Colour your virtual life!

Media branding processes in a social-media-world

Full Paper

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"Color your virtual life" – media branding processes in a social-media-world

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Introduction

This paper wants to show how media brands may be successfully marketed in an environment that is more and more influenced by Social Media by using the concept of product-oriented marketing. Though Rainer Funk identifies product-oriented marketing as the mainstream method of marketing in the 20th century and even today, it rarely is discussed as a strategy besides supply- or demand-oriented marketing strategies. The reason may be that it does not fit one of the traditional mainstream definitions, as it derives it's descriptive parts not from the economic theories, but rather from a psychoanalytical study of consumer and supplier behaviors. As such, it asks for demands by nature, however it also brings into question how these demands were put into existence, regarding supply mechanisms as the origin of certain demands.

Firstly, we have to give several definitions for terms related to product-oriented marketing theory. We will thus begin our argument by defining "product-oriented marketing", "lifeworld" as well as the later used theoretical concepts of "media logic" and "formats". After that, we will elaborate on how product-oriented marketing suffers from diminishing returns when it comes to many non-social-media-brands, and why Social Media brands do not suffer the same way. We follow that by showing how media brands in social-media-lifeworlds may share the resistance to diminishing returns because of the resembling formats between Social Media and traditional media brands. We will use several examples of brands traversing the gap between traditional and Social Media to work out exactly how the two types of formats resemble. The examples will also be helpful to feature two distinct token of media logic which we will use as paradigms for a generalized approach towards branding traditional and Social Media in one lifeworld. Our approach is merely theoretical at this point in time, thus examples are only used for demonstration purposes.

Definitions

Definition "product-oriented marketing": Rainer Funk defined the term "product-oriented marketing" in "Ich und Wir" (2005), and his later work "Wie die Produktion von Erlebniswelten zur seelischen Ausbeutung des Menschen führt" (2009, p. 3): Our translation: „The favored marketing strategy of the 20th century was a product-oriented one. This term does not mean that marketing was about the outstanding qualities of a product and it's practical value. Product-oriented marketing rather means, that the qualities attributed to the product can only be called attributes in a rudimental way. Advertisement makes this blatantly obvious. While once, it tried to idealize the product (the detergent cleaning sparkling white, then supra-white, then ultra-white), now (and even today) it understands the product as a package of properties which stand in no direct relation to the practical value of the product. The actual use of the product plays a subordinate role."

Definition „lifeworld": Once again, following Rainer Funk (2009, p.5):
Our translation: „Through the production of emotional realities, certain target groups should get the ability to feel alive again, full of emotions, active, creative, oriented, aroused, secure or full of passion. Once again, advertising shows how the progression went. Successful advertising today orchestrates worlds of experiences and lifestyles, it gives the impression that the products are parts of these lifeworlds. The ad brings forth a world of experience or a sweet dream, a world full of fascinating beauty or even dirty brutality, in which the desires, affects and needs of people are materialized, and,

at the same time, the yoghurt or beer or powerful car are at home. A world is created full of adventure and youth, and the consumers of a particular tobacco brand belong to that world. The designs of those created realities and markets conform to 'emotional designs' which are identified by tests and trend scouts."

Definition "media logic": We follow Stig Hjarvard ("The Mediatization of Society", in: Nordicom Review 29, 2008, which he builds on the traditional definition by Altheide and Snow, see Altheide/Snow, 1979/1991: "Media logic") in his approach to the term "media logic": "The logic of the media refers to the institutional and technological modus operandi of the media, including the ways in which media distribute material and symbolic resources and make use of formal and informal rules." Keep in mind that this definition is merely intensional, thus pointing out what media logic means without actually providing the examples, or the extensional meaning of "media logic". For our paper, it is crucial to derive certain extensions – at those points, we incorporate our own understanding of the term.

Definition "formats": The term is used by Altheide/Snow ("Media logic", 1979/1991, 11) in their definition of "media logic": "Formats consist, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus of emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication." In essence, "formats" describes the design-oriented part of media logic, the modi of presentation.

Lifeworlds and diminishing returns

The success of product-oriented marketing is heavily based on, though rarely scientifically connected to, the premise of immersion. On the other hand, the failure of said marketing method can also be explained by the absence of immersion. Why is that?
Regarding non- or low-immersive media-reception, media can be described by the metaphor of the window: They allow you to look into other places without you actually being able to get to those places. In terms of product-oriented marketing, this is a major deficit and becomes a problem in long-term marketing goals: It produces diminishing returns. If the consumer buys, say, a can of Coca-Cola hoping for it to catalyze her progression towards the young-people party lifeworld displayed in Coca-Cola marketing, she may be disappointed if unsuccessful, and Coca-Cola will lose it's association to that lifeworld, at least from the consumer's point of view. For product-oriented marketing to work long-term, those diminishing returns are the major stumbling block. They state that becoming part of these lifeworlds is not as easy as buying the accessory-products.
Long-term marketing needs to give additional pieces of information on how to reach these lifeworlds in order to compensate for diminishing returns. Methods include co-branding, sponsoring and idea marketing, to name just a few. Those methods point the consumer's direction towards something else she can observe through the media as windows, nevertheless, the principle structure of the observation setting stays the same. Thus, they do not extinguish diminishing returns, they just diminish their effects by directing the attention to another accessory, resulting in diminished diminishing returns. The window is the problem, as it is a border. It has to be removed in order to bring the consumer closer to the promised lifeworld.

Getting around the "media-as-windows"-problem

Of course that is not possible, as media are not removable as means of mass-communicated marketing. What is possible, however, is to redefine the function of media, as happens in Social Media. Social Media represent different means of interaction, which allow consumers to not only observe, but interact with the observed lifeworlds.
At best, the limiting character of the window becomes invisible, because the media themselves are presented as being part of the lifeworld. The means and uses of Social Media allow that to happen,

since their inherent media logic forbids the notion of a stable media-window through which things are observed: In Social Media, the consumer would never know on which side of the window she actually happens to be, rendering the whole metaphor of the window pointless.

Social Media do not just represent tools for observation, as other mass media do, they prototypically encourage the consumer to take action in shaping, or social-engineering, or social-tweaking, her own lifeworld. Here, the concept of immersion shows it's strengths. The more the medium becomes an engineering-tool, the more immersed the consumer is into the observed and re-engineered lifeworld. In consequence, the more the consumer tweaks her real world and the lifeworld to become similar, the less diminishing returns will interfere with product-oriented marketing of items which are accessories to the lifeworld.

Engineering away the accessories

As good as that sounds, for marketing, there is a major risk involved with the whole notion of the engineering consumer: What happens if the consumer decides to marginalize the marketed product or brand during the course of her tweaking the lifeworld? What if the consumer re-engineers the concept of Coca-Cola's young-people party lifeworld into her own version of it, a version which may be even more desirable for the consumer and in which Coca-Cola is not needed anymore? This problem is very real – just watch the recent crowdsourcing-activities of McDonald's Germany and Pril.

We do not have a solution for this issue. However, we are able to identify the core of the problem: As long as the product is merely an accessory to a lifeworld, it can be marginalized in the described way. This is highly unlikely to occur if the product we try to brand is a necessity to the lifeworld, to the community. Obviously there is one very distinct necessity for a lifeworld containing or structured around Social Media: The Social Media themselves. When it comes to Social Media, the thing you use to observe is the thing you observe.

At least, this is what happens in an ideal world. When it comes to the marketing and branding of Social Media, there are several crucial steps to be taken to actually make the consumer perceive those media in that way.

The most important step is to brand a social medium not as a tool, but rather as the fundamental logic (which, of course, means: media logic) on which the lifeworld is built. This means the social medium has to get a distinct brand identity, and you have to put resources into shaping that identity. (By the way, this approach is applicable no matter if a media corporation wants to establish a new social medium, wants to incorporate an existing one or simply wants to use an existing one from a third party supplier.) Usually that is not an adequate strategy for branding of non-media-brands, as it is not able to change the status of the product as an abolishable accessory, but rather undermines that effort.

But what is different about media companies that makes it advisable for them to put said effort into branding Social Media? The reason lies in the similar kinds of formats traditional and Social Media share. By "formats", we refer to the modi of presentation, as introduced at the beginning of this paper.

Examples of media logic

Here are some examples: One of the most important formatting rules of news is to put the most important news item to the most apprehended place. Successful Social Media like Facebook have similar mechanisms, though the selection process may differ: If a lot of my Facebook friends "like" the same news item, it will become a priority in my perception. On most boards, the most recent item will be at the top, which corresponds with the importance of actuality for the selection mechanisms or news factors of mainstream journalism.

Branding a "how" instead of a "what"

What do these parallels mean for product-oriented marketing? They show that, if you concentrate your branding efforts on the formats, you are actually branding a way of communication instead of a media product; you are branding a "how" instead of a "what". In essence, if traditional media companies try to establish their traditional media brands (a television station, a newspaper) as key accessories in social-media-based lifeworlds, they can actually brand their traditional media and the social medium at the same time, making those efforts very efficient.

There are two major steps to be taken to achieve success here:

1. As the formats (keep in mind, we always use this term in the way Altheide and Snow introduced it) of any social medium are not directly stipulated by you, the provider, but rather by your customers, establishing an overarching brand identity mostly involves re-branding of your traditional media, where you actually have the power to do so.

2. Provide a clear and distinct vision of the formats of your proposed lifeworld. Neither the lifeworld nor the key accessories should be regarded as disposable. Your aim is to produce a holistically experiencable lifeworld, so reclusiveness towards any "yet another" fragmentary experience is mandatory.

Broad rules for branding success

We want to spend the rest of this paper discussing how such branding processes should be conducted, introducing several broad rules for achieving success here.

Our first two rules are more or less directly taken from our aforementioned considerations:

1. The importance of product-oriented marketing will grow while Social Media become more important. Why is that? The current evolvement of Social Media makes them, in essence, more ubiquitous. They become sources of journalistic or crowdsourced information, they become places for play, they become tools for office work, they become third places where, as Habermas would say, "democracy breeds" and so on. This makes the lifeworld experience richer, adding more pieces to the puzzle. Or, to use the metaphor of the accessory again: Accessories whose brands are strongly attached to a social medium become viable in more and more situations, making them, though not necessities by now, at least commodities. So, the more Social Media manifest themselves in the lives of the consumers, the more accessories gain importance, making product-oriented marketing more important, too.

2. Adapt social-media logic.
As we already pointed out, it is tough to make a social medium adapt the formats of traditional media, because the users are the ones who define the formats of a social medium. Imagine you trying to enforce strict rules towards spelling and grammar in an online forum – your rate of success is highly debatable, and you will estrange a lot of your users. Instead, make the formats of your traditional media more like those of your Social Media.

We want to give two examples of media logic that are key to the branding of Social Media and could, or rather should, be first in line for adaptation for traditional media.

Overarching themes

Mediated communication is not meaningful by itself, it is meaningful if it belongs to a certain context which the consumer is interested in. Why context, not content, you may ask? The difference between context and content is: Content stipulates certain topics around which mediated communication revolves. Context, on the other hand, stipulates the way, or practice, of communication itself. It is, if you will, more about the perception of communication rather than the topic of communication.

If you choose to make content your overarching theme, you either get reclusive pretty fast, becoming special interest, or, in the case of a very broad content-oriented overarching theme, you get diluted. Neither way is desirable. If you choose to make context your overarching theme, you can avoid both.

What exactly does a context-oriented overarching theme look like? Consider claims of major media brands: "We love", claims the german TV-station Pro7, "Color your life" is the claim of german TV-station Sat.1.

Neither one of those overarching themes makes any notion of a specific form of content, but rather gives a very broad perspective on what all the pieces of communication in this medium or lifeworld have – or should have - in common. In a certain way, they represent codes of conduct for the means of communication in the specific medium or lifeworld. That is what we call context-oriented overarching themes. We have developed criteria for evaluating the quality of different overarching themes considering their reclusiveness and dilution, however, for time constraints, I am not able to present those arguments here; you may find them in the full paper. The paper also includes quality evaluation of overarching themes in Social Media like Facebook or Twitter.

What we did not discuss up to that point is the question why overarching themes are important at all. The short answer is: Overarching themes give the user a general orientation of what the lifeworld is all about, thus stating why the user should not just aim for specific accessories, but rather for a multitude of accessories, commodities, necessities that are key to the proposed lifeworld. The more elaborate answer can, once again, be found in the full paper.

In our theoretical work, we found a very helpful semblance for the function of overarching themes. Product-oriented marketing tries to establish some form of consumer-side dependence towards the lifeworld (and, hopefully, the accessory). The latin word "religare", from which our modern word "religion" can be derived, points an even better picture. So if you compare product-oriented marketing to the concept of religion, a brand would be similar to a certain religion and overarching themes would be similar to temples. In temples, a multitude of different religious perspectives or concepts may be in effect, yet they are considered to belong to the same religious practice. "Color your life" might have very different implications for different people, yet they suppose to share some general ideas about coloring one's life. Overarching themes help the temple's community to decide which modes of conduct are acceptable, towards which other temples one wants to be open or reclusive, which kinds of activities are considered helpful and so on. No matter who preaches about which topic on which day, what kind of music is performed and so on; as long as the temple, the overarching theme, is considered to be a place that brings positives to one's life, one will associate with that temple.

Personal testimonials

The second example of formats influential in Social Media and based on media logic are personal testimonials. Given, there is an overabundance of those, as personal testimonials range from the "Like"-button-statement to people who exemplify lifeworld-based identities. We are mostly interested in the latter, strong versions. As actual persons, personal testimonials play a strong role in the grounding of lifeworlds for a very simple reason: They exemplify ways of life in a particular lifeworld based on media logic. More often than not, they do not just set an example of living in the lifeworld for other people and consumers, but also serve as prototypes for the presentation of lifeworlds in traditional mass media. As a consequence, they help shape the lifeworlds themselves, or even, in special cases, constitute them.

We identify two types of strong personal testimonials. Type 1 are those who embody a certain lifeworld and come to most customers' minds if asked for the "face" of a traditional medium. In the field of traditional media Maybritt Illner of ZDF or Holger Schmitt of faz.net may be considered type 1. Going back to the religion-analogy, they resemble resident priests or clerics to their temples: they preach the overarching theme.

Representatives of type 2 are not associated with one distinct temple or overarching theme, but are rather independent, self-employed personal testimonials. They either very successfully used Social-

Media-Logic to enhance their popularity and the celebrity status they already built up in other traditional media or emerged as Social-Media-"Gurus" just in time. Most successful examples of type 2 personas combine both options: Sascha Lobo or Mario Sixtus may come to mind. They might be loosely associated with a couple of temples, but since their preaching is slighty, yet distinguishable different from the priests' ones, they are not considered priests. Through their preaching in temples, nonetheless, they enrich the temples' lifeworld while also maintaining foothold in lifeworlds outside the temple. We call type 2 the "itinerant preachers".

Now, what is the reason temples bring in type 2 regularly to preach to their faithfuls? In short, it is their authenticity. They are not easily rejected by the congregation, because their message is non-reclusive towards the temple, but, on the other hand, they bring in certain notions of the ambiguities that arise when the temple's lifeworld meets real life.

One example we like to illustrate is Jakob Augstein. Augstein manages his public persona in an itinerant-preacher-type way. His progression towards an itinerant preachership started in 2008 when he bought and since then publishes German Weekly Newspaper "Der Freitag". The turnaround of the paper towards a community-based concept is considered one of the most radical journalistic experiments in Germany. Articles written by readers in the online forum have chances to be published in the print version, if considered excellent by the community and editors alike. The authors are then paid remuneration. Readers are not "dumber" than journalists, which could be a "harsh mortification of journalistic narcissism" for some of his colleagues; Augstein was quoted on Spiegel Online.
We consider Augstein as one of the first converts to itinerant preachership based in traditional and Social Media logics alike. He is authentic, credible and visible. No matter where he appears to the public his speeches attract readers and non-readers of "Der Freitag" and the linked community. He moves between media almost weightlessly, creating a holistic lifeworld in which the product – a community – is a necessity for participation.

Because of their high level and quality of authenticity, we consider type 2 to be more successful in establishing even the temples' lifeworlds than type 1. Type 1 may be more streamlined, however they are "preaching to the choir", they do not reach people outside the temple, which counts faithfuls conducting their outside-of-the-temple-life as well.
If you follow the notion of type 2's advantages over type 1, you may derive a third broad rule for the success of product-oriented marketing:

3. Media brands want all their clerics to become itinerant preachers.
The best lifeworlds are holistic in their experience, however, that does not mean they should be perfect in every way. Perfect lifeworlds are too fake to be true.
Therefore, the preaching of the temple's priests may become shallow after a while. In consequence, even the best clerics should try to become itinerant preachers. Though this, by default, exempts mutual exclusiveness, the temples will benefit from that in the future.

Final thoughts

Though we used Rainer Funk's definition of product-oriented marketing, which in turn is based on the works of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, we did not turn our attention to the core reasons for their examination of product-oriented marketing, which, quite frankly, is a harsh critique of said marketing method from a psychoanalytical point of view. Our distant aim is to analyze those media-logic-based lifeworlds by adopting their point of view, as well as comparing it to our own in-the-works-analysis that is based on a modern take of classical critical theory (Adorno). While we do not think that these steps

are in any way necessary to gain success with product-oriented marketing, we do not want to ignore the critique both from psychological and cultural theories towards our field of research.

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