"Convergent storytelling as promotion: a model for brand engagement and equity"

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Abstract

The introduction of products of fiction (e.g., books, movies, and television) is used to show how the communication tool of convergent storytelling can be instrumental in encouraging the diffusion and subsequent engagement with a brand. This multi-media approach to promotion is designed to simultaneously engage multiple audiences, many of whom may avoid or delay purchase. This paper presents a model of how very different groups are reached by the different media employed and how this synergy of multiple media and multiple communication contacts (convergent storytelling) can not only reach these audiences, but provide them with an immersive brand experience and by doing so, create a higher level of engagement.

Keywords: brand engagement, convergent storytelling, transmedia storytelling, diffusion, promotion.

Introduction

Marketers are increasingly looking to brand engagement as a tool to build the value of their brand. Of course, brands are more than just goods on a store shelf. Today, celebrities and athletes understand that they are a "personal brand," one with personal and emotional connections to their fans. Their brand value can then be "loaned" to the merchandise they endorse. Intellectual properties like books and movies are also brands to be promoted and protected in order to increase their value and longevity. Getting these branded properties to be known by large numbers of people takes a concerted effort of promotion through media both available to, and used by, the people assumed to be potentially interested (our target market). This paper proposes that marketers recognize the value of multiple streams of connecting with different kinds of audiences in what is called transmedia or convergent storytelling. This technique is used to make the necessary frequent, and emotional, connections – connections that often vary slightly in content – needed to achieve engagement with the brand. This approach is especially well-suited to deal-ing with works of fiction because of the natural storytelling inherent with the product. Therefore, works of fiction will be used as examples in this paper, but other forms of brands can also benefit from the emotional connections that storytelling offers.

1. The product life cycle and diffusion

The process by which the brand becomes liked, purchased, and repurchased by more and more people is known as a product life cycle. Product classes, and sometimes brand names, go through the stages of Introduction, growth, maturity, and finally, decline as competitive substitutes enter the marketplace. Different groups of people, however, will be willing to try these new product classes and brands at different stages of the PLC and these group characteristics are explained by Rogers' diffusion of innovations (Rich, 2010). Their characteristics are labeled innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and finally, the laggards who generally resist trying new products and brands. Figure 1 shows how the two concepts can be plotted simultaneously to show both the growth of the product and who is driving that growth.
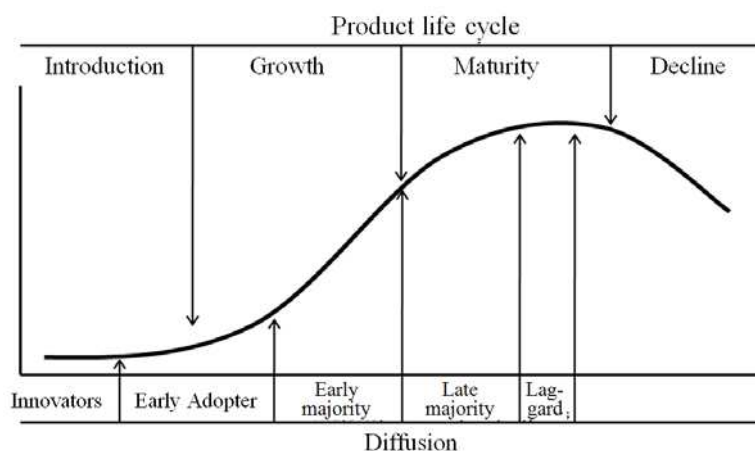

Fig. 1. Product growth and its' drivers

Traditional promotion strategies tell us that these groups will be interested in different media, so media and media vehicle selection is important. However, even those in say, the innovators group – and perhaps especially the innovators group – are looking to be impacted differently for each media contact made. These individual, and different, contacts offer the opportunity to engage in a different, and more impactful, way of connecting emotionally (i.e. engagement) with the brand. This is the basis of convergent storytelling.

2. Convergent storytelling

Convergent Storytelling – also known as transmedia storytelling (Hansen, 2009) – says "every story, image, brand, relationship plays itself out across the maximum number of media platforms, shaped top down by decisions made in corporate boardrooms and bottom up by decisions made in teenager's bedrooms. The concentrated ownership of media conglomerates increases the desirability of properties that can exploit "synergies" between different parts of the medium system and "maximize touch-points" with different niches of consumers. The result has been the push towards franchise-building in general and transmedia entertainment in particular" (Jenkins, 2009).

Here Jenkins has proposed maximizing "touch-points" for not only different niches (targets) but also recognizing that synergies will develop because of the multiple contacts, or frequency, of the promotions. So far, that's not very different from standard promotional strategy. But Jenkins goes on to explain the real value of this transmedia storytelling.

"A transmedia story represents the integration of entertainment experiences across a range of different media platforms. A story like [TV shows] "Heroes" or "Lost" might spread from television into comics, the web, computer or alternate reality games, toys and other commodities, and so forth, picking up new consumers as it goes and allowing the most dedicated fans to drill deeper. The fans, in turn, may translate their interests in the franchise into concordances and wikipedia entries, fan fiction, vids, fan films, cosplay [costume play], game mods [modifications], and a range of other participatory practices that further extend the story world in new directions. Both the commercial and grassroots expansion of narrative universes contribute to a new mode of storytelling, one which is based on an encyclopedic expanse of information which gets put together differently by each individual consumer as well as processed collectively by social networks and online knowledge communities" (Jenkins, 2009).

Therefore, convergent storytelling provides marketers the opportunity to make more connections, and a higher level of "engagement," that is often elusive through the standard tools of marketing and media strategy. The value of this engagement will be discussed in the next section.

Figure 2 shows that there is no a single entry point into the PLC – product life cycle/diffusion curve. Convergent storytelling provides us with many entry points, each with its own set of media/contact connections and each of these sets with different interested people. People do not interact with only a single entry point, but flow across from one medium to another. The result is a "new kind of narrative where story flows across each platform forming a rich narrative tapestry" (Gomez, 2010) for an array of products.
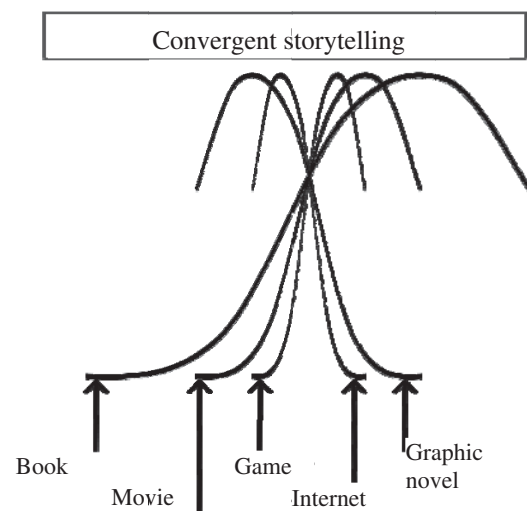

Fig. 2. Multiple entryways to the PLC

It is proposed in Figure 2 that the groups of people from these many media points will combine at some point on the PLC. The curve's inflection point suggests that the unified entry point will be where both the PLC's maturity stage and the diffusion's late majority stage begin (Figure 1). However, the need for an emotional connection to develop both brand engagement and brand passion leads to the hypothesis that only the innovators and early adopters may be on separate media entry points and in contact with the convergent storytelling stage. Model testing will be needed to establish whether there is a unified entry point and if so, the PLC location.

The diffusion process has shown that people who are the first to try new brands have characteristics different from people who enter later, but different groups are more in contact with some media and less with others. Therefore, people do not necessarily enter the convergent storytelling media modes simultaneously and different groups will prefer different media for their first contact. Some are likely to first encounter a brand property as a book, then perhaps a movie and game simultaneously, and lat-

er as a graphic novel. Others may see a movie first, and then be interested in developing the story further by gaming and novels.

Several brand properties are already engaging in convergent storytelling. The television series "Castle" has its fictional lead character, Richard Castle, portrayed as a mystery writer while also releasing actual mystery books with this fictional character as the author. The television show is produced by ABC Studios and broadcast on the ABC network, while the books are published by Hyperion. All three companies are owned by Disney. On the NBC series "Parks and Recreation," the fictional lead character is writing a non-fiction book, while the show's producer is actually writing that book, albeit one of fiction (Fine, 2011). Confusingly blurring the reality and make-believe at times, but offering lots of Jenkins' touch-points with different content in each, these programs are synergistically offering the true fan a much more immersive brand experience than that of the casual fan.

Works of fiction like those highlighted above are especially well suited to this kind of "alternate reality" storytelling. Owners of the fictional property can continue to extend the story, characters, etc. into new media as the opportunities develop. This convergent storytelling technique, however, can easily be adapted to a wide variety of products, services, and experiences.

3. A marketing model for convergent storytelling

3.1. Value of a brand. The goal for owners of brands is to build the brand's value, measured by brand equity. Brand equity, like a firm's equity, implies an economic value beyond the functional characteristics of the branded product (Hawkins, 2010). In many ways, it represents the brand's future profitability. When developing a formula to estimate the dollar worth of a brand's equity, one of the primary components will usually be brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty represents the degree to which a customer is willing to purchase the brand without considering alternate brands. Also, brand loyalty must include an emotional component (e.g., liking, preferring) in order to distinguish loyalty from simple habit. Of particular interest to marketers is the possibility of pushing loyalty further into the realm of brand passion (Paine, 2010).

Brand passion is an extreme end of the scale of loyalty and engagement that implies a more long-term connection (Paine, 2009) with the brand and a self-identification with the brand to the point of adopting characteristics of the brand's personality as one's own. One can see how this is sometimes called "brand wor-

ship" (Assael, 2003). Commonly used examples include the brands Apple and Harley-Davidson. One can also see this brand passion with the fictional works of "Star Trek," "Star Wars," and "Harry Potter," and more recently, the "Twilight" series of books and movies. These fictional brand properties and their promotional partners offer fans a variety of opportunities to engage with the brands and their spinoff products, including special dress-up parties in which the fans have the opportunity to recreate and reimagine their favorite characters (Target, 2012).

The newer digital and mobile devices coming to market will enhance the opportunity for consumers to communicate with both firms and fellow brand fans on a scale more massive than ever before (Learmonth, Teicher, Diaz, Patel & Klaassen, 2012). All of this loyalty, leading to passion, cannot occur without the initial connection between the fan and the brand through brand engagement.

Brand engagement is a term loosely used to describe the process of forming an attachment, both emotional and rational (Nail, 2006), between a person and a brand. Brand engagement is created by the actions, attitudes, and behaviors of both the organization and those with whom the organization is communicating (Paine, 2009). Importantly, brand engagement is enhanced by the increased number of interactions between the firm and the person, and secondly, by the channel variety with which the person has those interactions (Jenkins, 2008). These frequent, and emotional, connections will be a key to developing both brand loyalty and the possibility of brand passion. Importantly for advertisers, engaging ads are less likely to be skipped by viewers (Sass, 2009) in this DVR-enhanced lifestyle. In fact, many marketers today are stressing that they are more interesting in developing (and measuring) engagement rather than simply counting contacts with advertising. While the attractiveness of increasing engagement as a motivation for convergent storytelling is apparent, the traditional measures of ad effectiveness may not be designed to reflect the impact of engagement with the ad (Baar, 2011). Baar (2011) reports that relevance, however, does impact ad effectiveness, and this is consistent with the aims of convergent storytelling.

These elements of brand engagement, loyalty, passion, and equity lead to the need for a model of the interaction and direction of the connections. The input of convergent storytelling is highlighted as a preferred method of stimulating these connections.

3.2. The convergence model. A marketing model for convergent storytelling is proposed in Figure 3. The model shows multiple entries to the model besides

the media alternatives. This recognizes that groups, both face-to-face and virtual (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) offer additional avenues to touch and enhance the convegent storytelling.
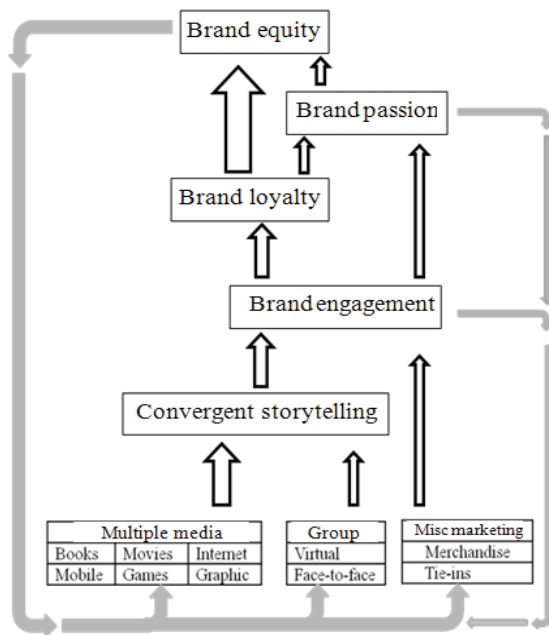
Fig. 3. Role of convergence on brand equity

The model shows that not all engagement is dependent upon the storytelling. Other marketing tools associated with the introduction of books, movies, video games, etc. may not have influence on the storytelling, but may still have influence on building brand engagement by increasing the frequency of brand contacts, or touch-points.

The model illustrates a feedback loop for the traditional brand extension of popular brands through the brand equity loop. It also proposes a feedback loop for early brand engagement and brand passion, which may eventually lead to brand equity, but in the meantime may be utilized to enhance inputs such as additional merchandise and additional media and group contacts.

Conclusion

Marketers will continue to champion brand engagement as a long-term means to evoke passion, loyalty, and equity in their brand. They also need to look to the value of this transmedia strategy as an important tool because of the emotional connection between the target and the brand that the strategy will create.

As previously discussed, works of fiction lend themselves especially well to the transmedia/convergent storytelling since fiction is at its essence, telling stories. Whether it is the more common books-to-movies or the coordinated release of multiple brand properties, storytelling is an effective and efficient way to reach different targets – and for the same target, multiple touch-points.

What this paper has demonstrated is that more traditional brands may also use this storytelling strategy to enhance the consumer connection to the brand property. The synergy of different media with each media vehicle's individual inputs contributing to the storytelling, a richer, fuller story will be created for each of the groups who in turn will influence later groups toward the brand.

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