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Is Your Brand a Living Entity?

By Hemant C. Sashittal, Monica Hodis and Rajendran Sriramachandramurthy

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A few companies are using Twitter to converse with followers in ways that build a new kind of connection to the brand.

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WHAT IS TWITTER communicating about your brand to young adults?

If your company is like many major brands, not all that much. But through focus groups we conducted with undergraduate students who were avid Twitter users, we found indications that effective Twitter strategies are helping some companies, such as Starbucks and Whole Foods, give their brands a special status and personality among these young adults. These brands transcend their

status as *things* and become seen, through their Twitter presence, as living entities with thoughts and feelings; such a brand becomes, in effect, what we call an “entified brand.” We see brand entification as a new and more powerful adaptation of “brand personality” for the microblogging, social media environment. Entified brands enjoy a special status among members of the “millennial” generation of young adults; these brands are viewed as authentic

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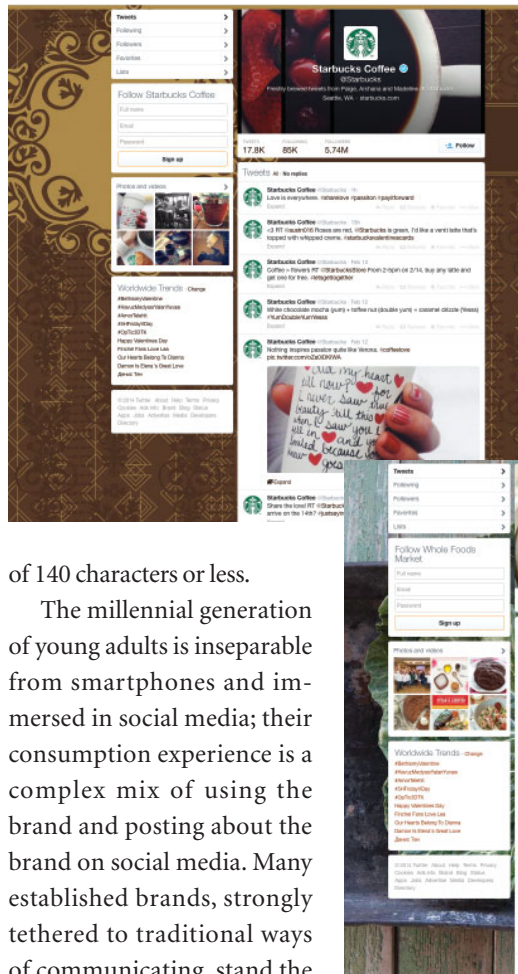
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personalities and attributed with an elevated, celebrity-like social status.

Entified brands are not just lovable objects; they are seen as exalted entities that return the love — as can be seen in some of the tweets from their followers. In 2013, a Starbucks follower tweeted: *Do you know how I know @Starbucks loves me? They're open on Easter! Happy bunny day lovers.* Status elevation is a strongly emotional outcome. Starbucks is seen not as just coffee. It is not even just a person; it is a “hip and cool” person. A follower tweeted: *@starbucks Thank you for being so hip and cool and edgy and independent and non-corporate and young.* Another follower tweeted on the same day: *@Starbucks, please follow me, I love you so much, I had you yesterday :(. Twitter users even want the brands they care about to be happy. One Intel fan tweeted: @Intel congratulations on your 10^6 followers that should bring u mega happiness. Wishing u all the best for giga happiness :-).* Nerd-speak perhaps, but the sentiments represent homage to an exalted individual.

As college professors, we first became interested in how young adults relate to Twitter for a simple reason: We had a hard time separating undergraduate students from their smartphones in class. Whatever interest we could trigger in students through our learned insights paled in comparison to the instant response produced by an alert on a student’s smartphone. Class discussions on product management and branding were too strongly peppered with social media terms to ignore. Twitter, in particular, emerged as a key medium for defining and living consumption experiences. Little in the literature, otherwise rich with descriptive insights, explained the power of Twitter for building brands.

So we asked our students. Through three focus groups, we asked students, aged 20 to 24, who were avid Twitter users to describe what they did on Twitter and why, and how and why they interacted with brands they followed on Twitter. What they told us suggests to us that through Twitter, these members of the millennial generation were developing new ways of interacting with brands. The brands that they had developed strong connections to via Twitter were those that, in effect, engaged in an intelligent conversation with their followers — in interactions



Effective Twitter strategies are helping brands such as Starbucks and Whole Foods gain a special status and sense of personality among some of their Twitter followers.

of 140 characters or less.

The millennial generation of young adults is inseparable from smartphones and immersed in social media; their consumption experience is a complex mix of using the brand and posting about the brand on social media. Many established brands, strongly tethered to traditional ways of communicating, stand the risk of losing their connectivity to this generation. Yet we suspect a fundamental transformation is occurring in the way millennials connect with and consume some brands. The strengthening tether between millennials and their smartphones, tablets and laptops suggests “brand entification” will feature more, and not less, in their consumption experience. Traditional ways of building brands have passed their sell-by dates, while social media opens up new possibilities.

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