment to a brand can be influenced (positively) by encouraging interactions with groups of like-minded customers and identification with the group in social context offered (and sponsored) by the firm and the brand, but controlled and managed primarily by the consumers themselves.

By managing brand communities with a light, open touch – and sustaining them with corporate-level commitment – companies can build fierce customer loyalty, increase marketing efficiency, and enhance their brand equity. Because brand community members have a strong interest in the product and in the brand, they can also be a valuable source of innovation. In a study of brand community members, research found that the stronger the identification with the brand, and the higher the brand trust, the more likely a consumer was willing to contribute to open innovation projects initiated by a brand. For example, the Skittles brand enhanced a sense of community via the consumer collective when it redesigned its corporate website as entirely
By ceding complete control to consumers, the Skittles website represents exactly what people are thinking, feeling, and wanting to communicate about the brand.

But to manage brand communities successfully, marketers need to understand the types of community affiliation, as well as the roles community members play. Strategy consultants Jump Associates have identified three basic forms of community affiliation: pools, webs and hubs. Members of pools are united by shared goals or values, like Democrats, Republicans, or Apple enthusiasts. Web affiliations (e.g. Cancer Survivors Network) are the strongest and most stable form of community because the people in them are bound by a wide range of relationships. Finally, members of hubs are united by their admiration of an individual, and can be used to strengthen a brand pool, a strategy implemented by Nike by associating with sports stars like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods. The diagram below illustrates the characteristics of pools, webs and hub.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pools</th>
<th>Webs</th>
<th>Hubs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People have strong associations with a shared activity or goal, or shared values, and loose associations with one another</td>
<td>People have strong one-to-one relationships with others who have similar or complementary needs</td>
<td>People have strong connections to a central figure and weaker associations with one another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The shared activity, goal, or values are the key to this community affiliation</td>
<td>Personal relationships are the key to this community affiliation</td>
<td>A charismatic figure is the key to this community affiliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple enthusiasts</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Deepak Chopra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans or Democrats</td>
<td>Cancer Survivors Network</td>
<td>Hannah Montana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironman triathletes</td>
<td>Hash House Harriers</td>
<td>Oprah</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As use of the Internet becomes more pervasive, so too have online brand communities become effective tools for influencing sales. One study of online brand communities found that the quality of the communication exchanged between customers reduces the level of uncertainty about the firm and its products, which relates to increased profits for the firm in terms of immediate purchase intentions, and the number of products purchased. It also found that the impact of negative information is not as strong as the benefits of positive information. So maintaining a brand community that allows customers to know the firm more intimately through peer-to-peer conversations will work in the firm’s favor, even if negative information is shared.

A challenge in building and managing online brand communities is that consumers can easily associate marketers’ efforts with extrinsic motives of profit exploitation and thus become less
likely to engage with, and contribute to, such a community\textsuperscript{26}. One possible solution is to develop a platform of online brand communities encouraging consumers to share and exchange their ideas voluntarily rather than imposing the organization’s own ideas, such as sales coupons or sweepstakes. This implies that marketers should employ a passive role when facilitating brand communities – similar to the role played by Skittles.

5. The increasing significance of emotions in marketing

A tried and true tenet of effective communications is that it is not \textit{what} you say that builds relationships, but \textit{how} you say it. Or in marketing communications terms, it is not the rational message that builds brand relationships, but the emotional creativity. Human behavior is heavily influenced by emotions, not solely by reason. Consumers are often highly emotional and intuitive in their behavior, operating through the emotional centers of the brain, dictated by their “heart” or “gut feeling” and often independent of conscious control.

An emotion is a mental state of readiness that arises from cognitive appraisals of events or thoughts, has a phenomenological tone, is accompanied by physiological processes, is often expressed physically (e.g. in gestures, posture, facial features), and may result in specific actions to affirm or cope with the emotion\textsuperscript{27}. Emotions encompass both positive (i.e., pleased or relaxed) and negative (i.e., nervous or annoyed) feelings.

Studies suggest that people cannot make decisions without emotions being involved\textsuperscript{28}. There are cases of people who have had accidental destruction of the parts of the brain that produce emotions. When confronting tasks that involved clear choice about what to do, these people couldn’t decide – even though they could rationally and very articulately describe the pros and cons of the choice situation. At the level of product and service choice, consumers do not think in well-reasoned, rational, and linear ways, and therefore cannot easily explain their behavior\textsuperscript{29}. Therefore if marketers wish to build strong brand relationships, they need to incorporate high levels of emotional content into their communications\textsuperscript{30}.

A considerable number of studies in psychology and marketing have developed useful frameworks and typologies of emotions related to effective communications. The Consumption Emotions Set (CES), for example, measures 16 super ordinate positive and negative consumptive emotions\textsuperscript{31}. In terms of important objectives such as customer satisfaction and willingness to recommend, emotions can have both direct and indirect effects\textsuperscript{32}. Consumers’ likelihood of recommending a core service may be influenced more strongly by emotions than by satisfaction with the core service, concluding that emotions can in some cases make for a better predictor of behavioral intention than cognitive measures of satisfaction.
6. The impact of emotions on loyalty and consumer-brand relationships

With the trend today toward commoditization and increasing price and quality parity, engaging with customers emotionally – through the brand experience – often provides the best opportunity for differentiation and loyalty. A number of studies have shown that consumption emotions have an impact on behavioral intentions, including word of mouth communications and loyalty. For example, pleasure and arousal have significant effects on word of mouth, while gratitude, the emotional appreciation for benefits received, accompanied by a desire to reciprocate, is an important construct for understanding relationship marketing effectiveness.\(^{33}\)

Organizations should quickly get the basics right (e.g. price, product durability, service reliability, etc.) and then move on to building emotional bonds with customers through some of their social and personal motivation needs. Many global brands (like Nike) develop these higher-level bonds and build loyalty by creating customer experiences that connect to self-esteem and self-actualization needs. These brands meet the customer’s rational and functional needs, but then offer something additional, such as a learning opportunity or a chance to help others. Companies like Starbucks, The Body Shop, Southwest Airlines, and Amazon, have demonstrated how to build brands with very little mass media advertising. Each offers a unique value proposition and focuses on the customer experience.

One recent U.K. study interviewed 2000 consumers to determine exactly how they form emotional relationships with brands. The consumers in the Brandhouse Emotion 100 Report were asked to measure 100 leading brands on seven emotional principles: contentment, belonging, compassion, pride, enjoyment, excitement, and desire. The results revealed that very few brands have succeeded in building a strong emotional attachment with customers. Interestingly, when respondents were asked about the importance of each emotional principle, contentment, belonging and compassion took the top three spots. While generating desire and excitement is often the key aim of advertising campaigns, those surveyed ranked these two attributes as least important.

While technology brands scored highly – Google and Sony topped the chart – consumers also recorded high emotional connections to brands with heritage and longevity, such as Heinz, Kellogg and Marks & Spencer. Some sectors were better at connecting emotionally with consumers than others. Those brands offering a tangible product, such as food or drink, scored higher than service-based brands. Relatively low scores were awarded in the airline, tour operators, hotels and resorts, restaurants, and coffee shops sectors.

Consumers form relations with consumption objects such as products or brands, which range from feelings of antipathy, to slight fondness, all the way up to what would, in person-person relations, amount to love.\(^{34}\) Recall the AMEX Link-Like-Love program; if successful, AMEX and its corporate partners offering consumers deals on desired products and services through Facebook have the potential to generate powerful emotional impact. A recent integrated campaign to promote Pillsbury products connected with consumers on an emotional level and leveraged the power of social media. The campaign that carried the theme “Holiday ideas made...”

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“easy” was an evolution of ads that Pillsbury introduced in 2008 called “Home is calling.” It included commercials, in lengths of 15 and 60 seconds, encouraging viewers to go to the Pillsbury Web site, at memoriesmadeeasy.pillsbury.com, where visitors could upload photographs to create personalized versions of the 60-second commercial. The Pillsbury fan page on Facebook, at facebook.com/pillsbury, has more than 1.3 million likes. General Mills, who owns the Pillsbury brand, is moving forward aggressively in the digital world. For instance, to bolster the Betty Crocker brand, the company is stepping up its presence online; in social media like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube; and on mobile devices, with apps and a mobile website at m.bettycrocker.com.

Brands that conduct social media interactions with consumers in a meaningful way like this are seeing a positive impact on the bottom line. Chadwick Martin Bailey research states that the likelihood for individuals to buy / recommend increases after they follow a brand via social media (see figure below). The fact that almost 50 percent of a brand’s Facebook fans already are customers further boosts this proposition. A positive experience from direct brand interaction will lead to repeat purchases and recommendations.

The discussion of emotional branding tends to focus almost exclusively on product (tangibles) brands and not service (intangibles) brands. But in the marketing of services, too, emotions play a key role in selection and consumption behaviors of consumers. The intimate nature of service delivery is likely to make the experience more personally involving and will result in the generation of emotions, whether or not the service provider attempts to manage the customer’s emotional experience. Marketers of service brands need to meet the challenge of creating and managing a positive emotional brand experience before, during, and after the brand purchase. In particular, they must strive to provide a unique, emotional brand experience for customers that go beyond the mere provision of services.
Baby boomers in particular respond well to messages that touch emotions\textsuperscript{36}. Research shows that older adults typically recall twice as many of the emotional components of a message than younger adults. As people mature, cognition pattern becomes more right-brain oriented, which has a critical impact on marketing, as the right brain is where emotions and memories reside. While emotional marketing works with all consumers, it is far more effective with mature consumers due to the way their brains have developed.

Some researchers have attempted to answer the basic questions of whether, why, and in what form consumers seek and value ongoing relationships with brands\textsuperscript{37}. Consumers do not just buy brands because they work well. They are involved in relationships with a collectivity of brands so as to benefit from the meanings they add into their lives. Some of those meanings are functional and utilitarian; others are more psychological and emotional. All, however, are purposive and ego-centered, and therefore of great significance to the persons engaging them. Important factors for keeping a relationship alive include affective and socio-emotive attachments (love/passion and self-connection), behavioral ties (interdependence and commitment), and supportive cognitive beliefs (intimacy and brand partner quality). All of these combine to yield strength and durability over time.

Social media can be used to reinforce such strength and durability for a brand. The table below shows how Virgin Atlantic Airways (VAA) employs social media to deliver on the four qualities that make it such a successful brand\textsuperscript{38}.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Qualities that make successful brands</th>
<th>How VAA uses social media to deliver each quality</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Offer and communicate a clear, relevant customer promise</td>
<td>The VAA customer promise is innovation, fun, informality, honesty, value, and a caring attitude. This customer promise is reinforced at every touch point, and VAA uses social media to support these brand values. For example, the most-read section of its Facebook page includes travel tips from crew members – communication that comes across as honest, informal, and caring.</td>
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<td>2. Build trust by delivering on that promise</td>
<td>Trust is mainly about service delivery, but when things go wrong, keeping customers informed can prevent that trust from eroding. During the volcanic-ash crisis in 2010, VAA’s website couldn’t keep pace with the rapidly changing situation, so it used Facebook and Twitter to communicate with customers.</td>
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<td>3. Drive the market by continually improving the promise</td>
<td>For VAA, like many companies, the greatest social media opportunity lies in gathering insights to drive continual incremental improvements. For example, in response to online-community suggestions, it launched a system to arrange taxi sharing on arrival with passengers from the same flight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Seek further advantage by innovating beyond the familiar</td>
<td>Fresh insights from social media reinforce the innovation aspect of the brand. For example, Facebook interactions helped the company appreciate the extensive planning that goes into a big trip, so they launched Vtravelled, a site dedicated to inspirational journeys. Customers moderate the conversation and exchange information, stories, and advice. The site leads to some sales, but its main benefit to VAA comes from brand reinforcement and new customer insights.</td>
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Managing customer communications in the new digital era

In 1999, Steven Spielberg convened a three-day think tank to gather insights from 23 top futurists for the making of his sci-fi thriller *Minority Report*, which depicted the world of 2054. The goal was to create a realistic view of a plausible future. Projecting out from the present day’s marketing and media technologies - Web cookies, GPS devices, Bluetooth-enabled mobile phones, TiVo personal video recorders, and barcode scanners - the filmmakers gave shape to an advertising-saturated society where billboards call out to you on a first-name basis, cereal boxes broadcast animated commercials, newspapers deliver news instantly over a broadband wireless network, holographic hosts greet you at retail stores, and where biometric retina scans deduct the cost of goods from your bank account.

The technologies portrayed in the film were far from science fiction, and today many are in use or are in development. Wireless newspapers and magazines that stream news updates - like the *USA Today* seen in the film - are extensions of “digital paper” technologies currently being developed. Meanwhile, today’s GPS and wireless network technologies are close to the place-based, personalized advertising that provides a backdrop for the film’s city scenes. GPS-based technologies are used by wireless carriers to target ads to users in specific locations. And new Wi-Fi based Location Enabled Networks (LENs) carve up a wireless network into discrete segments that target users passing through a specified location. As users pass access points, content can be served up based on their position. Of course, for all their commercial potential, these technologies are not free of ethical considerations - a point the movie drives home with a heavy hand. However, what we are witnessing is a rapidly changing communications environment dominated by digital technology – and Spielberg’s future is already reality. While we do not purport to predict the future as well as Spielberg, here we suggest insights to guide marketers in the evolving digital era.

**Think Social.** Social networks – particularly Facebook - have emerged as the dominant digital communications channel, particularly for people under 34 years of age. In the U.S. 2010 social network use doubled among those over 55, and 33 percent of consumers used social networks to navigate content on the Web, up from 13 percent in 2008, with similar patterns worldwide. As consumers spend more time on these networks, decisions about what to purchase increasingly reflect interactions with friends and other influencers. Marketers will therefore have to adapt their strategies to reach increasingly networked consumers, and place more emphasis on tactics such as word-of-mouth and storytelling. Social media advertising continues to grow as well, with prospects for greater use and effectiveness due to its ability to tightly target specific audiences rife with referral potential.

One challenge facing marketers is that social media websites remain one of the lowest-scoring categories of websites when it comes to customer satisfaction. User concerns about privacy, including being targeted for advertising, continue to be problematic for social media websites. In 2011, the social media category earned a score of 70 on ASCI’s 0 to 100 scale. Wikipedia topped the social media category with 78, benefiting from its nonprofit position that allows...
users to surf, create, and edit content without intrusion from commercial messages. Google-owned YouTube came in second place with 74, while Facebook scored a low 66. If there is a battle between Facebook and Google in the future for social networking preeminence, it will likely center on user satisfaction, a trend very much worth watching.

**Act Mobile.** Smartphones have emerged as the device of choice for email, Web browsing, and product research. As the power and functionality of devices grow, the possibilities for making money from mobile platforms will continue to improve. Smartphone users already are more accustomed to paying for digital content than traditional online users are. A good example of new technologies at work comes from Copenhagen Airport where a new program tracks travelers’ movements based on the Wi-Fi-emitting devices they carry. Airport officials can get a real-time picture of where travelers go and what they do, and can use this information to improve the design of the airport, direct the flow of passengers, or shift employees to improve the efficiency of security or immigration checkpoints. Meanwhile, travelers can download the associated iPhone application to receive location-specific information on their devices such as where to find the shortest security line, or special deals being offered by nearby stores.

Mobile or smartphone advertising is still a young field, and little research has been conducted in this area. Most research in mobile advertising is concerned with targeted advertising - using SMS text messaging to target consumers. Early academic research suggests an acceptance, especially by younger consumers, of well-executed mobile push advertising if the source is trusted, permission has been given, and the messages are relevant and/or entertaining, though consumers in general are still wary of mobile advertising, and we are seeing a decreasing response rate of push advertising, due to a combination of wear-out, spam and smishing – all of which raise issues of information privacy and time wasting. The growth of mobile advertising will therefore depend partly on the industry’s ability to overcome these continuing barriers to consumer acceptance and its ability to exploit the much greater capability of the latest mobile technology – namely, the mobile internet, including social networking – compared to SMS text messaging.

Initial research on response to mobile advertising, such as a display ad response or a mobile search, suggests encouraging response rates for cross-media campaigns, and this is where we are likely to witness the largest growth in mobile advertising. Furthermore, recent technological developments in two-dimensional barcodes have enabled mobile marketers to go beyond such simple integration. For example, a QR code can be reproduced on any printable surface – a magazine, newspaper, poster, label, or receipt. The encoded information (website address, email, product images, or coupons) is readable by a camera-equipped mobile device. American clothing store, JCPenney recently created one of the most practical and clever uses for QR codes. When a customer purchased a gift from any JCPenney store before Christmas of 2011, he or she received a ‘Santa tag’ which had an accompanying QR code. By scanning it with a mobile phone, the purchaser could then record a personalized voice message for the person they were sending the gift to. Once that was done, the QR code was stuck onto the present and sent off to the recipient.
**Viral Through Video.** As digital platforms multiply, consumer video-viewing habits continue to change. In 2010, 69 percent of viewers watched videos on their PCs and 33 percent on their smart phones. Twenty-four percent viewed Internet content on their TVs – a percentage that has tripled over the past two years as Internet-enabled consoles, DVD players, DVRs, and TVs have proliferated. Advertisers therefore need to refine marketing plans so that they reflect this new video-viewing behavior and get creative about targeting users who are time-shifting and dividing their attention among platforms. Some media executives are experimenting with small companies whose social media technologies tout viewer engagement through second screens. Shazam Entertainment Ltd., for example, sends users content related to a TV show such as a music download, when a user “tags” a show by pressing a button on the phone or iPad when prompted during an episode. In the quest to create viral content that stimulates brand conversation, video is likely to be a key medium.

**Make it Emotional.** As products and services become less differentiated on performance characteristics, relationship building emerges as a strategic option to create a sustainable advantage. Social media offer a very powerful platform upon which to build these relationships. However, in the new digital arena you interact with customers and others as you have never done before. You are now engaging in a conversation with your customers and this conversation may or may not be centered around the benefits of your product; in fact it may focus on (mis)perceptions unrelated to your core brand message. Nonetheless, it is a conversation and your customers will react to how you converse. How consumers feel about you may be what drives loyalty, and how you handle social media can determine how your consumers feel about you. The goal is to make every interaction one that elicits positive thoughts and feelings that engage, satisfy, and foster belonging to the brand community.

**Align Tools to Strategies.** By now it is clear that the digital marketing arsenal of communication tools is growing at a rapid pace. It is likely not practical or manageable to incorporate all tools into an effective integrated marketing communication strategy. In order to identify the right mix of tools, and resource them appropriately, marketers must give careful thought to their strategic objectives. While not perhaps a novel concept, doing so has never been more critical given the increasing savvy of customers and options for marketers. Strategic objectives can be classified into four areas: customer engagement, driving channel traffic (store, web, tradeshow, etc.), virality (stimulating word of mouth), and brand building. Selecting and aligning digital media with these four areas will ensure that customer communication management efforts have maximum effectiveness and efficiency.

Of course the importance of these strategies will differ depending on industry, competition, product and service portfolio, specific business objectives, and so forth. In the retail sector, driving store traffic is usually a key strategic objective. Organic tea brand Steaz took to social media platforms to generate awareness and drive sales at Target stores. The company’s social media campaign saw sales double after users downloaded and shared coupons on Facebook and Twitter. The marketing team aimed the campaign at mothers after conducting geographic and demographic research. According to Steaz, mothers were the perfect audience to generate
awareness and sales, as they usually looked for coupons and were involved in health related discussions in social media.

In the insurance industry, the objective behind the use of social media is often customer engagement. In Sweden, insurance company TryggHansa is leading the way with its social media activities. PR and social media manager, Johan Erikkson wants TryggHansa to become ‘the most available insurance company in Sweden’, and while the company does use social media for traditional purposes, such as marketing, it uses it more as a service channel and to provide a platform for questions from clients and the public. Part of this is due to cultural practices as Swedes tend to ask companies more questions on social media. The company also engages in what Erikkson terms ‘proactive customer service’, which involves scouring the large forums and message boards for insurance questions, and answering them, rather than simply answering questions that appear on its own pages.

Finally, in the financial sector, social media is being used for a variety of reasons – foremost for customer engagement and brand building. In 2011, First Direct from the U.K. launched the first crowdsourcing platform to hit the U.K. financial sector - First Direct Lab. First Direct has long been the U.K.’s most advanced bank when it comes to social media. Initiatives such as ‘Little Black Book’ and its online forum ‘Talking Point’ have established its reputation for embracing everything that the web has to offer in terms of customer engagement. First Direct Lab is, according to the official press release, a social platform that will be populated with content every month such as product designs, service innovations and website concepts. Users will have the chance to critique the content through a comment facility and forum, with the feedback collated and inputted into the product or service teams before release. Banks have been slow to embrace social media but are now turning to the channel to help re-build the trust lost during the financial crisis.

*Respect Thy Customer.* Digital mobility and social media platforms enable organizations to have continual customer engagement and insight. Companies will continue to know more and more about their customers. While the “win-win” for companies and their customers is greater brand value, the dark sides of customer information, notably lack of privacy and unwanted communications are bound to become more pervasive. Organizations must consider customer engagement empathetically, constantly considering their communications from customers’ points of view. The future of marketing communications will continue to be all about relationships, and these will be irreparably harmed when an organization is perceived to violate a customer’s privacy or creep too much into their lives. Too, organizations must anticipate increasing regulatory and legal scrutiny on issues related to privacy and security.

In conclusion, the ability to choose the most effective mix of online and offline marketing channels has become a critical issue for marketers. The integration of online marketing within overall marketing strategy is complicated by diversity in current and emerging online applications and measurement issues. Marketers are aware that traditional communications channels have retained their historically favored attributes, especially trust and reliability of information. But it is unclear if existing marketing communications models such as advertising
persuasion, consumer behavior, and “reach, frequency and impact” apply in online media. To accommodate a digital world, research must adopt new approaches to theory and method. Most of the research about digital media deals with small behavioral questions about online behavior and, even then, the work is often quickly outdated. Research on a deeper level, exploring consumer emotional responses to digital media is needed. More specifically, understanding the emotional responses of consumers to social media will provide much needed insights that will enhance customer communications management in the months and years ahead.
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The **Center for Marketing Studies** at the Darla Moore School of Business provides value to local, regional, national and global businesses through excellence in marketing programs, training, seminars and consultative experiences. The Center for Marketing Studies is committed to assisting business leaders from concept to implementation. For more information on the Center for Marketing Studies contact Dr. Tom Madden at +1-803-777-4784.
Endnotes

3 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
9 Data from Mintel, November 2011.
15 Court, op cit.
16 Ibid.


