

Research: Brand communities

One of the objectives of a brand community is to raise brand commitment among the members of that community. Harley-Davidson, for example, has a very lively brand community: HOG; Harley Owners Group. A range of different activities are organised by and for this community, such as Harley days, where Harley riders can meet for a day out. This bolsters the sense of belonging to a group, as well as brand loyalty. This kind of community is marked by the fact that there is social interaction between its members. Researchers at the universities of Texas and Oklahoma subsequently asked the question whether such a 'community feeling' can also be created without there being direct interaction between members – and if so – whether that will contribute to loyalty towards the brand.

This study was conducted by a US theme park by way of a web-based questionnaire. Respondents were split up into two groups. The first group of respondents participated in social interaction relating to the brand, such as an online discussion group. The researchers refer to this as a '*social* brand community'. The second group was one of respondents that were not members of a brand community, but did actively communicate with each other about the brand. The researchers refer to this as a '*psychological* brand community'. The study shows that both members of the social and the psychological brand community display the same brand-related behaviour. Both groups identify with both the brand and the group. This increases the psychological significance of the brand and brand loyalty in both groups.

The key outcome of this study is the discovery that psychological brand communities are easier to create and maintain than traditional social brand communities. But there is a subtle difference: psychological brand communities are better suited to attract new customers, while social brand communities are more apt for customer retention.

Reference(s)

Carlson, B.D., Suter, T.A., Brown, T.J. (2008), Social versus psychological brand community: the role of psychological sense of brand community. Journal of Business Research, vol.61, p. 284-291. *

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