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CREATING A CITY BRAND COMMUNITY IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This article discusses topical issues of applying brand management technologies using the example of a specific object - the territory of a subject of the Russian Federation. The authors actualize the importance of territorial marketing through various branding tools. The Omsk region already has been facing the problem of outflow of the population to other regions for several years; this is especially pronounced in the youth segment. The authors carried out a number of quantitative and qualitative studies, such group and individual interviews in order to determine the reasons for the revealed trend and find a solution to this problem. During the analysis, it was revealed that one of the reasons why people move to other regions is the negative image of Omsk as an environment for life and professional development. Separately, it was noted that in the city there are no fully functioning digital opportunities for the implementation of effective communications between active participants, which could lead to an improvement in the perception of the city and the region as a whole. Based on the results obtained, a number of recommendations were proposed for creating a platform for the urban youth community in the digital environment and methods of Internet communications for participants to form a positive brand of the city of Omsk.

1. Introduction

At present, in the context of a rapidly growing trend of migration from regional centers and towns to the capitals, it is becoming increasingly difficult for regional cities to "stay afloat" and not give in to the struggle for citizens. Gradually, all municipalities come to the conclusion that in order to maintain competitiveness, they need manage the main processes and also pay great attention to the marketing component of urban development. Today, one of the basic elements of any urban development policy is the development of a marketing strategy. One of the most popular and effective tools for achieving the marketing goals and objectives set by the strategy is the creation of an online community of the territory brand.

Creating an online community of the territory brand will allow the municipality to build trusting relationships with citizens, hear their needs and improve the territorial "product", thereby increasing the degree of loyalty and commitment to the territory. The purpose of this article is to develop recommendations for creating a territory brand community in a digital environment. The recommendations are based on the results of a study of the preferences of young people in the organization of the urban community platform and its content.

2. Problem Statement

A brand community is a group of consumers who share an interest and attitude to the brand, with a developed social identity, whose members jointly participate in group actions to achieve collective goals and / or to express mutual feelings and obligations. Brand-related group activities are combined with other social activities in these brand communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). For the first time, the term brand community was formulated by the authors of an article of the same name published in the Journal of Consumer Research (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). They described the brand community as "a specialized, geographically unfettered community that is based on a specific structure of social relationships between brand fans". But this definition does not specify an important circumstance – the context of the association of members of such a community. To get a complete picture, it is important to note that this kind of community is an effective and manageable form of bringing together brand customers who share its values and show great interest in its development. Usually, members of the brand communities have extensive knowledge of the product and participate in its discussions; they support each other in solving problems and creating new product ideas.

Recently, the role of communities in creating brand-consumer relationships has attracted more and more attention (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006; Fournier & Lee, 2009; Jang et al., 2008;Marzocchi et al., 2013; McWilliam, 2000; Raïes et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2013). Members who identify themselves with the community have greater loyalty to the community (Scarpi, 2010). The regularities of the mechanisms involved in the transformation of the relationship between the client and the community, between the client and the brand are studied (Kumar & Nayak, 2018).

The transition to an information economy based on knowledge and interactivity, together with the significant development of communication technologies, in particular, the advent of the Internet, led to the development of the concept of the online brand community (OBC). It should be noted that in the modern

world, the concept of a brand community is directly related to social media and mass media. As a result of the fact that in the 21st century, the possibility of using modern communication technologies, in particular the global Internet, has become more accessible, a new type of brand community has been invented and gained great popularity-the online brand community. Its only difference from the classic concept of a brand community is the way of communication between the participants, because in this case, all interaction takes place in an online environment, using either brand platforms or social networks. This type of brand community is particularly relevant at the present time, when, due to the COVID-19, there are practically no alternatives to communication in the virtual space.

OBC is a community of brands in a virtual environment, primarily through the Internet (Füller et al., 2007). A fundamental feature of the OBC is the ability of its members to interact with each other. Consumers who are members of online brand communities share an interest in a particular brand by sharing information and knowledge, or simply expressing their relation, and these social interactions influence customer relationships with the brand (McAlexander & Schouten, 2002).

Research shows that online brand communities are an effective tool for influencing sales, regardless of whether these communities are located on company-owned websites or independently of them (Adjei et al., 2010).

The purpose of territorial marketing is to form a territorial product among consumers, a desire to "purchase" it. For local residents, this desire manifests itself in the absence of intentions to move to another city or country, for tourists – in plans to spend a vacation or just visit this territory, for investors – in the willingness to invest financial resources in the development of the territory.

One of the most effective tools that can achieve this goal can be the creation and development of an online community of the territory brand. In itself, the concept of a territory brand is a combination of its unique properties, fixed in the minds of the inhabitants of the territory and forming its competitive identity. Accordingly, the territory brand community is an association of the "consumers" of its "product" who are most involved in the development of the territory brand. It will act as a channel for promoting the territory by creating a single virtual space for the population on behalf of the administration, where the latest news of the region will be covered, territorial services will be provided, public initiatives and current projects will be discussed. The number of studies on the benefits and consequences of creating brand communities in the digital environment is insignificant, the issues related to the formation of the online community of the territory brand, the impact of the quality of relationships within the community on the perception of the territory brand, the role of the OBC of the territory in increasing the loyalty of community members to the city/region are practically not studied. The results of this study contribute to the academic and managerial understanding of the issues of managing the territory brand in the digital environment.

3. Research Questions

The study aims at identifying the level of loyalty of residents to the Omsk city, brand perception of the city, its inhabitants, readiness for participation/involvement of residents in the urban community, satisfaction of the community in which they are at the moment, preferences in the organization of the online platform of the urban community and its content.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to develop recommendations for creating a platform for the urban youth community in the digital environment and ways of online communication of participants to form a positive brand of the city of Omsk.

5. Research Methods

The main research method is a survey. In the course of the study, 207 people were interviewed, among which three age groups were identified: from 18 to 24 years – 46% of respondents, from 25 to 30 years – 32% of respondents and from 31 to 35 years – 22% of respondents.

5.1. Quantitative research

The method of data collection is individual and group interviews.

5.2. Qualitative research

In order to obtain additional information about consumer preferences on the organization of the urban online community platform and the development of a test version of the community based on it, it was decided to use one of the methods of qualitative research – a focus group. The participants of the focus groups are young people from 18 to 35 years old, who at the time of the study were active participants in various online communities of urban topics.

During the focus group, participants were asked to complete tasks and answer questions divided into semantic blocks. In the first block, the method of mixed sorting of cards (a combination of open and closed types of sorting) was used. The purpose of the card sorting method is to develop the site structure based on unstructured data, highlight categories (build taxonomies), and check and agree on the selected structure. Participants had the opportunity to add their own author's cards in the course of completing the task. The content of the sorting cards was formed based on the results of a quantitative study. Participants were asked to arrange the cards according to their proximity to pre-defined categories, and then explain their choice. In this case, the same card could be assigned to several categories or not to one of them at all.

The task of the second block of the focus group is to clarify the preferences in the design of the online platform. The questions involved choosing the most appropriate font and background screensavers for the urban community site.

The third block was the final one and contained the questions, the answers to which were necessary for the development of the content strategy of the community.

6. Findings

The assessment of the loyalty of young respondents to the city showed that the absolute majority like to live in Omsk, but 66.2% of respondents are ready to move when they have the appropriate opportunity. In addition to the above, the survey showed that young people have a rather negative view of the picture of the city's development and assess Omsk as a dirty, poor and unpromising territory. Based on

the responses received during the survey, we can say that only 15% of respondents feel true loyalty to the brand of Omsk, which is expressed in their positive assessment of the city and lack of intentions to move out of it when the appropriate opportunity arises, while 29.5% of respondents express the opposite opinion on this issue and form a group of anti-loyal citizens. The largest share in the structure of respondents, namely 51.2%, is represented by latently loyal young residents of Omsk, who expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the city, but agreed with the opinion that if possible, they will still leave Omsk. And only 4.3% of respondents are not ready to move, even though they give the city a low rating. Such statistics prove the need to publish information on the platform of the city's online community that destroys the stereotypes that have formed in the minds of young residents of the city. The most appropriate tools in this case can be comparative articles, ratings and videoreports that present an objective picture and focus on the strengths of the city. Participants' preferences were determined in relation to the ratio of the types of information they consumed. It turned out that for some of the young people of Omsk at the moment, it is the auditory form of perception of information (in the form of podcasts), along with text, photo and video content, that is relevant. At the same time, most still tend to use more classical forms of information presentation: text publications and, in rare cases, small videos.

When developing a community content program, it is necessary to focus on the principle of stimulating the growth points of the territory. Such a strategy will involve using the main competitive advantages of Omsk and focusing the attention of the target audience on them. An example of a city's strength is its cultural life, which was given the highest rating by the respondents, as evidenced by their recognition of the city as active as opposed to boring. Adding a special section to the community platform, which is a poster of all city events and activities, can also serve as a good tool for forming the image of Omsk as an active and interesting territory for young people.

In general, respondents have a neutral-negative view of the picture of the city's life, as evidenced by low or average ratings of the descriptions of the territory included in the semantic differential. For example, respondents believe that Omsk is a dirty (3.2) and poor (3.6) city. Equally borderline are such pairs as "depressive-cheerful" and "backward-progressive" (4.6), as well as "unpromising – promising" (4.5). The respondents rated describing of Omsk the most highly as an active city as opposed to a boring one (5.4), but nevertheless this rating on a 10-point scale can only be considered neutral. Such a negative image of the city's brand, which is fixed in the minds of residents, means that when creating a brand community, it will be necessary either to provide the appropriate functionality on the platform to solve problems of concern to citizens, or to dispel existing stereotypes through published content.

Next, it was necessary to find out from the Omsk youth whether they consider it appropriate to create an urban online community, and to assess the degree of their involvement. It turned out that the absolute majority of respondents believe that Omsk needs to create an online community, while 22.2% of them are ready to take an active part in its development, and another 42% - a passive participation. It is also worth considering that a fairly large number of respondents, namely 18.4%, found it difficult to answer the question, which may indicate that with a more detailed explanation of the benefits of implementing the initiative to organize a community, they can be persuaded to support the idea.

The most popular motives for joining the online community of Omsk among the respondents are almost equally the desire to improve personal living conditions in the city (47.8%), as well as the desire to

contribute to the development of Omsk. In addition, 39.1% of respondents identified the desire to keep up to date with the latest events in the city as an important factor of their motivation, and 20.8% - the desire to find like-minded people. At the same time, 14.5% believe that nothing can motivate them to become members of this community.

The most popular topics among Omsk youth are the issues of city improvement, ecology, education, roads and transport, medicine and labor. Accordingly, the content plan will need to be compiled, taking this information into account. For example, to publish daily information about the environmental situation in the city (indicators of the volume of pollutants' emissions), to cover the process of implementing programs for the improvement of Omsk (creating an accessible environment, improving urban areas), and so on. Raising awareness of residents about all activities aimed at improving the main areas of the city's life, and most importantly, demonstrating real achievements will help not only correct the perception of the city's brand by young people, but also increase their loyalty to it.

Also in the focus group, the participants expressed their opinion about the priority of the forms of information presentation in the community, which is worth paying attention to. So, according to the respondents, even if the text type of publications prevails on the platform, they would also like to be able to watch mini-format video reports (of short duration in time), watch photo content on topics relevant to their interests. And in addition they receive information in the auditory form of perception in the form of podcasts popular today among young people with the participation of well-known personalities in the city (athletes, businessmen, bloggers).

7.   Conclusion

The analysis of currently existing urban communities, their communication strategies, content strategies, audience profiles, and activity statistics was carried out. Based on the results of the marketing research, the main recommendations for the design, content and content of the Omsk brand online community platform were formulated, a program for its promotion was proposed, and recommendations were given for evaluating the effectiveness of the territory's brand community. In the future, it is planned to assess the changes in the attitude of community members to the brand of the territory. Since the main component of the brand community is the connections created at the brand/community member and community member/community member levels, the effectiveness assessment methodology will include not only the calculation of quantitative indicators, but also a qualitative assessment. The calculation of the group of indicators of reach/popularity will be aimed at giving an overall assessment of the success of the community. Determining the dynamics of the inflow and outflow of community members, as well as its mentions in the media environment, will be the main reference point in assessing the results of the work done over a certain time period.

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