

THE USE OF FACEBOOK BY AIRASIA AND EASYJET TO MANAGE CORPORATE BRANDING

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Abstract

Since the emergence of social media, businesses of various industries including airlines have been constantly challenged by the digital platform. The fact that social media empowers the customers to give feedbacks that are visible to the online community, the way a brand manages its social media platforms do have an impact to their branding. For AirAsia and EasyJet as low-cost airlines players, social media is more than just about presence, it is about extending customer services and enhancing branding. This paper is studying how AirAsia and EasyJet leverage Facebook to engage with the online customers. Through content analyses and focus groups as the research instrument, postings and interactions of the two low-cost airlines on Facebook pages have been analyzed. It is revealed the two airlines are active with promotional contents that attract interactions with the customers. It is noted that postings and online interactions on Facebook pages influence the corporate branding of AirAsia and EasyJet as individual brands.

Keywords: social media, branding, low-cost airlines

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Introduction

Businesses and brands all around the world have been “forced” to adapt the way they communicate with the public evidently after the emergence of social media. The way brands communicate with the stakeholders especially general consumers is evidently has shifted. Social media has empowered the public with communication platform to share their bad and/or good experiences directly to brands and it is visible to everyone. Pridmore et al. (2013) stated that the fact that social media is expanding from day to day, it opens a vast opportunity for brands to communicate and engage with the consumers through bits and bytes of the social media.

Acknowledged as an ‘open source branding’ platform, Avery and Fournier (2011) recommended that all brands to seize the opportunity to enhance corporate branding. The diversification of communication channels across multiple communication platforms either on traditional or social media is inevitable especially with the ongoing technological drive. With an integrated communication channel, it helps brands to improve their brandings and messages more effectively.

Similarly, the usage of social media as a part of communication channels has been adopted by airlines industry. As the industry deals with a lot of customers every day, social media is deemed a great way to deal with the online customers. It enables the airlines company to disperse a lot of customers into smaller publics on different channels inexpensively through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and even the traditional media. Low-cost airlines and social media are seen as a good combination as both terms promote cost-efficiency. The idea of inexpensive cost of social media fits the values of low-cost airlines – cheap fares, destination-to-destination and no-frills (Karivate, 2004; Alderighi et al. 2004).

As for presence on social media, both AirAsia and EasyJet have a strong presence especially on Facebook. It is noted that both airlines have high numbers of followers on social media that is seen as a good chance for them to deliver and mould their brandings among the customers and non-customers. Djiksman et al. (2015) proposed that exposure on social media come in two forms. The first one is self-imposed exposure that refers to activities carried out by the followers themselves such as following, liking and writing comments. Secondly, involuntary exposure which refers to force-to-view contents through boosted postings and paid advertisements.

With the increasing number of social media users, many businesses feel at stake to always enhance their own branding and reputation. The same goes to AirAsia and EasyJet, whereby failing in managing online customers may have an impact in damaging their branding and reputation. Therefore, this research will be identifying how the two airlines use social media – to their advantage or otherwise.

Theories

3-Stage Branding

Hebert (2011) proposed that the theory focuses three key components – design, value proposition and positioning statement that involved in establishing a brand in the consumers’ mind. Design refers to colours, logos, catchphrases, slogan and other imagery that enable the customers to differentiate brands. As for value proposition, it refers to the differentiating or

specific elements of a marketed or perceived products to add value to customers. Lastly, positioning statement is the way of a service or product is stored in the customers' mind. By using this theory as a guide, the social media- associated branding component of AirAsia and EasyJet has been analyzed, helping to project the current state of each airline from the eyes of the consumers.

2-Way Symmetrical Public Relations Model

Grunig and Hunt (1894) as cited in Butterick (2011) stated that two-way symmetrical proposes that businesses should do more than just conveying persuasive messages but to engage in direct communications with the stakeholders especially through listening, learning and adapting the publics. In brief, this theory suits with this research to study the two-way communication and acceptance between the low-cost airlines (AirAsia and EasyJet) and their respective audiences. By gauging the communication and existing interaction through social media channels, a concrete justification can be made on the state of branding of both airlines.

Methodology

As this research involved analysing a large amount secondary data on Facebook pages, therefore, content analysis has been used as the research methods. The gathered, analysed and quantified data had enabled the researcher to derive patterns and to form valid arguments and conclusions for this research (Jennings, 2010).

Content analysis is frequently used in researches that involve analysing a large amount of secondary data such as newspaper, texts, books, websites and even social media postings such as Facebook postings to quantify the frequency of specific words, patterns, ideas or any other forms of visible and readable information. The results are drawn from content analysis within a set of materials and within a specific time frame allow the researcher to validate a hypothesis and to address research questions (Mayring, 2000).

This method has given various valuable data which are useful for the researchers to address the research questions on the use of social media to manage corporate branding by both AirAsia and EasyJet. All the data from content analysis is recorded and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Focus group is another method used for this research. The main focus for focus group is to understand how the customers perceive and view the reputation of both airlines. Focus groups are suitable for this research as it provides a clear view of different opinions, acceptance and understanding about the use of social media by AirAsia and EasyJet in the context of customers' perspective. Since the focus groups were conducted in a small size discussion, it enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the opinions and issues relating to this topic and to get clear details to answer the research questions (Jennings 2010).

The researchers conducted four focus groups, had managed to gather wide-ranging feedbacks from Asian, European and Malaysian participants on the use of social media to manage individual brands and reputation by the two airlines.

Group	Background	Total
A (All Asians)	1 from Hong Kong 1 from Thailand 1 from Malaysia 2 from China	5
B (All Europeans)	2 from the United Kingdom 1 from Romania 1 from Greece	4
C (Mix of Asians and Europeans)	1 from Singapore 1 from China 1 from Germany 1 from Romania	4
D (All Malaysians)	6 from Malaysia	6
Total of participants		19

Table 1: Focus Groups Participants

Samples

Due to a different amount of data and limitations on Facebook, the samples were selected differently from each platform. The following is the summary table of the sample selection for posting and interactions from both platforms:

Platform	Sample size	Time frame	Selection method
Facebook posting	All postings available each day	30 May 2016 until 14 June 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All available postings
Facebook interaction	30 per day from each account		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One sample after every fifth comment Samples collected equally depending on number of posting each day. If there are 30 or less interactions in a day, all available interactions will be recorded.

Table 2: Selection of sample from Facebook

Data Analysis

All the data from content analysis is recorded on coding sheets and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The coding sheets capture the themes of postings such as themes of postings, frequency of interaction and brand propositions.

As for the data from focus groups conducted, they were categorized thematically according to its appropriateness. The data then used to support the argument and to substantiate the findings.

Findings

A total of 28 and 11 Facebook postings were posted by AirAsia and EasyJet respectively from 30 May to 14 June 2016. Table 2 below shows that AirAsia had one to three postings every day while the number of postings from EasyJet was inconsistent. As for the number of interactions, AirAsia recorded a similar pattern with a total of 480 interactions while EasyJet had 160.

Date	Facebook Posting		Facebook Interaction	
	AirAsia	EasyJet	AirAsia	EasyJet
30 May 2016	2	-	30	-
31 May 2016	1	1	30	10
1 June 2016	2	-	30	-
2 June 2016	2	4	30	30
3 June 2016	1	-	30	-
4 June 2016	2	-	30	-
5 June 2016	2	-	30	-
6 June 2016	1	1	30	20
7 June 2016	1	-	30	-
8 June 2016	2	-	30	-
9 June 2016	1	1	30	30
10 June 2016	3	1	30	100
11 June 2016	2	1	30	30
12 June 2016	3	-	30	-
13 June 2016	1	2	30	30
14 June 2016	2	-	30	-
Total	28	11	480	160

Table 3: Summary of Facebook Postings and Interactions by AirAsia and EasyJet

Themes of postings

AirAsia's highest posting accounted for travel fare promotions with 28.57% postings. Postings about travel destinations including their partners or subsidiaries followed afterwards, with both recording 21.43% each. AirAsia's Facebook page had posted quite a number of postings about their inflight magazine called *Travel3Sixty* and their subsidiaries called Tune Hotel as part of their promotional strategies. Themes such as festival, celebration and others were not too significant with only two postings each.

The majority of EasyJet's Facebook usage is to promote travel destinations 36.36%. Despite the low number of Facebook postings by EasyJet, it is found that the themes of postings were quite balanced between these three; fare promotion, contest/event and partners/subsidiaries with 18.18% each. The similarities between AirAsia and EasyJet can be derived from here where both airlines focus on using Facebook for promotional purposes – fares and destinations.

Overview of Analysed Data from Focus Groups

For this research, four focus groups were conducted. 19 people were assigned into four groups comprised of four to six participants in each group. All participants are originally from Asian and European countries.

From the focus group findings, it is discovered that the majority of the customers are positive towards the engagement by the two airlines. Despite the glitches they had encountered, engaging on social media has become an expectation from the businesses especially airlines. The production of content also played an important role to attract and retain customers. Social media is indeed the fastest way towards it, but comprehensive planning and rampant execution are required to maximise the benefits of social media

Therefore, after analysing the findings from content analysis and focus group findings, it is revealed that in general, customers are happy with the engagement of AirAsia and EasyJet on social media. They are attracted to content related that promotion and destinations. This matter seems to be highly embraced by the two airlines especially AirAsia as they evidently utilise social media more consistently to market their products and at managing customers. It confirms Nielson's (2012) suggestion that social media can be used to connect with customers and to promote brands' products and service.

From the focus group findings, it is found that AirAsia and EasyJet have a really strong branding as low-cost airlines on social media and among the customers. Their secondary branding is about the various travel routes that both airlines have. These two branding propositions are similar with the findings obtained from the content analysis. Thus, it has given more validity to the findings and answers for the research question.

All in all, from the findings of content analysis and focus groups, it is revealed that these two airlines' branding as 'low-cost carrier' is very well-known among the customers. Due to that fact, it is evident that they both are trying to bring other branding propositions forward. The most prominent branding that they have on social media is about their travel routes to various places while at the same time, always come out with seasonal promotions, discounts and rewards to reemphasise the 'low-cost' branding as suggested by Kohli (2015). Ultimately, to stand out among other competitors and to be front of mind when customers wish to fly on low-cost airlines.

Branding Propositions

AirAsia's Facebook page has embarked in diversifying their branding messages from more just the "low-cost" proposition which mainly operation-related. From the data collected, it is evident that AirAsia placed "various destination routes" as their top branding proposition with 42.86%.

The airlines also branded themselves as a “friendly/thoughtful” company with 25% and followed by 21.43% proposition of being an “affordable and cheap airlines”.

It is found that AirAsia mostly branded themselves to be seen as a cheap and an affordable airline that offers various destination routes on social media. In addition to this, the majority of their routes are within Asia, and their customers are mainly Asians, especially South East Asians, which have various races and spoken languages. Hence, it can be seen that AirAsia portrayed that they are a culturally and religious sensitive entity. This can be reflected from the variation of languages on their postings too.

EasyJet’s overall brand proposition on Facebook was mainly about their nature of business; ‘cheap and affordable airline’ 54.55%. Dissimilar to AirAsia, EasyJet used Facebook to portray themselves as ‘current news conscioues and ‘finally stable entity’ with 27.27% and 18.18% respectively.

The brand propositions placed by EasyJet on social media mainly pertained to their core business values on being cheap and affordable, alongside with various destination routes. These brandings are very similar to AirAsia. EasyJet’s social media is more active in portraying their routes rather than mentioning about their prices. This is due to the fact that EasyJet is well-known for their all-year-round cheap fares; thus, not much emphasis is required.

The Reputation

Content Analysis Findings

It is found that EasyJet did not use Facebook as efficient as AirAsia. This may be due to the fact that they are not as active as AirAsia on Facebook. However, it can be considered that EasyJet used social media as a way to manage reputation by attending to customers in a timely manner, which helped to reduce negative impacts over any issues they may have on the ground, such as flight delays and cancellation.

As stated Powell (2013) in the literature, online reputation including social media is highly depending on how well it is being comprehended. Complaints, negative comments and even normal inquiries cater to a good reputation. Therefore, the findings from content analysis revealed that in comparison, AirAsia is more active on Facebook than EasyJet in terms of response. The rate of response and resolutions of the two airlines too are an indicator on how well social media is being managed that will shape the reputation.

Focus Groups Findings

The majority of the participants acknowledged that AirAsia has a better social media reputation in comparison to EasyJet due to the differences in social media interactions. However, both airlines are still considered as reputable. Majority of them noted that EasyJet is selective and rarely reply to any comments on Facebook. This validated the findings from the content analysis on their rate of response in comparison to AirAsia. Despite any issues, crisis and reputational problems the two airlines have encountered or are facing, all participants are still in favour to use their services, especially when prioritizing cheaper and affordable budgets.

It can be seen that these airlines use social media to manage and enhance reputations. The key element is to improve the response rate and crisis communications simply through it. Even

though the majority of the participants care less about their reputation, it is still vital for them to lessen the adverse impact if any negative issues and crisis occur.

It is also revealed that in a time of crisis, social media is expected to be more active to update the customers as real-time information can be conveyed directly without much hindrance. This will help to safeguard if not enhance the reputation and credibility of the information disseminated.

Conclusion

As social media is known to empower and enable a two-way communication between customers and brands, its overwhelming volume of interactions had been and always be a real challenge for AirAsia and EasyJet to cope with.

From the content analysis, it is revealed that both airlines used social media to engage the public through contents that were appealing and closely associated with their values of 'low-cost'. Contents such as ticket promotions and vacation destinations were the most common themes of postings of the two airlines on Facebook. These types of contents attracted positive engagements among the customers. In addition, using social media for promotion purposes was relatively cheaper than traditional promotional channels, such as print and broadcast advertisements. Although both airlines appeared on traditional media, they used social media more frequently and creatively by crafting their postings with attractive and interesting images as well as videos. Despite the significant difference in terms of the number of postings between AirAsia and EasyJet, it is found that both airlines posted on similar themes – vacation destinations and travel fare promotions. Thus, it can be concluded that AirAsia and EasyJet used social media to engage with their customers mainly through and for promotional information. With encouraging responses from the customers too, it is concluded that promotion is the key for low-cost airlines to engage on social media.

In terms of branding, it is found that AirAsia and EasyJet had a very strong 'low-cost' branding; both on Facebook and among the customers. Through Facebook, it can be seen that these two airlines portrayed themselves more than just being 'cheap and affordable'. Significantly, they branded themselves as being cultural and religious sensitive, active in CSR and always updated with the current news. However, these brandings are not as strong if they were to exist and remain as their current branding. More visibility on the social media is needed for other brandings to be seen and remembered by customers.

As for reputation, these two airlines evidently used social media to manage reputation through two ways. The first way was through customer relations; a contributing aspect towards reputation. Customer relations, as regarded in the focus groups, was hard to manage, yet was believed to be compulsory on social media. AirAsia was seen more efficient compared to EasyJet in terms of the rate of response and issue resolution on Facebook. Secondly, both airlines had conducted issue and crisis communications management. AirAsia evidently had experiences dealing with a plane crash, which they communicated on it well through social media. Thus, this contributed to their reputation, in which they were perceived as great in the low-cost airline industry. For EasyJet, they never had any major crisis, whereby their most common reputable issue was operations. Through the focus groups and social media interactions, EasyJet was identified to be commonly associated with 'flight delays and cancellations'. Even though resolving operational matters on the social media seems impossible, good communication and responses are needed to rescue their reputation. EasyJet did receive numerous complaints about flight delays on their social media, but they responded well to almost all of them. Thus, this explained why most customers perceived EasyJet's

reputation as good. All in all, AirAsia and EasyJet have a good reputation, but there are rooms for improvements. Therefore, it can be concluded that social media has influences on social media, especially through their efficiency to address customer-related matters as well as on issues and crises.

In short, social media is a widely-used platform by airlines, especially for the low-cost carriers, as a medium to connect with the customers. It offers great potential for brand and reputation enhancement in this industry. However, comprehensive and precautionary steps must be considered before indulging fully on social media, especially in terms of response time, contents and identity, as a slight mistake on social media can cost damage on branding and reputation.

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