

Ethical Marketing Communication in the Era of Digitization

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the consideration of ethics in marketing communication. Recently, Lenskart, American Swan and Trioka made promotional brand communication on the day of the Nepal earthquake to exploit business leverage. This faced criticism on various media platforms for insensitivity of the communication piece. Author identified various factors which may lead to such insensitive communication which includes, organizational policies, role of educational institutes in moral development, cognitive moral upbringing of individual, individual personality traits, intentions of the message and competitive environment. In addition it explains, how brands handle image management once it has been damaged. A few components of Image Repair Theory such as, mortification, evasion of responsibility and reduction in the offensiveness of the act have been used to restore the image.

Keywords: Marketing communication, ethics in marketing, ethical marketing communication, competitive environment, image management.

1. Introduction

"Ethical considerations - questions of right and wrong - are an inseparable part of real-life marketing communications. Any part of an organisation's marketing communications can send messages about its ethical stance, either intentionally or otherwise. Organisations need to cultivate an active awareness of the ethical consequences of their marketing communications."

- Richard Christy (2009, p. 99)

Over the decades, marketing has been a process to sell goods and services produced by the business world. Marketing includes the processes to communicate offerings to the prospective customers in a way which

attracts attention and stimulates the intention to purchase. The modes of communication have undergone changes over a period of decades in line with technological reforms, economic changes, changes in the operating environment of the business and most importantly, customer expectations. In the last decade, digitization has revolutionized marketing communication. Aaker (2015) noticed that digital marketing communication is a powerful device for building brands and strengthening the relationship with individuals and community by engaging them actively in the marketing process. He also adds that such active participation has led the marketer to communicate the message at individual level with rich and deep content. In a way, the digital platform has given the marketer an option for greater reach with more customized offerings.

According to Aaker (2015), digital marketing communication strategies need not be seen as a silo entity, it could take many more forms depending on cultural differences, events, crisis, company profiles, logistics of the countries and variety within the country. It would be very naïve to generate branding strategies and its communication for India as a country, without considering its cultural diversity or the logistics of the regions across India. Thus, a context is of prime importance for any marketing communication. Likewise, at the time of natural calamity, a marketer needs to understand the criticality of that crisis and needs to formulate the communication campaign taking into account societal and humane needs.

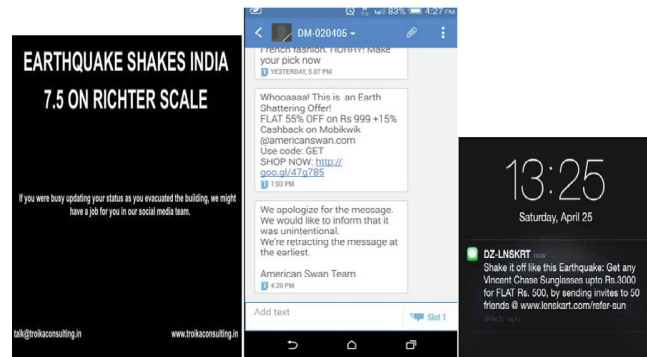
For example, on the day of the Nepal earthquake on 25 April, 2015, Bharti Airtel offered all calls from India to Nepal free of charge on its network for 48 hours from midnight the same day. ("Nepal earthquake: Call traffic from India sees massive jump", 2015). Similarly,

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Facebook ran a campaign called "Safety Check for the people affected by the earthquake". Through Safety Check, one could update one's family and friends that one is safe. People could also check about their friends' safety (Sen, 2015). In contrast to Airtel and Facebook, a few brands like Lenskart, American Swan and Troika Consulting tried to get business leverage through the calamity of the earthquake.

Lenskart, a seller of eyewear and contact lenses through online and retail stores, sent an SMS advertisement to its customers saying, "Shake it off like this earthquake" (Khosla, 2015). The message sought to offer special discounts for sunglasses on the disastrous day for Nepal. The discount offered by sending the message to fifty known people was on the brand Vincent Chase sunglasses. Such viral activity had been planned to generate buzz in the market relating to a particular offer. Sprague and Wells (2010) argued that personal recommendation through referencing is one of the strongest triggers for customers because it comes from a reliable source instead of a corporate third party. But, the thrust of Lenskart to gain more consumers by the means of buzz marketing during a calamity was questioned and they faced criticism for their SMS advertisement (Khosla, 2015). Another similar piece of communication was by American Swan, an online fashion retailer, which came up with, "Earth shattering offer", providing discounts to its followers (Khosla, 2015). In the SMS advertisement, followers were provided promotional codes to avail high discount and added discount for using the platform of Mobikwik. Thus, American Swan planned to get business from existing customer through sales promotion. But, their choice of event for sales promotion faced criticism (Khosla, 2015). Another blunder was from the talent sourcing agency, Troika, which communicated hiring of people who were busy updating their status on social media while their building was being evacuated in earthquake (Khosla, 2015). Troika posted a picture of the same on their Facebook media job group page and urged social media savvy candidates to apply for the posts of social media team. As rightly noted by Va (2015, p. 75) for communication message, brand "cannot touch the tangent Millions unless the Method of dialect

between the brand and the prospective customer is unique, innovative and special", which is also a premise of guerilla marketing. In the same manner, Troika tried to be unique by Guerilla marketing on social media, but it faced criticism too (Khosla, 2015). Images of these communications are shown below.



Consequently, these brands attracted immense criticism on social media; so they ended up with an apology for their advertisements. American Swan and Lenskart sent posted apologies to their followers and customers for their message and said that the whole event was unintentional and they did not intend to be mean about any crisis or the people involved in it (Shrivastava, 2015). Troika Consulting removed its Facebook post within a few hours and sent an apology post to their followers. With a communication to Social Samosa, Troika communicated that the message not intended for earthquake victims ("Troika Consulting's response to Earthquake Post", 2015). Thus, all the three brands planned image management immediately after the incident. Even though the brands tried to build positive images afterwards, customers do have their own way of interpreting the phenomenon. Wan and Schell (2007) argued that the image of the brand is analyzed at two levels: firstly at the level of personality and character, which refers to motivations of the brand with skillfully designed communication. At the second level, customer's perception about the communication, based on their understanding and interpretation. Here, two processes are playing a role, firstly at the cognitive level through customer's understanding about the organization and secondly, at the affective level through customers' own interpretations in relation to marketing communication by the brand (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Dowling, 2001).

Ethics in marketing communication refers to the marketing morality related to one of the 4P's that is, promotion. Communication pieces like the ones mentioned above raise concerns over the ethics involved in marketing communication. In India, Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) regulates the ethical issues involved in marketing communication. The general guidelines from ASCI and other regulatory bodies put emphasis on the normal requirements of decency, legality and honesty regarding the advertising messages or claims, and the means by which these messages are being presented (Pickton & Broderick, 2005). But, these requirements are not explained in great detail (Pickton & Broderick, 2005). So, for a marketing manager, what might be communicated is nebulous. Most organizations are not intentional in their unethical doing (Carrigan & Attala, 2001); but these are pitfalls which organizations should be wary of. Such pitfalls may lie with organizational policies, workforce or other environmental forces. In the following section, through detailed literature review, author explains ethics in marketing communication and identifies the factors which may lead to insensitive marketing communication. Plus, once the damage has been done, how a brand reacts to the situation and undertakes image management is also studied.

2. Ethics in the Marketing Communication

Ethics is about the study of morality in which practices or activities which are right and wrong have been focused (De George, 1999). Question of right and wrong have been discussed by thinkers and writers over many decades and to discuss it superficially here in this space would not do justice to its magnitude. Varey (2002, p. 325) produced a more pluralistic view for ethics in marketing communication stating, "ethical standards should ensure that representation and expression are not misleading, deceitful, exploitative, demeaning, irritating, wasteful, arrogant or servile". For this research we consider people's response on a particular instance as a right or wrong act. Laczniaik and Murphy (2006) noted that ethical marketing puts customers first. In the present case, criticism on various media for marketing communication by Lenskart, American Swan and Troika

would reveal the insensitivity in their communication or wrong action, while studying morality.

As a part of the larger domain of ethics, ethics in business focuses on ethical principles in relation to the conduct of the business. Within the study of business ethics, ethics in marketing communication is an important component. In the literature of marketing communication, ethics concerns appear at two levels (Christy, 2009). Firstly, critiques of the marketing communication who believe that the activity as a whole is undesirable or only some aspects of the marketing communication activity are not justifiable on the basis of ethical principles. This study focuses on the ethical consideration within various activities of the marketing communication which may include advertising, sales promotion, PR and so on.

As Robin and Reidenbach (1993) pointed out, marketing communication is seen to be ethical or unethical based on the context in which they are applied. The consideration of ethics in marketing communication has been studied in various contexts such as truth telling through advertisements, treatment for vulnerable groups, representation of groups, infringement of personal privacy through direct marketing, images of women and men in advertising and stereotyping people, culture and region (Attas, 1999; Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002; Carrigan & Szmigin, 2003; Christy & Mitchell, 1999; Packard, 1960; Strachan & Pavie-Latour, 2008). However, no study has focused on sensible and ethical marketing communication in the scenario of natural calamity. This study offers an opportunity to explore and understand the phenomena of ethics for sensible communication by the brands in the scenario of devastating natural calamity.

3. Factors Influencing Ethical Marketing Communication

3.1 Personal, Organizational and Institutional Factors

It is quite interesting to know why brands adopt differing communication strategies in similar situations of devastation. In the Nepal earthquake, Airtel and Lenskart chose to do different marketing communications. It is critical to understand the factors

that actually differentiate both. Sparks and Hunt (1998, p. 92) pointed out various organizational factors which affect organizational ethical decision making, which includes, "the process of judging organizational practices, the impact of supervisory actions, the effect of Machiavellianism, the influence of cognitive moral development, the role of deontological norms and the role of the importance and moral intensity of ethical issues". Hunt & Vitell (1992) described a model of ethical decision making wherein sensing the ethical situation and feeling ethical sensitivity in the decision making process is a personality trait. As a result, some people never recognize the existence of the issue at all. The study identified variables like religion, individual value system, beliefs, strength of moral character and ethical sensitivity. Here, they consider ethical sensitivity as a personal characteristic which enables an individual to feel the presence of an ethical issue. Some authors have also pointed out the role of educational institutes like schools and colleges in instilling the sense of ethics. There is an influential relationship between the environment of an educational institution and the development of standards of ethics in students (Hawkins & Cocanougher, 1972). Thus, factors at personal, organizational and institutional levels have an influential role to play in ethical communication.

3.2 Contextual Factors

In addition to the factors mentioned above, context and motives are also vital while evaluating ethics in marketing communication. Clampitt (1991) has discussed three fundamental assumptions in relation to the communicator and the motives for ethical interventions in marketing communication. Firstly, each and every communication has one or the other ethical dimension. While choosing any communication, a communicator focuses on the feelings attached, information to be sent and motives. It is the receiver who takes a moral stance for any piece of communication. Secondly, he adds that marketing communication involves motives and their impact. There is the chance that a good motive was directed in a deceitful way. Lastly, while making decisions relating to ethical communication, one needs to understand who is communicating with whom, in what sense, where and when. Thus, motives and context of the communication

are important.

3.3 Competitive Environment

Eliashberg and Chatterjee (1985) have noted that a brand's marketing department keeps an eye on competitors' activities or conduct. A competitor's activities or industry practices are important driving factors for a brand's marketing strategies to gain competitive advantage. Johnson & Busbin (2000, p. 153) observed that competitive advantage has taken a "multidimensional character"; to be at the cutting edge, brands need to be effective at product strategies as well as marketing strategies. They added that to attain competitive advantage, a brand needs to be up to date with the flow of market information, distribution intensity and diversity, sophistication of customers and competitors etc. At the same time, competitive advantage can be hindered by "structural nature of the industry, networking, alliances and government interventions" (Johnson & Busbin, 2000, p. 153).

In the present scenario, digital marketing communication and its innovative tactics have added one more dimension to competitive advantage. Johnson & Busbin (2000, p. 153) noted that digital marketing has changed the form of "time based competition" introduced by Stalk and Hout in early 1990s, which focused on being faster than the competitor. Being faster would include being faster in response to market changes, faster in distribution channels and service to the customers, faster in new product development with the advent of technological changes. In the above mentioned form of competition, digitization has revolutionized information dissemination in an innovative way. The advances in information dissemination has generated concepts like buzz marketing, viral marketing, stealth marketing, word of mouth and Guerilla marketing.

Notarantonio and Quigley (2009) explained buzz and viral marketing as tempting customers or consumers to take the product, service, brand or any business function so that they involve themselves in the advocacy process by spreading the message to others. They added that in the process, the source of the message has prime importance due to its assumed objectivity. Commercial sources of the message are also important in spreading

awareness. But, word of mouth has a strong influence on innovation information adoption which is a more reliable source in consumer decision making (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Mahr & Chiagouris, 2005). Notarantonio and Quigley (2009) added that Word of Mouth (WOM) is a source of consumer dominated channel of marketing because it is assumed to be independent of marketer intervention. So, WOM is a more reliable, credible and trustworthy source of communication. Schweitzer (2005) defined Guerilla marketing as an unconventional way of promoting the brand wherein traditional media is no longer able to reach the targeted mass demographic. He added that Guerilla marketing comes with more engaging instruments with element of surprise and unconventional methods of connecting with the consumer through offensive modes of promotion. Thus, the above marketing communication tactics give leverage to brands on the digital platform due to their capability of faster and more innovative information dissemination.

In order to gain competitive advantage, such communication tactics have generated a blind race of sales promotion and in turn, brands follow insensitive communication as observed in examples of earthquake mentioned above. Within the area of ethical marketing in general, and ethical marketing communication in particular, no studies have put emphasis on the factor of competitive environment as a vital influencing factor for ethical marketing communication. This study would instigate this factor for future research.

4. Image Management

Nandan (2005) explained the concept of brand. He said that brands are intangible assets which help in shareholder value maximization by reflecting the true value of the firm, keeping in mind the benefits of both organization and consumer. He also added that brand identity is the company's reflection of their own self to the world and brand image refers to the image received or perceived by the consumer. Brands try to eliminate the gap between brand identity and brand image through their communicative messages over a period of time. But if the gap widens, companies need to do image

management by handling crises encountered by the organization. Hermann (1963) notes three fundamental characteristics of crisis which are surprise, threat and a short response time. In the same line of thought, "An organizational crisis is a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities and threats in relation to its high-priority goals" (Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2015, p. 7). In this paper, we mention threat as a threat to the image of the brand. Organizational crisis through any activity widens the gap between brand identity and brand image, which needs to be managed. Objectives of the crisis management are maintaining the organization's image, lessening the negative outcomes, and protecting stakeholders' rights (Pang, 2012). Pang (2012) also added that, the impact of the crisis on the image of the brand depends on three things: firstly, how strong the current image is, secondly, the magnitude and type of the crisis and lastly, how much media attention the event got. Crisis and/or Image Management should thus opt for organizational normalcy and seek to influence the perception of the audience.

In the process of regaining the image and to restore the brand image, Holtzhausen and Roberts (2009) suggested Image repair theory proposed by Benoit and Pang. Image repair theory in public relations has got its roots in two forms of rhetoric: political rhetoric and social science. This theory suggests five strategies to repair the image of a brand. First, denial: It is explained as the communicative agency's stance on denying the performance of the act or to transfer the responsibility to someone else's shoulder. Second, evasion of the responsibility: It caters to the argument that the event was merely an accident and unintentional on the part of the organization. Third, reduce the offensiveness of the act: It emerges from showcasing one's good traits or by reducing the importance of the act or by blaming the accuser or by providing compensation to the victim. Fourth, corrective action: It refers to the communicative agency's plans to resolve the issue. And lastly, mortification: It suggests apology for the event by the brand. According to the situation, the organization

would use either one strategy or a combination of a few to resolve the crisis. Thus, a brand can restore its image in a crisis situation through any of the ways.

5. Discussion and Future Direction

5.1 Empirical Investigation of Ethical Marketing Communication

Lenskart, American Swan and Troika faced criticism with plenty of comments on various social media platforms for their proclaimed (by the people) insensitive piece of communication. The same incident raised questions relating to ethicality in marketing communication. To evaluate the same, one need to look at it from multiple perspectives, which include company policies relating to ethical behavior, individual's cognitive moral development, individual personality traits, intentions behind representation and expression of the message, role of education institutions, context of the communication, and competitive environment. For instance, criticism on a piece of communication has proved brands to be guilty of a deed, which proved to be insensitive in a single time communication.

At this juncture, it is quite difficult to evaluate whether on a larger scale people have actually perceived brands to be unethical and if yes, then which are the contributing factors to it. And even among the contributing factors mentioned, it is difficult to know which factors contribute more and with what intensity. To ascertain the same in future research, executing the method of laddering is recommended. Laddering refers having in-depth interviews with customers and developing an analysis of how customers actually translate the attributes of the products/communication with meaningful attachment by considering their own self, following means-end theory (Gutman, 1982). Here, the very purpose of having in-depth interviews is to know the attributes (A), consequences (C) and values (V) associated with the insensitive piece of communication. Attributes and values would be the influencing factors for ethical marketing communication in the current study. Thus, execution of the laddering method would distinguish ethics of the brands and the perceived value associated with it, which in turn decides the basis for the brand or

piece of communication being ethical or unethical. Another measure for finding ethicality of the brand is "ethical brand index" introduced by Karen Fraser, which is one of the most accurate measurements of perceived image in relation to ethics (Arnold, 2009, p.16). Such measures would help us to gauge long term perceived image of brands relating to ethicality. The combination of laddering and ethical brand index would give us a proper indication for customer's point of view. Vary (2002) argued that the objective of marketing communication is to differentiate, remind, persuade and inform, not by an authoritarian way, but through collaboration and participation with the stakeholders in a specific context. Here, brands tossed insensitive communication without understanding the sentiments of the customers at a time of natural calamity.

5.2 Competitive Environment: A New Factor of Influence

Renowned semiotician, Barthes (1953) said that, denotations are not the first meaning of signs and messages but it pretends to be so, whereas connotations are more established and close to the reading of signs and messages. So, denotations and connotations together lead to meaning making of the phenomenon. With the connotative underpinnings, the communication messages of Lenskart and American Swan generated guilt-by-association for brands like Vincent Chase and Mobikwik. Guilt-by-association refers to the consumer judgments of higher perceived risk and lack of trust regarding a particular brand by associating with another brand whose brand image has been contaminated (Gao et al., 2013). Both the associates, Vincent Chase and Mobikwik, might have got negative word of mouth for getting involved in such a piece of communication. Secondly, Lenskart had floated its offer for people who were required to make it viral by communicating the same message to fifty more people in order to get the discount. In a way, it planned for buzz marketing or word of mouth from a devastating calamity. Sprague & Wells (2010) opined that customers are highly receptive of word of mouth communication and adaptive to messages from reliable sources. Such buzz marketing campaign could have been created on a festive season or by announcing season's sale in summer, but the brand

messed up with the unusual communication on the day of a disaster. Troika Consulting used the concept of Guerilla Marketing through its unconventional message for recruiting people for the social media team. Apparently, all the three brands had tried to get competitive advantage through these communication pieces but it did not work for them.

In the last few years, the e-commerce segment in India has become highly competitive with the presence of international and national brands. PWC Report (2014) noted that, this segment has grown three times in the last four years: by 12.6 billion USD in 2013, which would grow manifold in two more years. To grab the market in this competitive environment and to get competitive advantage each brand is keeping an eye on other brands' actions and industry practices. Parallel to it, frequent sales promotions have been a trend in the industry. As a result, every player in the market is catching up with faster market changes, faster distribution and services, and faster new product development. Such a race is motivating them to grab the opportunity to earn even through disastrous natural calamities. This leads them to insensitive communication for profit maximization, which generates a pitiful situation. Thus, competitive environment as an influential factor for ethical marketing communication would be a new avenue for future research.

5.3 Image Management

Brand identity is an organization's unique and differentiated offering to the target audience which ideally reflects in every single communication by the brand. In the present case, Lenskart communicated to "Shake it off like earthquake" (Khosla, 2015). In this piece of communication, what is to be shaken off is an ambiguity. In the same context, earthquake that is a disastrous event with plenty of attached sad emotions was clubbed with the ambiguous message. It points to the clear blunder in the communication. American Swan communicated, "Earth shattering offer" (Khosla, 2015), which had connotations of being surprised with the present offer. But, how could a person be surprised in the shock of the disaster? Such instances have placed the brands in an image crisis. Once the crisis

occurred, the brands tried to maintain the image and to lessen the negative word of mouth. After a few hours, they sent apologies for the communication to normalize the situation and to change the perceptive image already generated. But, till then social media and traditional media had captured the issue and ruptured their brand image significantly. According to Image Repair Theory, brands performed the strategies of mortification, evasion of responsibility, and reduction in the offensiveness of the act. They intended to prove the messages unintentional and conveyed that they were merely an accident. Through their act, they curtailed the importance of the event in an effort to influence the perceived image in the minds of consumers. But, actually how effective they were poses a question of exploration with empirical studies in future.

6. Conclusion

Out of the 4P's of marketing, promotion is one of the significant parameters which drive the firm's success. Marketing of promotional communication has a significant impact on consumer psychology and their behavior in the consumer market. Ethicality in every communication campaign plays a very vital role in generating a good brand image for the organization. At a micro level, an organization's corporate policies, individual's cognitive moral development, individual personality traits, intentions behind representation or expression, context of the communication, are the most influencing factors for any irresponsible or deceptive communication. At the macro level, a rush for getting competitive advantage in the digital age motivates the marketer to use marketing tactics such as, viral marketing, buzz marketing, stealth marketing and guerilla marketing, in unethical ways. Plus, environment of educational institutions also plays a vital role. Such macro and micro factors leading to unethical practices widens the gap between brand identity and brand image, which in turn generates crisis situations for the brand. According to the Image Repair Theory, communicating agency's crisis situation can be handled by five strategies out of which evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, and mortification were used by Lenskart, American Swan and Troika.

Though quite often utilitarianism decides the moral worth of ethicality of the communication from the customer point of view, there is the need to dig deep and explore the underpinning factors which matter for ethical marketing communication with the intervention of both customers and marketers.

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