
Commentary: Standing out in a neon crowd; Exploring how to establish brand personalities on Twitter that help cultivate relationships with ‘fans’ and brand advocates

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Abstract

This short article examines the concept of brand personality based on an analysis of the use of Twitter by 10 hotel-casinos in Las Vegas. The authors’ research has shown that Las Vegas casinos use Twitter to refine and share a brand personality, enabling them to differentiate similar products in a highly competitive market. While Twitter has previously been valued in public relations for its ability to enable dialogue, the findings here suggest that creating a brand personality through social media messaging may also help a brand engage ‘fans’, connect with customers and convert Twitter users into brand advocates.

Introduction

Today’s Las Vegas offers visitors an imposing array of hotel options. Increasingly, tourists turn to the Internet, including social media, for input that affects their purchase decisions (Fesenmaier & Cook, 2009). Marketing and public relations professionals charged with promoting Las Vegas’s casino-hotels to potential customers face an uphill battle for two primary, interrelated reasons: an oversupply of hotel rooms and a declining demand to fill them, as ripples of the 2007-08 economic recession still keep consumer confidence in check. Although the city has seen some improvement in parallel with the recovery of the overall national and international economies (Kennelly, 2013), Las Vegas’s hotel-casinos must still set themselves apart from their competition in order to earn the all-important tourist dollar.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter have been valuable tools in these hotels’ efforts to distinguish themselves and connect with potential customers (Schwartz, 2010). This

research looks specifically at the way that 10 casino-hotel properties owned by MGM Resorts differentiate themselves by using elements of a unique brand personality in each hotel’s Twitter feed. It suggests that brand personality can be a useful tool in connecting with customers by creating brand advocates or ‘fans’ who will not only become future customers themselves, but also might serve to promote the hotel brand to others using Twitter’s social networking component.

Las Vegas: Background and context

Facebook and Twitter have proven to be effective vehicles through which casinos can directly communicate with current and potential customers (Schwartz, 2010). Visitors to Las Vegas are largely college-educated, between 30 and 60 years old, and have access to a household income above \$60,000. In 2013, 67% of Las Vegas visitors reported that they were employed (retirees make up another 20%) (GLS Research, 2014). The audience casinos can reach on Twitter is a potentially lucrative one. With 20% of people earning over \$75,000 using Twitter, this medium seems well suited to reach potential Las Vegas visitors; similarly, Twitter has a 35% use rate among 18-29 year olds, allowing casinos to tap into a future growth market that it must connect with to ensure continued success (Pew Internet Trust, 2014).

This research specifically looks at the 11 properties owned by MGM Resorts, Inc., one of three corporations whose casinos make up Las Vegas’s Strip (Binkley, 2008). These properties, which vary widely from the elegant Bellagio to the medieval castle-themed Excalibur to the iconic pyramid-shaped Luxor,

appeal to a wide range of audiences, increasing the company's ability to appeal to a wider share of the market. At the time of data collection, all

11 of these properties had (unverified) Twitter accounts. A list of the Twitter IDs for each of these properties can be found in **Table 1**.

Table 1 Twitter IDs and account creation dates for MGM Resorts properties (*) New York-New York Hotel & Casino's Twitter feed was not created until midway through the data collection period; hence, it is not included in this analysis.

Name of property	Twitter ID	Account creation date
New York-New York*	NYNYVegas	February 25, 2011
Vdara	VdaraLV	January 5, 2011
Bellagio	BellagioLV	August 2, 2010
Mandalay Bay	mandalaybay_LV	September 14, 2009
Excalibur	ExcaliburVegas	May 11, 2009
Monte Carlo	MonteCarloVegas	July 14, 2008
Aria	AriaLV	July 12, 2008
Circus Circus	CircusVegas	July 12, 2008
Mirage	TheMirageLV	July 12, 2008
MGM Grand	MGMGrand	May 6, 2008
Luxor	LuxorLV	May 2, 2008

Brand personality and Twitter

Brand personality draws its framework from the notion of human personality and was formally defined by Aaker (1997) as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (p. 347). Brand personalities can be enduring and have a significant effect on the individual's affinity for the brand, especially if the characteristics embodied by the brand personality are ones that the individual wishes to associate with him or herself (Aaker, 1997). Brand personalities may be useful as a method of product differentiation, but in order to do this successfully, they must be consistent, clearly distinguish the brand from other similar products in the marketplace, and promote qualities that are desirable to the individual (Sigauw, Mattila, & Austin, 1999).

Although research has not yet broached the topic of communicating brand personality through Twitter, prior studies have shown that brand personality elements can be transmitted through websites (Opoku, Abratt, & Pitt, 2006). De Moya and Jain (2013) have shown how use of Facebook for tourism promotion in Brazil and Mexico has evidenced the recognition of

brand personality by these countries' Facebook 'friends'. It seems logical to assume that Twitter would be capable of transmitting elements of brand personality as well. Similarly, the creation of a coherent personality may facilitate a brand's conversations with its fans and followers, facilitating the dialogue that Twitter can be valuable in enabling.

Originally designed as a medium for interpersonal communication, Twitter has developed into a far more complex social network which truly exemplifies the term 'social media', combining an elaborate network of Twitter users with the ability to broadcast short, simple messages that can be limited to one set of followers, or shared by users to ultimately penetrate many different online social networks (van Dijck, 2011). New York Times columnist Jay Rosen once favourably compared Twitter to the radio for its ability to broadcast short, pithy messages to a wide audience (Crawford, 2009).

From a public relations perspective, Twitter has proven to be a valuable way for organisations to communicate directly with members of certain publics. As of December 2013, approximately 20% of online adults in

the United States were active on Twitter (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Early demographics of Twitter users showed them to be older on the average than Facebook users (Farhi, 2009), although Twitter's numbers have started to shift toward a younger user demographic (Pew Internet Trust, 2014). These demographics made active users highly attractive to companies, which originally sought to use Twitter for somewhat mundane tasks such as providing product information and soliciting simple feedback.

Twitter has been used effectively by business and organisations to push important information to stakeholders, respond quickly in crisis scenarios, and address and resolve customer service issues, among other uses (Stewart, 2008). Twitter's ability to connect directly with key publics unlocks several potential benefits for the company, including improved reputation, an efficient means for customer service, and the ability to gather research about perceptions of brands and products (Crawford, 2009; Gilpin, 2010). The content of Twitter has also been found to shape media coverage and journalists frequently look to the microblogging platform for quotes, sources, and background information on developing stories (Parmelee, 2014). Twitter also allows an organisation to communicate directly with publics in real-time (Kuch, Briones, Liu & Jin, 2010), providing the immediacy that has become so valuable in the Internet age.

Online communication tools are particularly well suited to building dialogic relationships

between organisations and publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Despite the dialogic potential of Twitter, many organisations primarily use the tool as a one-way communication channel and offer little interaction with followers (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). In fact, several recent studies in strategic social media use have shown that social networking tools are rarely employed to their full dialogic potential (e.g. Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Park & Reber, 2008; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

While facilitating two-way communication is certainly a valuable aspect of social media tools, this research suggests that Twitter could also be an effective way to build and refine a distinctive online presence by transmitting a consistent brand personality over time. In addition, this brand personality could be useful in facilitating continued dialogue with followers by maintaining a consistent personality that fans can engage with in a predictable manner.

Brand personalities in practice: MGM's hotel-casinos

Researchers developed brand personalities based on a textual analysis of all tweets issued by the official Twitter accounts of hotel-casinos owned by MGM Resorts during a one-month period. The data were analysed using the three-step inductive coding method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Based on the results of the inductive coding process, the following brand personalities were identified (**Table 2**).

Table 2 'Personalities' of MGM property Twitter feeds

Property	Twitter ID	Personality
Aria	AriaLV	Not your typical Vegas visitor (characterised by difference from the tourist stereotype)
Bellagio	BellagioLV	Attentive concierge
Circus Circus	CircusVegas	Family-oriented tour guide
Excalibur	ExcaliburVegas	Budget-savvy good-timer
Luxor	LuxorLV	Party guy/girl
Mandalay Bay	mandalaybay_lv	Shopping guru/fashionista
MGM Grand	mgmgrand	Obsequious customer service representative
Monte Carlo	MonteCarloVegas	Cool friend who knows the city
Mirage	TheMirageLV	Cheerleader/gossip
Vdara	VdaraLV	Different, socially conscious and cool friend

The unique voice or ‘personality’ projected by the different hotel/casinos in the MGM Resorts stable of properties is particularly obvious at the economic extremes of the properties in this study. The upscale Bellagio and Aria, which often use complete sentences and more formal language, differ greatly from the more value-oriented Excalibur and Luxor, which use common text-messaging abbreviations and more informal and slang language. The voice is so consistent throughout the month’s tweets that it would be unusual and likely startle a follower to see Bellagio issue a tweet like the following representative tweet from the Excalibur account: “Last Minute Deal! Featuring Rooms from \$28 in Feb. Book ur last minute getaway today. Sale ends Monday: <http://bit.ly/3DAY0201>” (Excalibur, February 4, 2011).

As Marwick and boyd (2010) suggest, the act of communication necessarily considers that there will be an intended audience for each message. It is in the context of this intended audience that the differentiated ‘personalities’ of MGM Resorts’ properties proves most interesting. The characteristics of each property’s Twitter feed can be translated into qualities of those messages’ intended audience: The value orientation of Excalibur and Luxor suggest that the intended audience for these message are budget-conscious, while the high-end art and dining messages sent by Bellagio and Aria suggest that this intended audience is more concerned with culture, atmosphere and experience than value.

Tone and formality of language also help define a property’s intended Twitter audience. Tweets that are written in informal and abbreviated language likely imagine a younger audience more accustomed to text messaging and similarly abbreviated writing styles. Consistency of tone and writing style, as is seen especially in extreme examples such as Circus Circus/Excalibur compared with Bellagio/Aria, helps reinforce the ‘personality’ evoked by the messages to the point where tweets would seem out of character if they deviated from the usual style and tone.

Although the MGM Resorts’ properties all exist in a small geographic area and offer many

of the same features and services, through the strategic use of social marketing these properties are able to create unique personalities that contribute to their existing brands. By differentiating its properties’ Twitter feeds by variations in tone, voice and content, MGM Resorts is able to more efficiently market its properties to a wide variety of audiences. This use of brand personality for product differentiation, as suggested by Sigauw et al. (1999), is especially useful in the crowded market of Las Vegas hotel-casinos.

In addition, MGM is able to encourage the formation of brand loyalties with particular properties by establishing personalities with which the Twitter user/MGM Resorts customer can identify. The range of MGM properties offers a fit for every potential customer. This can help encourage repeat visits to certain properties by customers who feel connected with those properties via interaction on Twitter and may even help first-time Las Vegas visitors determine which property is best suited for them based on that property’s Twitter personality.

Furthermore, the diversity of personalities among the different properties provide options for customers at every point in their lives, from younger people to families with young children to entertain and from those looking to engage in Las Vegas’s notoriously raucous ‘party’ lifestyle to those with more refined interests. By creating and promoting separate personalities for its properties, MGM Resorts can attract and retain customers throughout different points in their life cycles. This is especially important considering that repeat visitors to Las Vegas made up 85% of the city’s visitors in 2013 (GLS Research, 2014).

The social nature of Twitter amplifies the advantages of establishing a clear brand personality. Twitter’s unique ability to enable users’ self-expression, while also communicating informative messages to other users (van Dijck, 2011), makes it a perfect way for brands to establish a personality that allows fans to identify with the brand; the brand is then able to engage with these fans, who are then able to become advocates within their

online community. Once engaged, fans can share messages and spread the brand's personality among their followers. In this way, the ability of Twitter to connect with brand users is amplified across fans' social networks, allowing these hotel-casinos to improve the reach of their messages as well as engage a greater number of potential customers in dialogue.

Conclusion

The use of Twitter by companies and brands has proven to be a significant advancement in the ongoing challenge of communicating directly with customers rather than relying on intervening publics such as the media. By establishing Twitter personalities for each property, MGM Resorts is able to not only differentiate its products in a saturated market, but also establish a brand identity for each property that can engage fans and be transmitted to followers in those fans' networks.

Further, this research shows that Twitter is not merely a medium through which brands can engage their publics in dialogue or two-way communication, although that aspect of the social media tool is certainly valuable. As van Dijck (2011) notes, Twitter is also useful for self-expression and identity building, allowing a brand to create and transmit a personality to users in a form of one-to-many communication. Because of Twitter's capacity for users to retweet messages within their network, this personality can be transmitted and amplified by fans and followers.

Future research is needed to determine the way in which the brand 'personalities' identified from this qualitative research resonate with fans. The research presented here shows that it is possible to establish different identities or personalities for brands or companies on Twitter through the use of tone and content. If these personalities can enable fans to become active advocates for the brand, Twitter could prove to be an extremely valuable tool used by public relations practitioners.

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