

Anna Scheibe*

PROSUMER BEHAVIORS IN BRAND IMAGE CREATION

Abstract

A brand remains a considerable source of the competitive advantage. One of the elements contributing to its power is image. The information revolution and globalization make it necessary to search for new means of differentiating brands. One of them is engaging consumers in the brand creation process. In light of the development of the Web 2.0, prosumers – active consumers functioning both as consumers and partly as producers – can have a meaningful influence on the image of brands. Their activities can entail both positive as well as negative effects.

Key words: Prosumer, brand image, social networks, word-of-mouth, co-creation

1. Introduction

In the present economic reality, in the era of globalization and the information revolution, a brand remains an important tool for competing. Its strategic value is determined by the customer-based brand value, which is the ability to make changes in the customer behavior in a way more favorable for the company. One component of this capital is the brand image, understood as a set of brand-related associations that were created in the minds of consumers.

In the face of globalization and wide access to information, consumers can choose from a wide range of brands available in the market, and are constantly being bombarded with information about different brands coming in from a variety of sources. As a result, the differences between the offerings of particular brands are becoming less distinct. Therefore, companies are looking for new ways to create relationships with consumers. One of them is prosumption, where the consumer is involved in the value-creation process. This is arrived at by combining the functions of consumer and producer.

Hence, some activities previously attributed to the manufacturer are passed on to the consumer, resulting in them being able to liberally shape the

* Ph.D., adiunct, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan.

values offered by the brand. There are not many studies available covering this phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is to explain not only what can be understood by this term. It is also an attempt to determine the impact that such an opportunity may have on consumers.

2. The concept of prosumer

The concept of prosumer was introduced by A. Toffler in his book "Third Wave" [Toffler 1997]. He describes people who combine consumer and producer functions, meaning that the consumers are taking over some functions previously attributed only to the producers. Toffler writes about the commissioning of work to users or consumers without any recompensation. Thus companies can reduce their level of investment and labor costs. In this context employees in such a relationship are therefore exploited by the companies to quite an extent.

The clear separation of producer and consumer functions was created during the industrial revolution. Afterwards, a clear division of roles began to fade [Ritzer 2010 pp. 1-31]. Initially, consumption had to be completely subordinated to production. Neither the methods of business organization nor the methods of production allowed for too much customization to meet customer demands. Then, with the globalization and information revolution, when hierarchical forms of business organization started to be replaced by non-hierarchical, it also became possible to customize products and services more to the needs of customers. Customers had the option of self-selection in some aspects. The first attempts at transferring some activities to consumers followed and consumers began to perform certain producer functions in return for providing producers with other value (such as faster service or lower prices).

At present, however, this phenomenon is associated mostly in relation to the Internet, where the rise in popularity of Web 2.0 has encouraged the development of such solutions. In cases such as Google, YouTube, MySpace, or Facebook, creating value is not limited to those who are employed by a corporation for the production, updating and maintenance of websites, but also extends to users who get involved in the production [Fuchs 2011, pp. 288-309].

In such networks many forms of presumption can be distinguished:

- Portals, where content is created by consumers and serves the exchange of knowledge such as Wikipedia;
- Social networks, whose main task is to provide communication between users of a network - Facebook, Nasza Klasa;
- Blogs- Twitter, designed to transfer information;
- Online Auctions - Allegro or E-bay;

- Services such as You Tube, or Fotka.pl - for posting mini-movies, or photos and commenting on them;
- Open-source solutions and software, where computer software is created directly by users and made available to others free of charge;
- Sites that collect information about places and giving consumers the ability to mark and select local attractions;
- Geoweb - maps which are created or modified by the users themselves [Ritzer 2010, pp. 1-31].

All these solutions are based on co-creation, which means the active involvement of consumers in the value creation processes [Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2004, pp. 5-14]. The success of these types of brands is dependent on the number of users, an increase in visibility, and the way that prosumers contribute to the creation of value offered by the brand. According to Ph. Kotler, what can lead to the popularization of such solutions is an increase in labor costs, the desire to enhance quality, the development of new technologies and the desire for self-development [Kotler 1986, pp. 510-513].

Research shows that prosumers are mainly young people (up to 35 years) who are interested in technical innovations (the group of innovators), and who spend most of their time "on-line", while not paying too much attention to guarding their personal data in the network. What can be observed among them are also some differences, depending on their age, in the way of thinking [Prosumer Report 2012]. Cisco estimates that the number of prosumers in the United States is approximately 4.5% of the general population, and their number is growing by about 9% per year [Gerhardt, 2008, p 2].

The issue at present is to what extent the prosumers may contribute to the creation of brands, the reasons for engagement and if their actions can contribute to the destruction of its image.

3. Brand image

Brand image is a set of associations that are arranged in a meaningful way in the customer's mind. These are associations connected with information about the brand and expectations for products, services, or companies that provide them.

There are many different ways of grouping these associations together. KL. Keller describes image according to the type of associations (what the brand is associated with), favorability of brand associations (positive or negative evaluation), strength (expressiveness of the associations) and uniqueness (qualities that are attributed to a particular brand and thus distinguishing it from the competition) [Keller 1993, pp. 1-22]. Brand image is primarily the result of marketing programs, whose goal is the creation of clear, positive and unique associations with the brand [Keller 2003, p. 70].

A brand's image is formed from both functional and emotional elements associated with a given brand [Palacio, Meneses, Perez 2002, pp. 486-505]. Functional features are related with products bearing one brand and are the basis for making a brand system [Kapferer 1997, p 50]. Emotional values influence consumers' judgments and are associated with distinct positive feelings and emotions connected with the brand.

Brand image is an important element in the brand's equity, forming the basis for gaining competitive advantage. Its role is emphasized in many models, depicting the rules of creating customer-based brand equity. D.A. Aaker lists associations as one of the parts that create brand equity [Aaker 1992, p 29], M. Delamotte explains the sources of brand strength [Delamotte 1997, s.79-85], while Intebbrand analyzes the external factors affecting brand value [www.Interbrand.com], K.L. Keller gives the dimensions of brand knowledge [Keller 1993, p.1-22], and J.N. Kapferer pays attention to the role of image and brand awareness in the perceived brand value creation [Kapferer 1995, p 31]. Thus, creating a positive image of the brand becomes the basis for the marketing strategies creation of many companies.

Brand image should not be confused with brand identity. Brand identity informs customers what exactly the brand is and can, therefore, be described as a set of information sent out by a company to provide stakeholders with details about the brand and what is available to consumers. Identity includes; ways of communication, visual identity or trademark. Therefore, the identity of the brand determines how the managers of the company would like their brands to be perceived by consumers. For consumers, brand identity is the basis for brand recognition and distinguishing it from competing brands. According to J.N. Kapferer, brand identity consists of six main components (prism of identity), i.e.:

- Physical features - characteristic for the brand, often associated with the characteristics of strategic products, such as Sony - Walkman;
- Personality of the buyer - ability to describe the brand as a person; the assignment of certain qualities of character, or appearance;
- Customer image - the opportunity to express their own self;
- Brand culture - the ability to assign specific kinds of behavior to the user, so that the brand becomes a symbol of belonging to a group;
- Reflection of the brand - an extension of interest beyond the target group;
- Relations, i.e. relations between people and entities. [Kapferer 1997, p 99].

Company managers should strive for a brand identity (the image that they want to create in the minds of consumers) which is synonymous with brand image (associations actually imprinted in the consumers). However, signals sent by the company are in fact distorted by external factors, which cause a discrepancy between the image and brand identity (Fig. 1)

SENDER		MEDIA		RECEIVER	
Brand identity					
Other sources: the ability of competitors to imitate, social expectations		Signals	The activities of the competitors, other interferences (experience, <i>word-of-mouth</i>)		Brand image

Figure 1. Brand identity and brand image [Kapferer 1997, p 95].

Signals sent by a company do not just consist of a promotional message, but include all activities related to its position in the market. So all elements of mix-marketing are taken into account and not just promotional activities.

The interfering factors here are then mainly the actions of competitors and their current offer or promotional activities that can change the mindset and perception of the brand by consumers. Another disturbing factor is consumers' previous experience in dealing with the brand as a result of previous contact with a product, company employees, or any other form of contact. Another element may be the perception of the company managing the brand - association with its mode of action, values, scope, etc. Other factors having influence may be country of origin, distribution channels, or a person, place or events.

The last factor influencing brand image, according to J.N. Kapferer, is the word-of-mouth element. This is information about brand distributed through informal communication channels among the community members. The process may involve many different people and institutions such as local communities, representatives of government and non-government organizations, NGOs as well as potential, actual and former consumers, etc. Nowadays, this factor is becoming especially important mainly because of ongoing developments in information exchange technologies. This is also due to changes in methods of communication both between companies and consumers and between users themselves. There is a rise in the importance of horizontal communication in which exchanges take place not only between a consumer and a company (one-to-one) but also on a "many-to-many" basis [Prahalad, Ramaswamy 2000, pp. 100-109].

Brand image is linked with associations stored in the minds of individuals, which may cause significant differences in the way a brand is perceived by different people. The reasons for such individualizations are the differences in individuals' perception as a result of previous personal experience with the

brand, imagination, personal values, beliefs, and aspirations [Dobini, Zinkhan 1990, pp. 110-119]. Social factors also have great impact on shaping the image of a brand [Coulter, Žaltman 1994, pp. 501-507], rendering the image subject to modification under influence from other participants in the community. Summing up, brand image is affected by a huge number of factors, not all of which a company is able to control.

4. Changes creating a brand

In the present era of globalization and information revolution consumers can much more easily, and at lower cost, locate detailed information on the current market, compare options and choose answers best suited to their needs. As a result, the bargaining power of buyers has increased. Customers are more educated and aware of their choices. Furthermore, with the availability of a large range of products, the distinguishing factors between brands may become hazy as, although clearly different from each other, those differences which distinguish the different brands available on the market may not be discernable. This poses the issue of how to proceed in order to create a clear border between a brand and its competitors. Many possible ways to answer this question can be found.

One suggestion is to emphasize the company's involvement in social welfare creation, which adds spiritual values to the values offered by the brand (in addition to the emotional and functional values) [Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan 2010, p 52].

Another way is to place the emphasis on creating strong, partnership relationships with consumers. Only such approaches seem effective in the face of a fluster of information which, as a whole, tends to suppress the effectiveness of promotional messages. A partnership here can be said to be an agreement under which two or more parties decide on collaboration to achieve a common goal without creating a hierarchical relationship. The techniques of creating relationships are related to the whole framework of marketing.

Brand owners are looking for ways to contact the client on multiple platforms. During this information revolution consumers are finding their information not only through official channels under control of specific companies, but also through many unofficial channels produced and managed by Internet users themselves. This fact has significant influence on the decisions concerning the creation of a brand image. Due to Web 2.0. solutions, all signs of a lack of integration in the functioning of the company and the ways of communication can be easily spotted by users. As a result of easy access to information, hostile messages are quickly distributed between network users and damaging the brand image. Therefore, especially now, in the era of the current information

revolution it is important to take exceptional care in maintaining the consistency in the company's marketing communication strategy. This requires not only control over the information sent by the company, but also the influence on the information transmitted by Internet users also or, in other words, the use of viral marketing techniques. To become powerful, a brand has to be "fair" and "faithful" to the vision and values in every aspect of its activity [Kotler, Kartajaya, Setiawan 2010, p 54].

An example of a different brand differentiation concept leans towards mass customization; the distinction of the brand by offering products tailored to individual needs on a massive scale without over-extending the product's price and delivery time. It is also a way to meet the expectations of consumers who, among a wide range of products available in the market, are beginning to seek products carefully personalized to their individual requirements.

Using the latter option is likely to require consumer commitment not only in the purchasing process, but also in the process of creating the product itself. It should also be noted that consumers are willing to take a more active role in the process of consumption. They appreciate the idea of brand co-creation, to express their creativity and build their personality, communicate with other participants in the community, and enjoy some unique and unforgettable experiences. All these factors lead to the development of prosumer behavior.

5. Prosumers in the creation of brand image

According to Ph. Kotler, prosumption attracts consumers who have a high desire to save. They are mainly interested in activities that do not require high skills, long time commitment or effort, but which are providing a high level of internal satisfaction [Kotler 1986, pp. 510-513]. One of the decisive conditions for the acceptance of such solutions is low price. In the case of Internet services referred to previously, the vast majority of consumers do not pay anything for joining the network or for their usage. The introduction of concrete fees may lead to prosumers turning away from a service and lead to a systematic destruction of such brands especially through negative commentary with other users via online channels.

Prosumer behavior can have a clear positive impact on brand image. Positive connotations are associated here between the values offered within the framework of prosumer behaviors. Belonging to this group may mean that being able to obtain a product which exactly matches the needs of a prosumer. This solution adds unique rational values, which form a positive image of a brand. In this case "remuneration" for work carried out by prosumers instead of by the manufacturer has a pleasurable result in that products exactly matching their individual needs would become available. Another reason is the social

recognition on the part of members of the community to which one belongs combined with a willingness to present themselves or to share their knowledge and insights with the community. People define themselves through the prism of connections with social groups or organizations. This often leads community members associated with the brand to engage in so called, collective behavior (e.g., ritual) creating a sense of mutual satisfaction. At the same time they influence the brand image [McAlexander, Schouten, Koenig 2002, pp. 38-54]. This way of thinking can be dominant in social networks in which all content (user profiles) is created by them, as well as portals enabling the exchange of information. Another example is the commitment to specific issues or cases (local patriotism, or even desire to defend your favorite brand). In this case, the reward for their hard "effort" can be the conviction of the rightness of their actions or to doing something good for the idea that they support. What induces this type of behavior may be a sense of identification with the brand, which is the way of perception, feeling, and assessing their affiliation with the brand. The benefits that the consumer may obtain as a result of such cooperation mean that prosumers do not expect to be paid for things they do.

The question arises whether such use of prosumption can negatively affect brand image. Prosumers could indeed in some way feel used by the manufacturer. This might lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and, consequently, to the destruction of the brand's image. In reality resolving this problem seems to be simple, because consumers have a choice and may only engage in those activities that provide them with the desired benefits. This has a positive effect on the level of their satisfaction. But another question arises about the perception of such actions in real life. Here the possibility of a negative reaction to such solutions is more likely to occur. Such actions may pose problem in, for example, a situation where in order to perform certain actions the ability to use technical equipment is required and more time is required in order that the purchaser be able to go through the process of ordering. In such a situation a consumer who is not a proficient user of modern equipment or who finds the time it takes to make a purchase is excessive, may not be satisfied with such solutions. As a consequence this could cause a change in their image of the brand. Such situations may also affect the elderly, who as mentioned earlier are not a part of the typical prosumer group. In that case, it is good to give consumers a choice – they can be served by personnel or choose the right offer on their own.

Offering a possibility of prosumption may create a positive brand image primarily through the creation of the uniqueness of the brand. Currently, when few companies offer the possibility of co-creation, offering such features can lead to the formation of beliefs about the uniqueness of the brand and its innovativeness. This feature may be particularly appreciated in the real world, where few companies can offer the possibility of the co-creation of an offer or mass customization.

In the case of prosumption, there is also the issue of the range of activities that you can entrust to prosumers; the designation of so-called brand limits, which results in the loss of control over the brand. This question may concern, for example, sharing some of their valuable resources with them (e.g. knowledge), which form the basis for the strength of a brand. The problem here may be the direction of the changes that the prosumer will make to the values determined by a given brand. They can create images entirely inconsistent with the manner intended by management. This issue, although it is topical with respect to each brand, in the case of prosumption becomes clearly visible, as consumers not only prejudge the image of the brand, but also influence the brand offer. Restrictions may lead to a reduction in consumer satisfaction, especially since the idea of prosumption is based on freedom and creativity of users [Zwick 2008, pp. 163-196]. In this case, therefore, more attention is paid to the need for coordination, not control. The strength of the relationship between the brand and the users is becoming stronger as the community is more effective in coordinating their efforts and provides the current and future consumers with more information before and after their purchases [Lakhani, von Hippel 2003, pp. 923-943].

A key point underlying the use of prosumption to create a brand image is to engage the consumer. Behavioral consumer engagement including the co-creation, social sharing, interactivity, collaboration and participation [Hoeffler, Keller 2002, pp. 78-89] can build a sense of relationship with the brand, and thus create its image. Prosumption allows you to create live experiences with the brand and reaching out to the consumer through a wide variety of communication channels, which facilitates the creation of strong brands [Joachimsthaler, Aaker 1997, pp. 39-50]. The consumer's belief about the purpose of commitment should therefore have a positive influence on the brand image.

6. Conclusions

This study has also been an attempt to explain the impact of prosumer behavior on brand image. The performed analysis of literature on the subject helped to clarify the concept of prosumer and identify certain areas of the benefits of using the phenomenon of prosumption. The general conclusion that can be drawn is the increasing influence of prosumer behavior on brand image. Prosumption can positively influence brand image, especially in virtual space, mainly due to the uniqueness feeling of creating. The analysis also shows, however, that the phenomenon of prosumption, due to the diversity of the forms in which it can occur, needs further studies. The areas that may be a prerequisite for further research are the limits of the brand; that is the extent to which the consumers may be entrusted to create brand values. Another problem might be

defining the extent of control over the activities of consumers and answering the question whether such control is necessary at all. Finding the answers to these questions may be an inspiration for further research.

References

1. Aaker D., *The Value of Brand Equity*, "Journal of Business Strategy", 13/4, 1992, pp. 27-33.
2. Coulter R.H., Zaltman, G., *Using The Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique to Understand Brand Images*. "Advances in Consumer Research", 21(1), 1994, pp. 501-507.
3. Delamotte M., *Les trois facettes d'une marque*, "L'Éxpansion Management Review", Mars 1997, pp. 79-85.
4. Dobni D., Zinkhan G.M., *In Search Of Brand Image: A Foundation Analysis*, "Advances in Consumer Research", 17, 1990, pp. 110-119.
5. Fuchs Ch., *Web 2.0, Prosumption and surveillance*, "Surveillance & Society", 8(3), 2011, pp. 288-309.
6. Gerhardt W., *Prosumers: A New Growth Opportunity*, Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), Marzec 2008.
7. <http://www.interbrand.com/en/best-global-brands/best-global-brands-methodology/Brand-Strength.aspx>
8. Hoeffler, S., Keller, K.L., *Building brand equity through corporate societal marketing*, "Journal of Public Policy & Marketing", 21, 1, 2002, pp. 78–89.
9. Joachimsthaler E., Aaker, D., *Building brands without mass media*, "Harvard Business Review", 75/ 1, 1997, pp. 39–50.
10. Kapferer J.N., *Les marques, capital de l'entreprise. Les chemins de la reconquête*, Les Éditions d'Organisation, Paris 1995.
11. Kapferer J.N., *Strategic Brand Management. Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long-Term*, Second Edition, Kogan Page, Londyn Dover 1997.
12. Keller K.L., *Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity*, Upper Saddle River, Prentice Hall, 2003.
13. Keller K.L., *Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity*, "Journal of Marketing", January 1993, pp. 1-22.,
14. Kotler Ph., Kartajaya H., Setiawan I., *Marketing 3.0 : Dobry produkt? Zadowolony klient? Spełniony człowiek!*, MT Biznes, Warszawa 2010.
15. Kotler Ph., *The prosumer movement : a new challenge for marketers*, "Advances in Consumer Research", 13, 1986, pp. 510-513.
16. Lakhani, K. R., von Hippel, E., *How open source software works: "free" user-to-user assistance*, "Research Policy", 32(6), 2003, pp. 923-943.

17. McAlexander J.H., Schouten J., Koenig H., *Building Brand Community*, "Journal of Marketing", 66, January 2002, pp. 38–54.
18. Palacio A. B., Meneses G., Perez P.J., *The Configuration of the University Image and Its Relationship with the Satisfaction of Students*, "Journal of Educational Administration", 40(5), 2002 pp. 486-505.
19. Prahalad C.K., Ramaswamy V., *Co-opting customer experience*, "Harvard Business Review", January-February 2000, pp. 100-109.
20. Prahalad, C.K. Ramaswamy V., *Co-Creation Experiences: The Next Practice in Value Creation.* "Journal of Interactive Marketing, Summer 2004, pp. 5-14.
21. Prosumer Report, Euro RSCG Worldwide, 13, 2012, http://www.prosumer-report.com/blog/category/this_digital_life/ [dostęp 5.05.2012]
22. Ritzer G. Production, Consumption, *Prosumption: The Nature of Capitalism in the Age of the Digital "Prosumer"*, 2010, pp. 1-31. <http://www.georgeritzer.com/docs/Production%20Consumption%20Prosumption.pdf> [dostęp 10.05.2012]
23. Toffler A., *Trzecia fala*, PIW, Warszawa 1997.
24. Zwick, D., Bonsu S. K., Darmody A. *Putting Consumers to Work: Co-creation and new marketing govern-mentality*, "Journal of Consumer Culture", 8, 2008, pp. 163-196.