

How Youtube Storytelling Can Win Consumers' Hearts: The Case of Nivea

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Abstract

The study explores the role of storytelling in generating positive consumer responses to video ads, compared to fact-based ads. The findings support the relevance of storytelling in enhancing consumer-brand relationship and show how a co-creation process in the evolution of a brand's storytelling content contributes to large and positive consumer responses.

Literature

It is long established that brands and consumers build relationships, which are the cornerstone of enduring bonds of emotional nature (Fournier, 1998). Recent scholarship identifies storytelling strategy as one of the most promising avenues for successful consumer-brand relationships (CBR) (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015), particularly in social media environments (Gensler et al., 2013), allowing brands to differentiate and grab consumers' attention (and heart!) in saturated markets (Woodside, 2010).

A storytelling strategy creates stories or imposes a story-like structure on events. It is characterized by a narrative structure that consists of chronology and causality (Escalas, 1998) and can be used to communicate values activating deep-felt emotional responses from a vast amount of consumers (Fog, 2010).

The categorization between informative and persuasive/emotional advertising (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999), highlighting the role of emotional communication in stimulating deeper and stronger consumer responses compared to informative content (Chan, 1996), is not new in the advertising literature. Nevertheless, little is known about the differential impact that storytelling communication can have on consumer responses, compared to factual advertising (Woodside, 2008).

The focus of this study is the further investigation of the relevance of storytelling in enhancing and reinforcing long-lasting co-creative CBR. The objectives of this paper are twofold: 1) evidence and understand the differential effect of storytelling videos in generating positive consumer responses to video ads, compared to fact-based ads 2) examine how brands can learn from and build on consumer responses to co-create a long-term storytelling strategy.

Methodology

This study is a first step of a wider research project that includes other brands and data collected from the Italian market, in order to examine how cultural differences may affect the way consumers perceive and react to storytelling video ads.

The first panel of data was collected from 2013 to 2015 on the NIVEA brand, investigating videos posted from the German NIVEA Youtube channel, a video-sharing website suited to narrative analysis (Pace, 2008).

Because of the in-depth nature of the research goal, an exploratory approach was deemed suitable and netnography is used as a framework for the collection and analysis of online content (Kozinets, 2002; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

38 video campaigns aimed at the German market were selected. Data included video engagement statistics, including the amount of views, likes, unlikes and comments, but most importantly, the viewers' comments (Gummerus et al., 2012). A sample of comments was

extracted randomly for each video by NVivo software and examined using content analysis prescribed for rich netnographic data (Kozinets, 2010).

Out of the 38 spots, 84% were non-storytelling. They are distinguished from storytelling spots in a number of ways: they usually focus on the launch of a new or modified product; stress the functional benefits; and usually only use one character, a woman in her 30ies, whereas storytelling ads portray a family. Lastly, storytelling ads last longer (on average 3'02'' compared to 0'30'') to support the narrative structure.

Findings

During the period 2013-2015, NIVEA released 6 storytelling spots. They are analysed closely, focusing on their evolution and how consumer responses were used and progressively integrated.

Firstly, storytelling spots usually perform better in terms of behavioural consumer engagement (likes, views, comments), highlighting the higher efficiency of the emotionally laden storytelling strategy compared to product-focused communication.

The analysis of consumer's comments shows several elements contributing to consumers' appreciation of a spot. Consumers respond positively to the continuity of the characters across the different spots; there is also an obvious process of identification with the characters, allowing self-construction (Schrembi et al., 2010) and expectation of representativeness of all the characters from the family unit. A core element is also the strong representation of NIVEA's core values, which are trust, security and closeness (Beiersdorf AG, 2015). Conveying these values through plots featuring relational bonds between family members generates strong positive reactions, which can be attributed to a process of value congruity (Hirschman, 2010) and brand identification.

A last element, particularly valued by consumers, is the conscious and obvious effort of NIVEA to take their comments and preferences on board, as their video strategy evolves. NIVEA continuously improved its video storytelling approach by learning from consumers' reactions, using both the valence and number of responses to adapt their content. For instance, the storytelling spot "Thank You Daddy" gained much attention and positive feedback, having received the customer's requests for a father character expressed in the comments to the spot "Thank You Mom". The effort to take into consideration the consumer's comments resulted in a better engagement behaviour performance: more than 2 million people saw the "daddy" spot and 400 commented highlighting the emotional tone of the spot and the characters.

Conclusions

There are several theoretical implications to these findings, which support the strength of a storytelling video spot strategy and the importance of consumer co-creation in this process. Firstly, the study supports the role that storytelling has to play in long-term CBR (Woodside, 2010) as the emotional aspects bear clear potential for heavier behavioural and emotionally-laden responses, compared to non-storytelling ads.

Secondly, a brand responding to the comments in the evolution of their storytelling content can make consumers feel valued and strengthen their self-enhancement (Brodie et al., 2013). The co-creation process analysed highlights the enhancement of emotional responses that can reinforce CBR in interactive, reciprocal and co-creative situations (Gensler et al., 2013). Even if the data collected in this study do not allow to examine long-term effect on CBR, tracking specific relationship between commentators and brand, the NIVEA example shows clearly that actively involving the consumer and its opinion is a winning strategy for

companies, which are recommended to shift from storytelling to storydoing (Gensler et al., 2013).

At this stage the study is limited in its exploratory nature. Further analysis should include more brands from different market sectors. Also, it might be interesting to compare reactions on ads that voluntarily apply storytelling strategies, as NIVEA, and those that do not. A more systematic approach should also be used to quantitatively clarify the causes of consumer's responses, in terms of spot features, for instance.

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