

Small Business Use of Facebook for Marketing: The Case of a Family Owned Mediterranean Restaurant

**M. Laeeq Khan, Jan Boehmer
Michigan State University**

Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have facilitated social interactions among individuals and fostered the creation of online communities. In the business world, consumers have used online platforms to interact and form communities that are centered on brands (Schau, Muniz, & Arnould, 2009).

An area of growing interest among business professionals as well as researchers is social media. In this realm, online communities of interest form around organizations and their products especially on sites such as Twitter and Facebook (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010). Especially social media such as Facebook pages are used for marketing purposes among organizations and businesses. This interest is in part due to the increase in importance of social media. Today, Americans spend more time on social networks and blogs than on any other type of website (Nielsen, 2012).

Facebook is the largest social media site in the world, with more than one billion users (Facebook, 2013a). It is also the second most visited site in the world by traffic, only behind Google (Alexa, 2013). In addition, a study by Culnan, McHugh, and Zubillaga (2010) showed that Facebook dominates in the retailing industry, while Twitter is the most frequently used social media platform in healthcare, distribution, energy, financial services and other industries.

Recent market research comprising Fortune 500 companies has found that marketing strategies including Facebook drives 24% more new sales (Aggregate Knowledge, 2013). It has also been shown that Facebook changes customer behavior (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). A study of a café chain using a Facebook page showed an increase in customer store visits in addition to generating more positive word of mouth among fans of the chain's Facebook page when compared to non-fans (Dholakia & Durham, 2010). According to the same study, fans reported significantly greater emotional attachment to the business.

Due to this widespread adoption and popularity of social media in the business environment, Facebook represents not only a platform for the development of communities, but also for businesses to reach out to those communities with their marketing messages, build brand image, and engage with their customers in a novel and social setting.

Social media has become an important element of the overall marketing strategy of businesses in terms of managing their brand image through effective customer relationship management (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). Mangold and Faulds (2009) described social media use by businesses as a "hybrid element of the promotion mix" (p. 357). Social media has transformed the marketing landscape by allowing for consumer participation, whereby consumers interact with the brand or the business and with other consumers (Muniz & Schau, 2011).

Interaction amongst consumers on social media platforms such as Facebook has various other implications. For example, Facebook use has been linked to the development of social capital (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), which is seen as “the potential resources that reside in social relationships and thus may be accessed by an individual” (Ellison, Wohn, Khan, & Fewins-Bliss, 2012, p. 7). For small businesses, this capital can potentially become an important factor in establishing a sustainable revenue stream.

With Facebook being both a major factor in the everyday lives of individuals as well as businesses’ efforts to distribute marketing content, the likely ability of a small business to facilitate the acquisition of social capital has a potentially huge effect on their overall success. The challenges facing various organizations are to how best to employ social media to reach out to audiences effectively. In addition, organizations are challenged by choosing the best performance metrics that could be employed to assess the success of their marketing campaigns (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The potential of Facebook pages for businesses and brands is relatively unexplored – particularly when it comes to social capital. Even fewer studies examine how small businesses use social media technologies.

A small business is defined as “one that is (1) actively managed by its owner(s), (2) highly personalized, (3) largely local in its area of operations, and (4) largely dependent on internal sources of capital to finance its growth” (Baumbach, 1988, p.1). It can also be argued that small businesses are defined in terms of how many people are employed, whether the business is independently operated and owned, or whether the business is only serving customers in a local context (HUD, 2013).

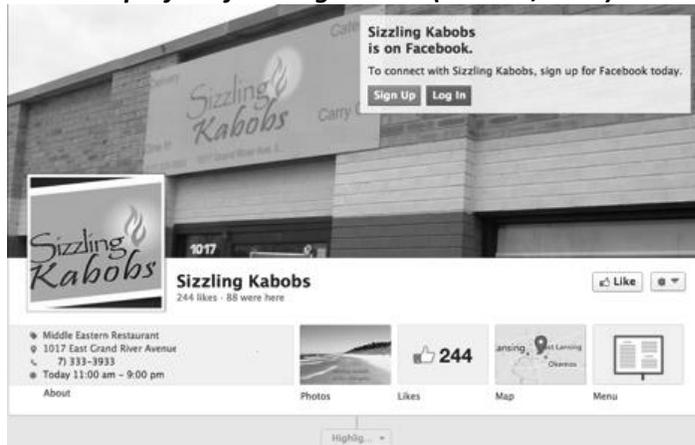
Despite their limited individual clout in the overall market, such small businesses are an important field of study. They constitute “the backbone of the nation’s economy” (Baumbach, 1988, p.1), and according to a report, between 1993 and 2008, small businesses created 65 percent of the net new jobs (jobs created minus jobs lost) in the private sector in the United States (Headd, 2010).

This article is an attempt to address this gap in the existing literature through a case study of a small business’ use of Facebook. More specifically, by looking at strategies employed by a small startup restaurant that potentially facilitate the development of social capital. This study examines social media use by Sizzling Kabobs (SK), a small family owned ethnic restaurant in a small Midwestern city with a population of roughly 48,000. This study first offers details about the business background that serves as case of analysis, the research objectives, and an overview of relevant theoretical concepts such as interactivity, engagement and social capital. The study concludes with a discussion of the contemporary business practices on Facebook and recommendations for efficient Facebook use by small businesses.

Business Background

The year 2013 marked the first anniversary of the establishment of Sizzling Kabobs and its social media presence as depicted in Figure 1. Sizzling Kabobs (SK) is a family-owned restaurant whose unique selling proposition is its specialized blend of Mediterranean and Indian foods. Because it with modest means, the business was short of financial resources to initiate a vigorous marketing campaign involving print and television/radio advertising. The only means employed by SK to gain clientele, was through capitalizing its location near a university campus and marketing its services on its Facebook page. Therefore, the restaurant has been actively employing a social media strategy since its inception. Within a short period of time it has gained a certain level of positive reputation and after one year has more than 230 fans on its Facebook page.

Figure 1.
Facebook profile of Sizzling Kabobs (June 14, 2013)



SK's positive reputation is also reflected by the fact that the SK Facebook page has been experiencing modest popularity in the form of user participation as expressed in 'post' likes, comments and shares. Within a span of one year of its launch, the restaurant attracted enough attention to be recognized by reviewers, as it was evident on local business review sites like Yelp.com and Urbanspoon.com. Those sites provide a link to SK's Facebook page, where current and potential customers can gain information about SK, such as the hours of operation, the menu and any reviews about the quality and variety of food.

Despite starting its operations, SK did not have the means to create a specialized website to market its services like its more established competitors. However, due to the availability of Facebook pages at no cost, SK was able to market itself solely on social media.

Research Objectives

The case study is motivated by the need to understand how small businesses are using Facebook to establish a social media presence, and how Facebook is leveraged to interact and engage with customers. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What Facebook features are being utilized by the business for marketing purposes?
- What types of customer relationship management strategies are employed by the business to engage customers?
- Can SK's Facebook use experience by the business be generalized to other small businesses?

A case study method was selected to answer these questions. According to Yin (2009), a case study offers a wider design picture and is a suitable research method when the aim is to understand contemporary issues in light of how and why certain things occur. A case study can also effectively provide insight into issues that may be overlooked in other forms of research methods. Most importantly, case studies provide a solid framework that can later be built upon and provide

organizations to “develop ways to translate theory into practice” (Ergun, Heier Stamm, Keskinocak, & Swann, 2010, p.112).

In order to understand Facebook use by SK, the restaurant’s Facebook page was analyzed. This included the types of posts made by the business as well as customers. The content posted as images, videos, and text based customer interactions formed the focus of the study. An analysis was also conducted of the Facebook “page” features that were employed by the business.

Social Media for Business

Considering the importance of small businesses for the overall economy, SK’s experience provides other small businesses a fine example of a potentially successful social media marketing strategy to emulate. Social media platforms like Facebook allow small startup businesses to be discovered in local circles. In addition, such endeavors allow customers to see a human side to a company that further enhances its image and the fan base, and therefore potentially facilitates engagement with the brand. If used correctly, social media has the potential to create brand awareness, find new customers, and provide valuable market research data. Businesses cannot dismiss the importance of social media simply due to the amount of traffic generated by such sites (Petty, 2008). Those benefits are especially ripe for small businesses that may have a shortage of resources to finance expensive marketing programs because they can directly interact with consumers at a personal level that is not easily afforded by other media platforms (Whitecavage, Widgeon, & Overbey, 2012). Therefore, effective social media use by small businesses has the potential to influence consumers’ perceptions of the company’s brand and its products – and brings them up to par with their more established competition. This is because Facebook is “the most structured social network Website” (Buffardi & Campell, 2008, p. 1305).

By providing the same features for all companies no matter what size, Facebook pages have a fixed format that all users, independent of their financial resources, have to abide by. Businesses thus have a streamlined way of posting content on their Facebook pages. All pages, although unique in their content, share a common design theme including a place for items such as profile picture, photos, wall posts, and links. In other words, a structured Facebook format means that small businesses have the same opportunities to market and reach out to their customers as do large businesses that may have hefty marketing budgets at their disposal and this at competitive advantage.

Facebook.com defines pages that businesses use as follows:

“Pages are for businesses, organizations and brands to share their stories and connect with people. Like timelines, you can customize Pages by adding apps, posting stories, hosting events and more. Engage and grow your audience by posting regularly. People who like your Page will get updates in their newsfeeds” (Facebook, 2013b).

Businesses are taking advantage of those opportunities. A simple search on Facebook reveals that a myriad of nationally operating and acclaimed restaurants are employing social media to their advantage. Viana (2011) rightly states that “restaurants are using social media to enhance an age-old marketing technique: Making customers and their experiences the face of their brand” (p. 1). According to a Pew (2011) study, 55% of adults said they got information about local restaurants from the Internet, newspapers, word of mouth and local TV. According to the same study 51% of adults got their information about local restaurants via the Internet and 23% relied on word of mouth.

Interactivity and Engagement

Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate, both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges. It also refers to the ability to perceive the experience a simulation of interpersonal communication even in a mediated environment (Kiousis, 2002). More specifically, interactivity places shared interpretive contexts in the primary role. Interactivity describes and prescribes the manner in which conversational interaction as an iterative process leads to jointly produced meaning (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997).

Closely related to interactivity is the concept of engagement. Peck and Malthouse (2011) define engagement as “the collection of experiences that readers, viewers or visitors have with a media brand (p. 4). Going in the same direction, Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) define customer engagement “as the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate” (p. 4). On Facebook pages, this engagement can be expressed through behaviors such as commenting on posts, “liking” them, and sharing information. Overall, engagement may simply be seen as being highly involved with something. In order to interact on a particular website, there has to be some form of attraction, something that grabs our attention and engages us. Interaction may also take the form of direct customer feedback, and polls.

In the traditional sense, consider a theatrical performance. A highly involved audience would be engaged with the performance, paying attention to each move of the performers, and listening to every word. It may also be viewed as an awakening of senses to something of interest. However, engagement may manifest at different levels. The lowest form of engagement is paying attention to the message in a mediated setting. On a higher level, engagement moves a step forward into the domain of participation. On a similar note, Heeter (1989) suggested that users exert greater effort when they attend to interactive media as compared to traditional non-interactive media. This may be seen as a greater level of engagement that interactive media demands.

Viewing engagement as a measure of a person's cognitive response, personal connection and actions, Suarez-Orozco, Onaga, and de Lardamelle (2010) outlined three levels of engagement: cognitive, behavioral and relational. Cognitive engagement is defined as the degree to which individuals are engrossed and intellectually involved. Relational engagement is the extent to which individuals feel connected to their environment. Behavioral engagement indicates individual participation and involvement in activities.

It is known that a business' success is linked to the creation of a customer experience (Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). We argue that social media provides the ideal environment to engage customers and create a unique customer experience. In this regard, Facebook fan-pages provide a unique and cost effective platform for expressing user engagement through likes, comments and shares.

According to Harris and Rae (2009), “social networks will play a key role in the future of marketing; externally they can replace customer annoyance with engagement, and internally they help to transform the traditional focus on control with an open and collaborative approach that is more conducive to success in the modern business environment” (p. 24).

Social Capital

Social capital is a theoretical framework about access to different types of resources within a person's social network. Some researchers such as Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2011) view engagement as a form of social capital. Depending on the active or passive use of a website, users may have different measures of social capital (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). The concept was conceived by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988), and is regarded as a form of capital distinct from human and tangible (or physical) capital. While it originated in sociology, social capital has been applied in various academic disciplines. Ellison, Wohn, Khan, and Fewins-Bliss (2012) state that social capital "lies in the connections between people and the potential for individuals to access resources embedded in their network of social ties, as opposed to the resources directly held by those individuals" (p. 7).

Lin (1999, 2001) outlines three critical components of social capital: the resources embedded in a social structure, the accessibility of these resources, and being able to mobilize these resources. The Facebook page makes these resources accessible and allows individuals to mobilize these resources in a community of business "fans".

Related work provides insight into the relationship between social media use and the attainment of social capital. For example, Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe (2008) established an empirical link between Facebook use and social capital. Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) further emphasized the importance of directed communication in contrast with messages commonly used by businesses to communicate their messages.

Building strong relationships with customers is a desirable marketing goal that can be achieved through online communities (Palmatier, 2008). Social media helps build relationships with customers. The main aim of building such relationships from a business standpoint is to motivate social media users to consume the product or service that the business sells. Customers who are actively involved in communications with the business are more likely to make a purchase from the company (Mathwick, 2002). It is arguable that through the process of building customer relationships, a business is building social capital.

For a small business that is in its infancy, the attainment of social capital through a Facebook community is vital. Such a fan base allows a business to tap into the resources in form of possible viral popularity that may be gained through an online social network. Not only does the fan community provide valuable feedback that may have otherwise cost marketing dollars, it also plays a role in fostering an image of an active audience. When a potential customer wants to learn more about the business, in this case an ethnic restaurant, such a social media presence is instrumental in providing the needed information. Not only can this information be in the form of customer interactions with the company (wall posts and comments), but also pictures, videos, and other sources.

Current Facebook Use by the Business

SK is utilizing the various functionalities of a Facebook page. A Facebook Page provides a free channel of communication between the business and its customers. Most social media users can create such a business fan page with great ease in a few mouse clicks. This page is a place where customers can interact directly with the business and other fans through actions such as writing on the Facebook Wall and sending personal messages.

Besides directly connecting with customers or fans, the SK Facebook page allows for the development and maintenance of deep customer relationships. As user comments suggest on the Facebook page, customers generally expect the businesses they deal with to have their own Facebook page. Here, brand enthusiasts have the opportunity to converse with other community members. This helps in setting up strong links not only with the business, but also with other members who may become potential customers.

The SK Facebook page seems to have a professional presence with quality content in the form of food images, information about the latest specials, and customer conversations about the menu choices. It is the main platform for the customers to get in touch with the business. In a way, the Facebook page is serving as SK's core marketing platform. Informal interviews with the business owner suggests that a considerable percentage of customers were pointed to the restaurant through social media. Many of those customers would otherwise not have learned about SK.

In reference to our first research question regarding the Facebook features that are being utilized by SK for marketing purposes, it is that SK uses a banner image, also known as a "cover" image for its Facebook page. The cover image depicts the actual brick and mortar business. Business hours and business phone are visible in the description on the top of the page. On the top of the Facebook page are also visible the restaurant's photos, number of page likes, a map of its actual location and the menu. One section of the page shows "Recent Posts by Others on Sizzling Kabobs" and another section shows the "Recommendations" by customers.

It is noted that more than three times a week, a new image of the food prepared at the restaurant is posted on the Facebook page. Textual information regarding different menu items is posted occasionally. Facebook page analytics data reveals that images attract the most number of posted "likes", followed by texts posts that ask a question. The number of page "likes" tended to increase following the posting of a picture that engendered greater engagement in the form of likes, comments and shares. This phenomenon may be explained by the virility of posts especially attractive food images. It is also notable that business engages with its customers by answering any queries posted on the "wall." For example, a customer posted the following on the SK Facebook page: "We loved your Chicken Kabobs, Beef Stew and Spicy Hummus!" The page administrator replied with the following: "Serving you is our pleasure. Glad you liked the food." Such interactions helped foster customer relationship management strategies that were being employed by the business to engage customers.

The business presents an ideal example of how social network resources are being mobilized to increase brand awareness, and most importantly increase engagement, that may translate into actual visits by customers to the restaurant. This might be enhanced by effective food photography that is potentially playing a part in fostering customer engagement.

Keeping in view the time constraint involved in running the business and taking care of the social media strategy at the same time, the business owner believes that it is more efficient for him to manage the Facebook page and not have to worry about managing the marketing effort on any other platform such as a business website. Moreover, the owner was in the best position to understand the business. This may be an advantage of a small business size as the owner can directly interact with customers.

It has been noted that the SK Facebook page has also served as a place for the venting of customer grievances that were handled by the business owner in an effective manner. For example, a customer complaint regarding a late order delivery was made as a comment on the SK Facebook page. The

Facebook page administrator, who is also the business owner, responded immediately. It is noteworthy that instead of deleting any negative posts on the wall, they were allowed to remain and the conversations between such a customer and the business showed that the problems were dealt with in an amicable manner. It may be argued that such examples strengthen trust in the business.

Tax, Brown, and Chandrasekaran (1998) argue that many companies see investments in dealing with grievances as a means of enhancing customer loyalty. They also found that customers “evaluate complaint incidents in terms of the outcomes they receive, the procedures used to arrive at the outcomes, and the nature of the interpersonal treatment during the process” (p.60). Social media, simply because of the design affordances that facilitate greater customer interactions, offers a better opportunity to satisfy customer complaints in an interpersonal fashion.

Another prominent feature of the customer interactions on the SK Facebook page is the fact that any comments are promptly addressed through interactive discussions. We argue that since these discussions are happening in an open public environment, they may lead to the development of greater trust and building of social capital.

Referring to our research question regarding how SK’s Facebook use experience by the business can be generalized to other small businesses, the current case demonstrates that by virtue of the standard Facebook design, it is possible for small businesses to engage with its customers without having to invest in an elaborate, interactive stand-alone website. For example, it enables the business to engage in interactive message exchanges with its customer base without any sophisticated technical means that would otherwise surpass the financial clout of small businesses.

The Facebook page also has features that support efficient customer relationship management in the form of sharing important business information that is current and grabs user attention. In this way SK was able to post timely promotional messages aimed at immediate redemption by customers during lunch and dinner hours. In addition, the potential for a viral spreading through the social network of the redeeming customers bears the potential of creating further awareness about the business and its promotions among those users who are in some way already related to the business fans.

Conclusion

Through observation of the SK Facebook page, it is notable that the business is engaging its fans and effectively answering questions, addressing concerns, and acknowledging when fans post on the page. SK also effectively showcases its food items, provides recipes, and in some cases explains the origin of a dish. This is instrumental in ensuring interactivity on the Facebook page that ultimately engages the audience.

As evident from the literature, social media platforms such as Facebook are popular places where users can not only interact with each other and share information, but also directly converse with businesses. For businesses, Facebook pages can serve as powerful tools to establish brand presence, save advertising costs, build strong relationship with customers, and provide valuable insight into new products at a minimal budget.

A myriad of different business types are employing Facebook and other social media sites to target and engage current and potential customers. However, with the power afforded by social media, responsibility must be exercised by social media managers. Technology can aid managers in dealing with

customers if they are committed to active involvement with customers, and deploy social media tools to facilitate customers in telling their stories (Gorry & Westbrook, 2011). Besides training employees to effectively manage social media platforms, the key is to engage customers, and efficiently exploit social media opportunities (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012). This case study of a family owned restaurant having a Facebook presence provided a snapshot of social media use for informational and marketing purposes in the realm of small businesses.

While this paper does not delve into a detailed analysis of the actual content posted in the Facebook page or the engagement that was elicited, it does point out some of the contemporary practices used in today's businesses. These can serve as avenues of future research in this regard. For example, we aim at conducting a comprehensive comparative study that brings to light the exact ways social media is being employed by small businesses in comparison with large businesses.

Future research needs to examine the effectiveness and success of employing not only Facebook but other social media platforms, and how the social capital potentially generated through social media can or is already being tapped. Business cannot afford to ignore having a strong and effective social media presence.

Recommendations

We argue that the establishment of a Facebook fan community is contributing to the development of valuable social capital for SK. This is happening by enabling the business to access the resources embedded in the social network. It then can potentially mobilize these resources to further enhance its image, and translate the positive goodwill established on the Facebook page into an expanding customer base. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) outlined some important points about being social—being active, interesting, humble, and honest.

The current case of SK using a Facebook page as its sole marketing tool is illustrative of the power of social media in helping a business create a customer-centered community. Overall, we believe that an effective social media presence holds much promise especially for small businesses. A social media strategy might be employed by a small business to potentially accomplish the following:

- Expand customer base by gaining access to markets outside the immediate geographical area.
- Compete with large well-established competitors on an equal footing via social media tools.
- Implement effective marketing strategies at a lower cost than traditional marketing means.
- Establish customer relationships.
- Reach out to audiences in the vast social networks through the existing customer base by engendering engagement strategies.
- Gain marketing intelligence by testing new products and services and gauging customer responses.

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M. LAEEQ KHAN is a doctoral candidate in the Media & Information Studies (MIS) program at Michigan State University. He has a diverse educational background with an undergraduate specialization in Economics, an MS in Telecommunications Systems Management and Masters in Business Administration (MBA). He is conducting research centered on user-generated content on social media and understanding the role of motivation and interactivity in encouraging participation. He is also interested in how organizations and businesses can best optimize their PR campaigns. He can be contacted at: laeeqk@gmail.com.

JAN BOEHMER is a doctoral candidate in the Media & Information Studies (MIS) program at Michigan State University. He holds an MA in Online Journalism from the Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences in Germany. Prior to his graduate studies, he has worked as a social media editor, writer, and community engagement manager for five years. He can be contacted at: janhendrik.boehmer@gmail.com.