

Social Media Marketing: BirchBox



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Introduction

The company BirchBox was founded in 2010 by Katia Beauchamp and Hayley Barna two graduates from Harvard University. The company specializes in monthly subscription boxes that are sent to their subscribers with 5 sample beauty and lifestyle products. This company, who offers an assortment of unique, high-end and quality products, is what first got me hooked at the beginning of last summer. \$10 a month was all it cost, and as I eagerly awaited the arrival of my first BirchBox, little did I know I was going to get so much more. Throughout this paper I will be analyzing two social media platforms that BirchBox uses to promote their essentially e-commerce store, and how the value proposition to their customer reaches beyond the products in the box and expands out into their social media experience.

Ever since I had started receiving my BirchBoxes I felt like I was getting so much more than 5 tiny little samples. It had all started with one of their monthly sneak peeks they had posted on their YouTube channel. The great thing about BirchBox is that within their social media planning they extend the value of their products through lifestyle tips. Through these lifestyle tips they allow customers to easily engage in their social media by implementing these tips and sharing feedback through this social interaction. I believe that BirchBox does well in engaging their users, and struggles with this challenge based on the social media platforms that they use. The two social media platforms that I will be focusing on will be tumblr and YouTube. Retrospectively, I have shared that it was their YouTube content that engaged me at first. However, I also utilize tumblr and was unaware of BirchBox's presence on this platform until starting this project. My goal in analyzing BirchBox's social media strategy is to compare and contrast these two social media platforms over a three month period to determine how BirchBox's organic content promotes their value proposition, expands their current target market, and defines their positioning in the market comparatively through their tumblr and YouTube platforms.

Method

To gather information about these two platforms I systematically monitored BirchBox's organic content. For BirchBox's YouTube channel I view BirchBox's staple posts which include monthly sneak peeks and 5 things to try. I also mixed a few other videos into see how they would increase the value of their social media through tips & tricks and specialty boxes. Together I wanted to analyze the value generated in these videos along with how they adapt the videos to fit potential new markets and adjust their positioning through external forces happening in the market.

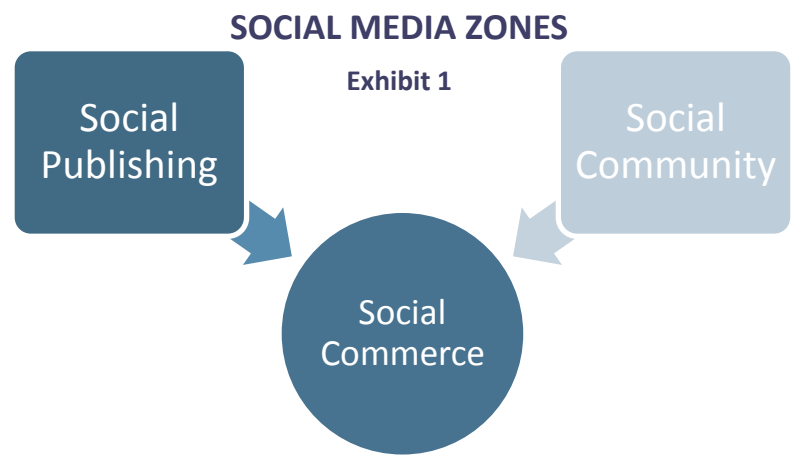
To gather data on the tumblr platform I would look for specific organic material created by BirchBox that had the most positive feedback by followers. By comparing all of these organic posts I hoped to draw a conclusion about the similarities in these posts and find a direction in which BirchBox could improve their marketing strategy. By improving their marketing strategy on their tumblr platform, BirchBox will be able to better position themselves to reach a larger audience that aligns with their value proposition.

In parallel with both of these platforms, I have monitored through Google Alerts news surrounding BirchBox. I have done this so that I can relate what is going on in the external environment to the subtle changes in BirchBox's organic content. I have also gained from these articles, insights pertaining to BirchBox's marketing strategy including their position, value proposition, and ideas for expanding into new markets. This information in association with the posts analyzed from the BirchBox YouTube and tumblr platforms will show whether or not they align with the organization's overall marketing strategy.

Discussion

Before comparing each platform, I analyzed BirchBox's YouTube channel, tumblr blog, and news articles individually, because I wanted to develop an idea of the marketing strategies for each platform and then comparatively look at what is happening in the market to see if it impacts those strategies. I also purposely chose two platforms that are very different from each other because I wanted to see how BirchBox would vary their social media strategy. From what I can gather in my results BirchBox's YouTube channel is in its strategic phase where it utilizes a formal process to plan social media marketing activities with clear objectives and metrics. Conversely, BirchBox's Tumblr is in its transition phase where social media activities still occur somewhat randomly, but a more systematic way of thinking starts to develop within the organization. (Tuten, 2013, pg. 35) This will impact the results because BirchBox's YouTube channel shows a well developed social media strategy compared to BirchBox's tumblr blog where its social media strategy needs improvement.

Tuten divides social media into four zones: social community, social publishing, social commerce, and social entertainment. Upon analyzing BirchBox's unique business structure along with its social media strategies, I have developed the areas in which BirchBox reaches out to its customers the most. BirchBox uses its e-commerce site in conjunction with its social media platforms to enhance the customer experience. Therefore, both the social publishing and social community zones in which BirchBox participates contributes and carries over to its social commerce zone. (See Exhibit 1) This flow of social media zones becomes in and of itself a value proposition for its consumers. To be successful, however, BirchBox must utilize its positioning to target new customer segments to expand its business. These three areas of identifying their value proposition, diversifying their target markets, and tailoring their positioning will allow BirchBox to focus to improve their tumblr social media marketing strategy, and comparatively looking at their YouTube channel to understand the strategic differences. Together these areas will make BirchBox's tumblr blog more useful for their social media strategy and for the business as a whole.



Value proposition

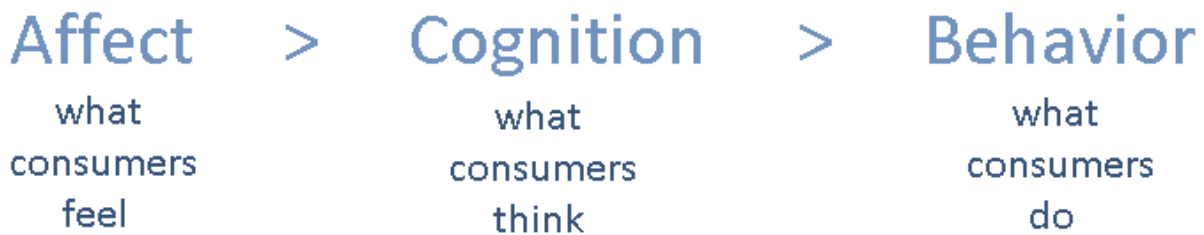
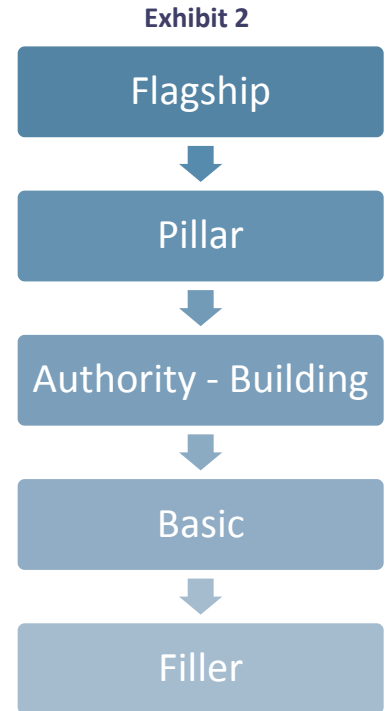
Upon evaluating BirchBox's objectives and how they relate to their value proposition, it can be established that the goals that BirchBox set in place are to drive traffic to the company's site. BirchBox's main value proposition is first and foremost to sell its core product, the beauty and lifestyle products sold on their e-commerce site. Their social media content, however, has become an additional aspect of their value proposition to customers. A basic outline of social media content can be outlined by Exhibit 2. BirchBox focuses most of their content on Pillar type information. Examples of Pillar content are:

Types of Pillar Content:

- How to
- Definition
- Glossary
- Theory
- List

BirchBox specifically excels at their “how to” content posted through their YouTube channel. Their tumblr blog, however, is not a platform tailored to pillar content. Most of the content circulated and shared on the tumblr platform is basic or authority building. BirchBox excels at pillar content, which is important to their customers; however, customizing their content to the platform’s and user’s expectations will most ensure the improvement of BirchBox’s tumblr usage through social media.

Right now a good proportion of the content on BirchBox’s tumblr page is organic content, but they should utilize incentivized content with linkbaiting to optimize their social engagement. Link’s like “Busy-Girl Gym Hacks” is an example of a resource hook (Tuten, 2013, pg. 137). These links often are tied to lifestyle tips, which is a value proposition through social media that BirchBox provides. These lifestyle tips are emotionally based. In the gym hack example, BirchBox is tapping into the frustration that many of their customers feel when they are busy and can’t find time for the gym, or it conflicts with other activities they could be doing. To explain how this emotive heuristics tie to behavioral purchase, the model in Exhibit 3 is a consumer behavior framework provided by Tuten (Tuten, 2013, pg. 170). This framework shows how a post about gym hacks can lead to financial outcomes by a follower purchasing a product referenced in the article linked on BirchBox’s e-commerce site.



In addition to its social media value proposition, BirchBox offers its customers the ability to write ratings and reviews for rewards. Tuten explains the value of ratings and reviews because it “reflects perceived quality, satisfaction with the purchase, popularity, or some other variable” and can hurt or help the reputation of a brand (Tuten, 2013, pg. 169). Further, benefits of a review can be seen in Exhibit 4. The importance here is that BirchBox sees the value in ratings and reviews, and adds another dimension to their value proposition, by rewarding points that customers can use towards future purchases.

Another aspect that BirchBox does well is its partnerships. Typically, BirchBox does this through corporate sponsors, or brands that they sponsor through their samples in monthly subscriptions or

specialty boxes. However sometimes they do have partnerships with influencers, for example fashion bloggers or make-up artists. Their best example is the YouTube video October 7th that was a how to of a half braid up do. This video scored 8,891 views by followers. The post was also relayed through their tumblr blog, gaining the most notable post in the log, gaining 475 notes. Not only did this partnership gain a large portion of views, but it widened the BirchBox influence to more viewers, because their content was also published by the influencer on her blog. BirchBox also does partnerships with different companies, non-for profit organizations, and celebrities to boost their brand image. (Examples of this can be seen in Exhibit 3: #1, 2, 5, & 6)

Widen target market

One of the main objectives BirchBox has is to attract new customers. To explore different segmentations, BirchBox needs to fully understand their current target market. BirchBox can most accurately identify their current target market through psychographic segmentation which looks at segmentation “based on personality, motives, lifestyles, and attitudes and opinions. It provides the ‘richest’ picture of consumer segmentation and helps marketers know the ‘real person’ of the company’s target market (Tuten, 2013, pg.70).” Before, I have stressed the value that BirchBox places on the ideals of lifestyle, and how important lifestyle influences are to integrating their social media into the lives of their customers.

So not only is psychographic segmentation important to BirchBox when expanding their current target market, but a common way to do that is through social media. Here, BirchBox also excels because many of their current target market carries the attributes of a social fan (Tuten, 2013, pg. 116):

- Emotional engagement
- Self-identification
- Cultural competence
- Auxiliary (outside) consumption
- Production

Social fans are something that could make or break BirchBox’s follower base. Tuten explains in her book that, fans need to feel a “return on emotion” or feel like the relationship with the company is not asymmetrical, where the fan puts most of the work into their relationship. The relationship needs to be symmetrical, where both the company and the fan feel like they gain some reward from the relationship. BirchBox does a good job of this through receiving feedback, and communicating clearly to their fans the changes they are making to the overall operational process. You can see these changes in many of their monthly sneak peek videos on YouTube. There could be improvements made, however, for BirchBox to continually strive to make that return on emotion clear.

Finally, for BirchBox to expand their target market, I believe that the most relevant place for them to do that is to diversify their tumblr blog from their YouTube channel. To guide this repositioning of their tumblr platform BirchBox should consider the following questions (Tuten, 2013, pg. 117):

- What are the existing creative assets? How can the brand’s creative assets foster a social experience and be repurposed for social media?
- What experiences are possible given target market needs and motives, the available channels, and the creative assets? How can we design this experience to maximize device portability access?
- What content is needed? Comments? Question and polls? Video? Images? Stories? Apps?

By considering these questions, BirchBox will not only be able to more effectively use their tumblr blog, but they will be able to reach more diversified followers who could potentially become new customers.

Positioning

One of BirchBox's objectives related to positioning is building a social community and motivating positive word of mouth (or "word of mouse"). Again, BirchBox does an excellent job positioning themselves as experts of quality beauty products tailored for their customers, and promoting lifestyle trends through social media to engage their customer base. They do an especially good job of this positioning through their YouTube channel, which engages users in "how to" videos, and monthly sneak peeks so customers can stay up-to-date on new products and announcements. The use of the LTCE framework aides BirchBox in excelling in the positioning of their YouTube channel. BirchBox listens to their users feedback, they strategize and talk about solutions, they communicate those solutions through their YouTube channel, and engage users by asking for additional feedback or responding to the change.

L - T - C - E
listen | talk | communicate | engage

The place where BirchBox struggles with their positioning is with their tumblr platform. Their tumblr platforms utilizes a lot of media that is posted on their YouTube channel and BirchBox e-commerce site. They seem to be recycling a lot of the content created for other platforms. To re-evaluate how their tumblr platform could be more impactful, BirchBox should consider the following questions:

- If the brand participates in social media, where should the brand be?
- How can the brand's profiles be developed in such a way as to reflect the brand's personality?
- If "fan pages" exist among brand loyalists on social networking sites, how can the brand leverage the fan sites to better meet its objectives?
- How can the brand integrate its social network presence into other campaign components?

Tumblr is an excellent platform for BirchBox to be on because it is a short form of blogging that relies on visual aids and had a great question and response process built in. In the social media log, you can see that there are several posts where BirchBox struggles to find their exact positioning on the tumblr platform. One of the more successful posts "3 Healthy Ways to Caffeinate," is an example of the ideal way BirchBox should position themselves on tumblr. This post has a high impact visual aid, it makes use of a controversial link bait, and engages the user to by offering a lifestyle value proposition.

Results

To aide it communicating the results from this social media study of BirchBox, look at Exhibits 3 & 5. Exhibit 3 shows the impact that external influences (news articles) had on BirchBox's social media influence. Overall, you can see that the impact of external influences on BirchBox's YouTube and tumblr were for the most part very similar. The most impactful takeaway here was the influence of #4, a news article written negatively about BirchBox not having a animal conscious box. Social media scores went

down overall, and BirchBox responded with their partnership with (RED) which did not do much to increase scores, since this non-profit organization directly helps aids, was not pet conscious. When they implemented the commerce conscious box, sponsored by Olivia Wilde, however, scores did improve from this response to a call for a more “conscious” box. (Exhibit 3)

The social media platform that was most impactful for BirchBox was their YouTube channel, where they excelled in partnerships, pillar content, psychographic segmentation, and integration of the LTCE framework. The YouTube channel’s weaknesses lie in their return on emotion, which would aide in increasing their target market. (Exhibit 5) They currently do an average job, making sure that feedback is taken into account and changes are communicated to customers. To really grow they target market through their YouTube channel, BirchBox should really focus on making sure that the return on emotion for their social fans are really there, focusing on relaying those messages outside of their monthly sneak peeks.

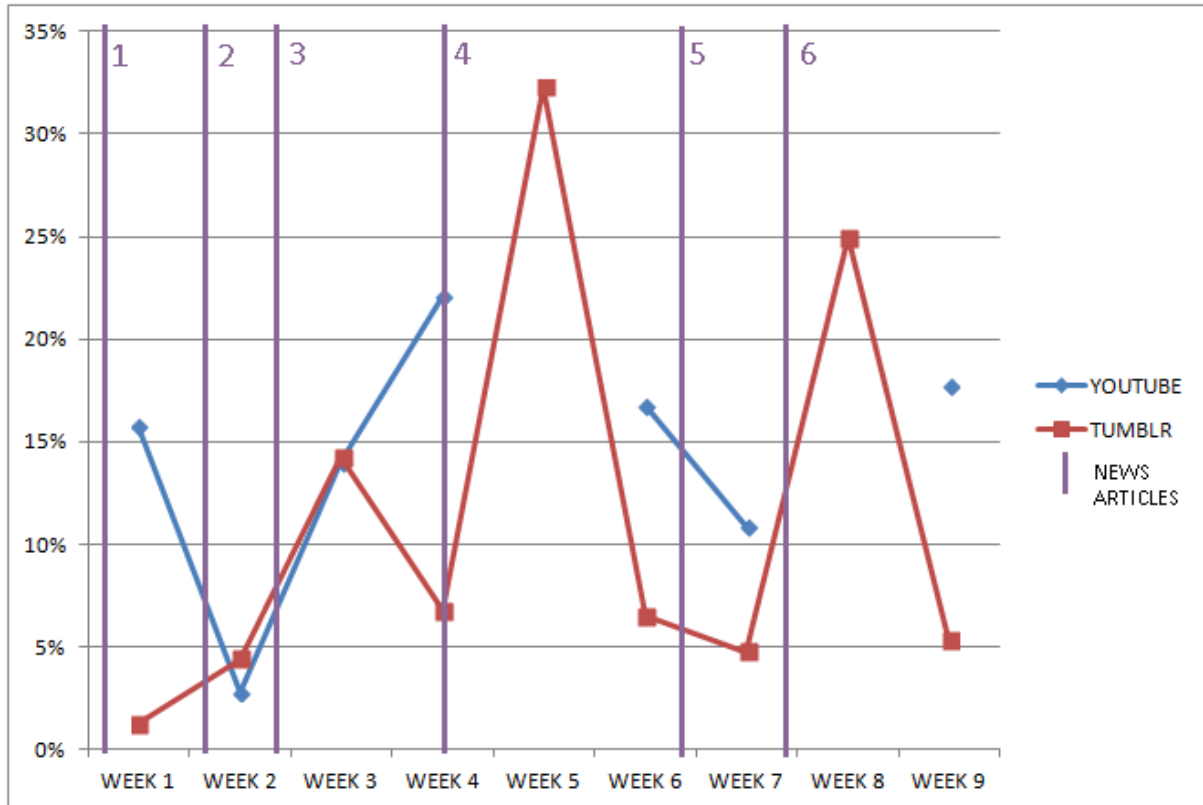
The social media platform that could be most improved upon is their tumblr page. While BirchBox does utilize link baiting and partnerships well, the tumblr page does struggle with psychographic segmentation and positioning. (Exhibit 5) This challenge is very large because without proper segmentation or positioning, their tumblr page is not producing as much impact as it could, by tailoring it to its own clearly defined target market and value proposition. Right now, a lot of the content contained on the tumblr page is reused material from other social media platforms or BirchBox’s e-commerce site. If BirchBox wants their tumblr blog to measure up, they really need to look at not only how the ease of use impacts their followers, but how the content engages users beyond just an afterthought of reposting content.

Appendix

EXHIBIT 3

BirchBox YouTube/Tumblr Engagement

With News Articles Influence



1. BirchBox partners with American Express, Bonobos, & Rent the Runway
2. Women's Health got 43,000 new subscribers after sponsoring a BirchBox package
3. In SoHo, retailers (including BirchBox) pick customer's brains
4. "What Annoys Me about BirchBox" published on Huffington Post
5. BirchBox teams up with (RED) to raise money and awareness to help fight AIDS
6. BirchBox partners with Olivia Wilde to produce a Conscious Commerce box – release date Nov. 7th

EXHIBIT 4

The Value of a review:

- Ratings and review are not always useful
- Ratings are heuristic; a mental shortcut consumer use to help them with decision making
- Reviews provide more detailed information for those who want to evaluate the choice at a deeper level
- Benefits to E-retailers:
 - Online reviews can generate increased sales by bringing in new customers
 - Consumers willing to pay more for products with higher ratings
 - People who write reviews tend to shop more frequently and spend more online than others

EXHIBIT 5

	STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
TUMBLR	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Link baiting• Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Psychographic Segmentation• Positioning
YOUTUBE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pillar Content• Partnerships• Psychographic Segmentation• LTCE Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Return on Emotion

Works Cited:

Tuten, T., & Solomon, M. (2013). *Social media marketing*. Boston: Pearson.