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ENHANCING A BRAND WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF MERCHANDISE AND A SOCIAL
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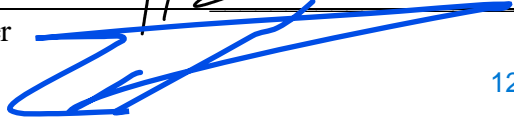
by

Rachel Imming

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
 for the Degree of Master of Science in Digital Marketing
 at
 Lindenwood University

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ENHANCING A BRAND WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF MERCHANDISE AND A SOCIAL
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Digital Marketing Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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By

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ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: Enhancing a Brand with the Introduction of Merchandise and a Social Media Content Schedule

Rachel Imming, Master of Science/Digital Marketing, 2023

Thesis Directed by: Professor Andrew Smith, Associate Professor of Communications for the College of Arts and Humanities

This project focuses on how to enhance a brand by incorporating merchandise for the brand and utilizing a social media content schedule to push out content consistently and uniformly. The primary beneficiary of this project is J.E.D.I. BrewCo, a small craft brewery out of Southern Illinois. The aim of the project is to study the important aspects of marketing and brand awareness, in order to help a brand better promote themselves. Ultimately, the project studies consumer engagement, advertising, experiential marketing, storytelling, and consumer behavior to help brands understand how these things affect and aid their business.

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I would also like to thank my husband and my parents for their constant support and encouragement throughout my time in graduate school.

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Introduction

After 5 years as an LLC, J.E.D.I. BrewCo is looking to increase their brand awareness and in turn hopes to increase their revenue. The current project of a social media content schedule will help keep J.E.D.I. BrewCo consistently in people's social media feeds and allow for more organic advertising as supporters will have more posts to share. It will also give J.E.D.I. BrewCo the opportunity to boost posts if they choose in order to reach more potential consumers. This project goes hand in hand with the prior project of merchandise sales implementation for J.E.D.I. BrewCo. In realizing that there are many companies who sell merchandise and do so well, the researcher contacted some of these companies to gain some insight, tips, and tricks for incorporating merchandise into a small, up-and-coming brand. The researcher has also gathered information regarding the benefit of social media posting and scheduling. As research has shown, storytelling and humanizing brands can be of great impact. As Hede and Watne stated, "narratives enable consumers to feel a connection or belonging with brands" (209). In the researchers' work with J.E.D.I. BrewCo, a small craft brewery, they have seen this play out. By sharing the story of J.E.D.I. BrewCo's inception, their continued work, and their future dreams and endeavors, they have garnered a decent following. However, they would like to see that following grow and expand both within their community and their social media following. After many years and several events with consumers asking for merchandise, J.E.D.I. BrewCo is working to incorporate merchandise sales for their small business. As the researcher is working to create a social media content schedule for J.E.D.I. BrewCo for the 2024 year, the researcher strives to introduce the sales of merchandise within that plan. This in turn will help grow their audience, push people to their website for merchandise sales, and ultimately generate more revenue for the company.

Literature Review

Almost all businesses, from small to large, have a brand nowadays. There is marketing and advertising that go along with that brand to create brand awareness. Many of these businesses come up with all kinds of ways to showcase their brand in hopes of growing it. Two focused efforts are social media content and the selling of merchandise, or apparel, for others to represent the brand. Through peer reviewed research regarding consumer engagement, advertising, experiential marketing, storytelling, and consumer behavior it is clear that both social media content and merchandise sales could assist with enhancing a brand. However, on the merchandise side of it, there is not much research into the effect of incorporating these merchandise sales for brands. Most of the available research is specific to retail companies rather than non-retail companies, and it is very generic.

Consumer Engagement

Key to a brand's survival, consumer engagement is of extreme importance. With social media as popular as it is, having a presence on social media platforms and consistently posting on them is necessary. Doing so can help increase brand awareness and also brand recognition. In a study by Unnava and Aravindakshan, they mention that "because consumers use multiple social media, brand communications on one platform could generate engagement within the same platform (direct effects) and potentially impact engagement with the brand on the other platforms (spillover effects). Additionally, past engagement with a post on a platform could sustain into the future, thereby improving the longevity of posts (carryover effects)" (p. 864). This study provides support for businesses to utilize multiple social media platforms when sharing content. In another study by Alibakhshi and Srivastava, they discuss the incorporation of the new story feature on some social media platforms. They discovered "that the introduction of the story feature reduces the frequency of SM [social media] post creation, but the

enhanced self-disclosure through the story feature increases follower engagement with the SM posts” (p. 573). This ties into the storytelling aspect of marketing that will be elaborated on later.

As mentioned above, a large factor in helping to increase consumer engagement and overall brand awareness is the frequency and consistency of posting. Kanuri et al. mentions how a “formidable challenge is to design a systematic framework that enables social media managers to design profit-maximizing social media schedules” (p. 104). While their study was specific to content platforms like newspapers and magazines, a few of their takeaways can be applied to an everyday business working on creating a social media schedule, and they are (1) timing of social media posts matter, (2) post appropriate content type at the right time, and (3) spend advertising dollars wisely (p. 104-105). By focusing on these specific strategies, businesses are likely to see higher engagement. Additionally, having a schedule built out in advance will simply make their day-to-day job easier. In a separate study by Cuevas-Molano et al., they too found that the scheduling of content and the length of said content mattered. They “suggest that marketing managers increase their publications in the central part of the week, prior to working hours and with a longer message length, providing more information and rich content to engage their brand followers” (p. 84). Overall, it’s important to consider these seemingly small details as they can have a large impact on the performance of a post.

Advertising

Advertising is of great importance for any company. However, in retail specific scenarios, according to research by Zenetti and Klapper, “results suggest, for instance, that advertising is more effective for buyers without recent brand experiences” (365). Zenetti and Klapper continue on to say that retailers should be “aligning their marketing strategies with the effects from advertising, for example, via special pricing and support activities to fully benefit from thorough knowledge of consumer demand”

(366). An important piece of advertising for a brand is social media. Brand value can be determined through social media. Found in a study by Mathur, “the psychological needs that drive individuals to conform to the expectation of others and accept social influence are key to determining how retailers can generate social media equity through social media marketing activities” (511). In the world of craft beer, many choose to work hand and hand with each other. Kraus et al. found that “cooperation between competing craft breweries can relate to, for instance, the assistance in equipment and materials, mutual marketing activities, exchange of know-how, experiences and information, or even joint development of new products through collaboration brews” (61). Most craft breweries are looking to support each other in order to further the interest in the craft beer industry. Even Kraus et al. mention that “although craft brewers know that the other breweries are, by definition, competitors, they are unified by the mutual cause to proselytizing the craft beer trend even further and inform people about the unique varieties of craft beer” (57). An example of growth in the craft beer industry, PR Newswire highlighted the Beerhead Bar & Eatery franchise in December 2019. They mentioned that Beerhead “has shown impressive growth and development for the brand, including a guest rewards program, a new website, launch of mobile ordering and retail merchandise website, and a new menu” (Beerhead Bar). Examples like this show that various developments can truly assist with brand enhancement and overall brand equity.

Experiential Marketing

Many consumers are looking for an experience when they make their purchase decisions. Research has shown that “marketers need to understand that their products are creations with lives of their own, interpreted vicariously by consumers, creating very individual experiences and identities” (Williams 364). As both new and old business owners look to enhance their brand, they need to consider the experiences their brand can create for consumers. “The premise behind marketing experientially is that it connects audiences with the essence of a product through participation in personally relevant,

credible, memorable encounters” (Williams 365). When a consumer first encounters a brand, they like to learn about the company and the background behind the brand. If the consumer can find a connection with the brand, it can then help with their loyalty and their willingness to share and review the brand. Research done by Melewar and Skinner for a small company, Corfu Microbrewery, showed that “the company does recognize that tourists want to have souvenirs of their visit, and that the Corfu Beer logo represents a strong identifiable brand” (903). As Smith and Asirvatham state, “craft brewery is growing in popularity and is considered an activity to include as part of a local tourism marketing mix” (132). Smith and Asirvatham also mentioned that “a few elements are essential if a craft brewery is to attract tourism dollars. One such element is an authentic experience, an experience that is reflective of the region in which the craft beer is being brewed” (123). By incorporating the experience, consumers are more likely to purchase items to remind them of their experience and then be able to share these stories with others.

Storytelling

Playing alongside experiential marketing is the idea of storytelling. Many people resonate or even identify with an individual or company’s story behind their products. As Hede and Watne state, “narratives enable consumers to feel a connection or belonging with brands. Humans can create and/or relay narratives to others, or add or exclude information from them” (209). J.E.D.I. BrewCo has experienced connection with consumers when it comes to their story from starting in a basement to making their way into the small business world. Another important part of storytelling is the sense of place that companies or products can provide a consumer. Hede and Watne also mention that they “identified that a SoP (sense of place) is evident in many of the craft breweries’ brand narratives, and that this appears to assist them to humanize their brands” (213). In speaking with J.E.D.I. BrewCo’s head brew master, he also agreed with Hede and Watne in that “brand humanization is now an almost essential

element of a branding strategy” (218). Utilizing social media, and specifically the story function within certain platforms, businesses can share the raw and real, behind the scenes type or everyday type of content that consumers are looking to connect with businesses on.

Consumer Behavior

The consumer behavior of craft beer drinkers can be niche. As Boger, Kwon, and Ritter found, “beer style marketers should identify beer style consumers who are satisfied with their beer style and should ask them to make public testimonials about their beer style to increase their personal level of beer style loyalty and to attract other consumers to the beer style” (2180). J.E.D.I. BrewCo considers their beer style to be more for those who may be scared of the craft beer industry. These people may think all craft beers are too hoppy or too heavy to drink. However, they also understand how some consumers can be committed to a specific type of beer and want to focus on support of that style of beer only. With this, as mentioned by Boger et al., “beer style consumers can make public commitment through advertisements, social media, in-bar promotions or other avenues where they can be asked to express their commitment by defending or spreading positive WoM (word of mouth) about their beer style” (2180). In a case study completed by McQuiston and Caldwell, they decided that the main focus was to “evaluate ways to increase brand awareness for Scarlet Lane by discovering the brewery’s key points of difference” (56). In doing this, Scarlet Lane Brewing Company could find their niche consumers.

Research Methodology

In working on a social media content schedule and guide for enhancing a brand with the introduction of merchandise, a qualitative methodology has been used for research. This method was chosen due to the lack of specific past research done on the topic, especially in regard to merchandise.

The researcher was able to find some helpful articles and case studies that gave some general information to apply, but it was discovered that a more exploratory method was going to be needed for research. Therefore, the researcher looked into website sources in order to gain some first-hand experience for the actual selling of merchandise for a company. Additionally, some time was spent on J.E.D.I. BrewCo's website development platform, Wix, to specifically learn how to incorporate online merchandise sales for them. The researcher also contacted several companies to try and gain some primary research through interviews. Two companies responded with the willingness to answer some questions. The companies were Boulevard Brewing Company in Kansas City, Missouri and Pinckney Bend Distillery in New Haven, Missouri. Boulevard's Merchandising Manager, Alyssa Broadus, has been with Boulevard Brewing Company for over nine years, and the researcher sent Alyssa the following interview questions:

Question #1: When did Boulevard start selling merchandise, and how was it sold? (online, gift shop, events, stores, etc.)

Question #2: What are all the ways Boulevard sells merchandise today, and which has been the most profitable form of sales?

Question #3: How does Boulevard decide what types of merchandise to sell?

Question #4: Do you have a specific designer for your merchandise?

Question #5: Boulevard has a lot of merchandise specific to the various beers and seltzers made there. Was this a strategic marketing move for Boulevard, and do you think this has helped with sales?

Question #6: Does Boulevard typically release new merchandise for all new products, or just the more popular or in-season ones?

Question #7: Have you ever tried advertising any merchandise as limited edition and if so, how did that go?

Question #8: What types of advertising does Boulevard do for their merchandise, and what's been the most successful?

Question #9: What do you think are some good, inexpensive merchandise items for a small business to consider selling?

Question #10: Who manufactures your merchandise, and what does the turnaround time look like?

Question #11: How much stock do you keep for your merchandise items?

Question #12: Do you think consumers in the craft beer industry today are truly only interested in the beer? Or, do you think consumers are starting to care more about the story behind the beer?

Question #13: What is your opinion on the value of merchandise sales for a company in the food and beverage industry?

Pinckney Bend's Chief Operating Officer, Tara Steffens, was sent the same questions excluding numbers five and six due to the specificity of the questions.

In reviewing the information collected from the interviews, the researcher noticed a few common themes. Both Alyssa and Tara mentioned the use of multiple vendors for their merchandise, as well as using local vendors as much as they can. They also both mentioned stickers as one of their suggestions for good, inexpensive merchandise. Lastly, they both agreed that the story behind the beer or company is important and that merchandise is necessary for brand building and advertising. This information has also helped in identifying direction for J.E.D.I. BrewCo's merchandise implementation. While the

researcher has not had a formalized meeting with all of J.E.D.I. BrewCo's partners, discussions have been had with a couple of them and so far, there seems to be a consensus. They would like to have stickers made as well as continue with their current offerings of hats, t-shirts, polo shirts, and tank tops. Depending on the time of year, they would also like to try and incorporate some seasonal items such as bucket hats and sweatshirts. For these merchandise items J.E.D.I. BrewCo has and would like to continue to support local vendors in Southern Illinois or the St. Louis Metro area. If J.E.D.I. BrewCo experiences some growth over the next several years, it is also an interest of theirs to open a microbrewery and in that case, merchandise would look to be sold there as well. Overall, J.E.D.I. BrewCo would like to truly utilize their merchandise as marketing and as Tara mentions “we want to make sure it’s something that shows the logo, gets the logo or message out there, and something people are proud to wear or display or use” (Steffens).

Production and Analysis

With interviews completed and secondary research explored, the researcher was able to create their guide for enhancing a brand with the introduction of merchandise, as well as a social media content schedule for J.E.D.I. BrewCo. For the guide, the researcher was able to extract helpful information and tips from the interviews and paired that with research done regarding advertising and storytelling in order to create the guide. An infographic is the method through which this guide is presented, and it will be able to serve both J.E.D.I. BrewCo and other companies as they work to incorporate merchandise with the goal of enhancing their brand. It has basic, introductory level directions along with tips, tricks, and suggestions to help kickstart merchandise sales. For the social media content schedule, research was done specific to consumer engagement and consumer behavior. This helped to reinforce the importance of a consistent posting schedule while also ensuring that the consumer audience is considered. The researcher utilized this information while creating a social media

content schedule which consists of a post each week for 2024 for J.E.D.I. BrewCo. The posts vary from holiday related posts to beer specific posts to personnel posts. Some of the posts help direct traffic to J.E.D.I. BrewCo's website and some help point consumers to an app called Untappd to leave a review for J.E.D.I. BrewCo or "check-in" to let others know they're drinking J.E.D.I. BrewCo beer. The researcher also created some additional content outside of the weekly posts in order to help showcase J.E.D.I. BrewCo as an expert in their field, as well as help promote some of their own beer. A series titled "Beer...It Isn't Scary!" was created to help share information to consumers about the various styles and types of craft beer out there. This was decided on because many people are unfamiliar with the different styles and types of craft beer and therefore don't even try any of them. Overall, the social media content schedule and the "Beer...It Isn't Scary!" series will greatly help J.E.D.I. BrewCo's overall social media presence, and hopefully their brand awareness as well.

The researchers' recommendations for J.E.D.I. BrewCo moving forward are to first discuss and solidify as a team the merchandise desired to be created and sold both in person at events and online through their website. Once this is determined, orders can be placed, and timelines can be established for the official merchandise release on the website. Having dates in place, J.E.D.I. BrewCo can then incorporate announcements for the release through the social media content schedule, as well as create additional merchandise related content to be included when they best see fit. It will also be of importance for J.E.D.I. BrewCo to continue with content creation overall, not just specific to merchandise. While they definitively have one post a week for 2024, along with the "Beer...It Isn't Scary!" series, they will want to increase their content sharing if they'd like to continue to increase their social media presence and brand awareness.

Conclusion

When speaking with J.E.D.I. BrewCo's partners, the researcher and the partners concluded that the selling of merchandise as well as more of a social media presence were top priority for them. So, overall, these projects were of great necessity. A plus in creating the merchandise guide is that other businesses will also be able to learn about introducing merchandise for their brand. However, the guide is relatively introductory level, so if a business is looking for more in-depth information, they likely will not garner that from the researcher's guide. Most of the research currently available is only for retail businesses, so it was difficult to give insight into the effects of merchandise sales for non-retail specific businesses. When it comes to social media, though, there is a plethora of research. There is not a lot specific to the creation of social media content schedules, though. The research mainly points to the importance of utilizing social media and knowing how to use it effectively. Ultimately, these projects have and will continue to help J.E.D.I. BrewCo build their brand and they could do so for others as well.

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