

Study shows brands dedicated to positive social change use social media to primarily promote products

April 25 2017, by Mike Krings

Social media has greatly changed how all sorts of companies can interact with their audiences and customers. A new study suggests that even brands dedicated to positive social change tend to use social media as a way to promote the brand more so than activism or social causes.

A University of Kansas professor co-authored a study analyzing the Facebook usage of a for-profit [company](#) most known for its support of social causes and a traditional for-profit company. They found that both used their pages primarily for product and brand promotion, but that the company dedicated to social entrepreneurship did use its page more to develop new connections than the traditional company, which focused more on capitalizing on existing ones.

Hyunjin Seo, associate professor of journalism at KU, co-authored the study with Ren-Whei Harn, a doctoral student at KU, and Salman Husain of Syria Relief and Development. They analyzed Facebook usage of TOMS, a company known for donating a pair of shoes or eyewear to people in need for every pair sold, and Sperry-Topsider, a traditional for-profit company that sells similar products to the same target demographic, Millennials, for one year. The study was published in the Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications, and Seo presented it at the International Conference on Communication and Mass Media.

The study looked at use of [social capital](#), or networks of people who

work together often for the cause of social betterment. The goal was to see if two types of social capital—bridging and bonding—were different among a social entrepreneurship and traditional for-profit company.

"What we found on both TOMS and Sperry-Topsider Facebook communities was that a lot of their posts were dedicated to product and brand promotion," Seo said. "However, there were greater amounts of social capital, in particular bridging, on the TOMS Facebook page."

Seo, whose research specializes in studying the connections between [social media](#) and social change, said she expected to find more posts dedicated to discussion of social causes and issues on the TOMS page. While that page did have a higher percentage of its posts, 17.4 percent, dedicated to social issues than Sperry-Topsider, 4.4 percent, it was still far from a majority of posts. TOMS dedicated 54 percent of its posts to product promotion to Sperry's 74.7 percent, respectively. Both communities also dedicated more posts to event promotion, 22.1 and 19.8 percent respectively, than they did to social issues.

TOMS' Facebook showed more bridging social capital in its community. Commenters had discussions and got to know each other through their discussions on the page. Much of that activity took place around discussions of a movement encouraging people to go without shoes for a day. The campaign was intended to raise awareness of people around the world who cannot afford shoes and the difficulties that causes. Many users took photos of themselves without shoes, posted them to the page and conversed with each other about the movement, not simply commenting on official company posts. Both communities had posts about [social issues](#) like the Ice Bucket Challenge, a fundraising and awareness movement for ALS that went viral in 2014.

The study also examined audience reactions to posts on each community, finding that TOMS posts generated more likes, comments and shares on

average, but not by a statistically significant amount, based on analysis of variance testing.

The study adds to the understanding of social media and how different organizations can use it engage with their audiences for commercial and other purposes.

"I feel that a lot of companies are following what you could call a 'social media playbook,'" Seo said. "They realize they shouldn't only talk about product information. We think the findings contribute to understanding information exchanges and forging new social connections. When we study social change, we tend to focus almost exclusively on nonprofits. But, of course, for-profits can be important parts of social change as well."

The study chose TOMS for social media analysis based on its stated mission of social entrepreneurship and Sperry Topsider as a traditional for-profit that sells similar products to the same demographic, not as an endorsement of either. The findings also help increase understanding of how social media-facilitated public relations can address social problems at the local, national and international level at a time when more resources are available to do that than ever before, said Seo, who also teaches social media marketing classes.

"Through this study I was interested in how for-profit companies are managing their Facebook pages," Seo said. "Understanding social media use by different types of organizations can help develop a more complete picture of how social media can play a part in positive [social change](#)."

More information: Facebook Brand Communities and Social Capital: www.researchgate.net/publications/228111111 and [Social Capital](#)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Study shows brands dedicated to positive social change use social media to primarily promote products (2017, April 25) retrieved 12 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-04-brands-dedicated-positive-social-media.html>

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