

BRAND ADVOCATES – AN APPLE PHENOMENON? AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON BRAND ADVOCACY AMONGST APPLE CONSUMERS

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Abstract

Apple consumers are well known for their loyalty. Unlike ordinary computer or mobile device users, Apple consumers do not simply buy the products; they become fans. Besides word-of-mouth recommendations the Apple advocates tend to have an emotional connection with the brand they love, they defend the brand and could overlook dissatisfaction. This study made use of qualitative research to explore and gain insights into the characteristics of the Apple brand advocates. The researcher made use of informal conversations to collect data on two Apple community blogs. The data was analysed by using content analysis and six main themes emerged from this study. Apple brand advocates make use of word-of-mouth to recommend and have a sense of trust with the brand. They believe Apple products meet their expectations and find the functionality and design of the products useful. They also enjoy being in an Apple community and find that Apple is irreplaceable by other competitive products.

Keywords: Brand, Brand Advocacy, Apple Company

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1. Introduction

In the market of infinite choices, consumers are faced with a great number of competing products in every category. On purchasing certain products, some consumers no longer settle for only user friendliness or price. They seek out brands that best represent their lifestyle and connects with their emotion.

Following the initial purchase, Apple consumers are encouraged to become followers and grow with the company. Some of these consumers develop a deep passion for the products, which can sometimes turn into an obsession. Apple users are not a group of random consumers who happen to use the same kind of products. They represent a distinct subculture, with their own rituals, traditions and mind-sets (Kahney 2006:5).

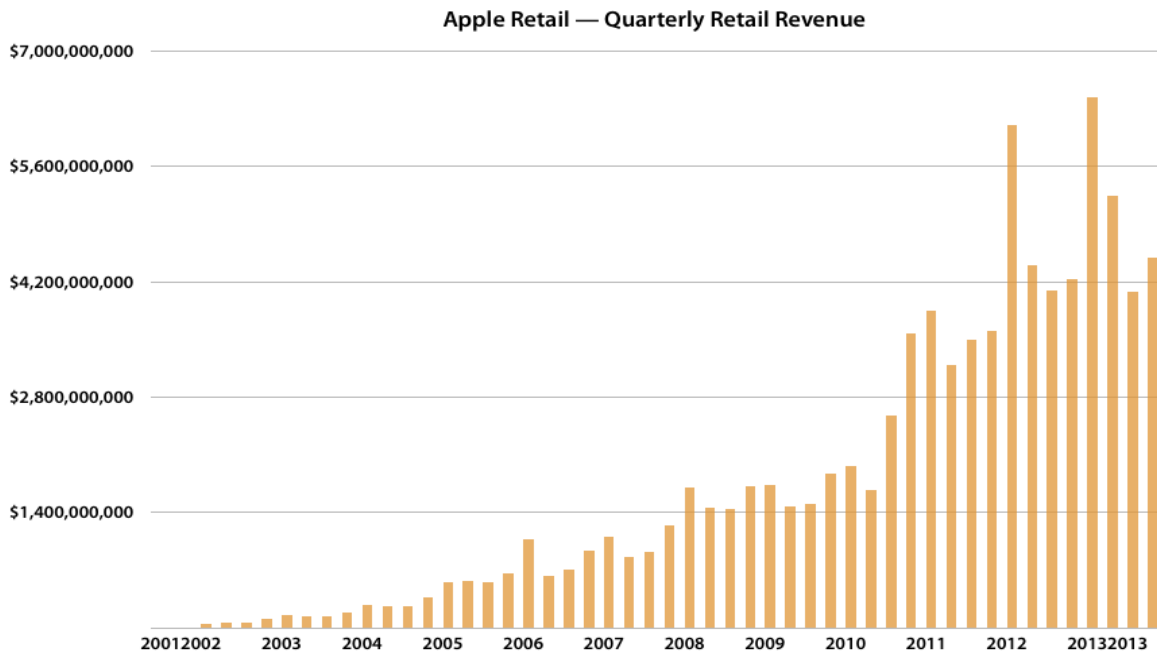
With the increasingly competitive environment in every industry, the concept of brand advocacy has created an opportunity for companies to further leverage the relationship that comes with brand

loyalty. Loyal customers would consistently choose to purchase the same brand when the purchase opportunity arises, however, brand advocates would seek out opportune moments to recommend their brand.

2. Discussion

Apple has had an amazing impact on technology, society, and the world through its innovations. Using the personal computer as a foundation, Apple has turned technology into an essential tool for use in consumers' daily lives. The company has expanded its products line in the last decade from computers to music players to mobile devices such as the iPhone and the iPad. Since the introduction of the Apple iPod in 2001, Apple has seen a steady climb in revenue from 2001 to the first quarter of 2013, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Apple revenue 2001 - 2013

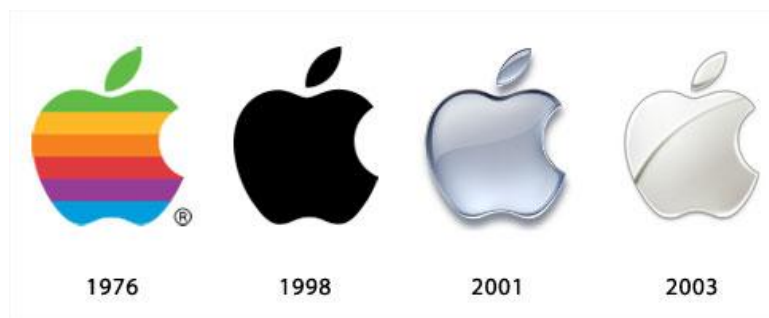


Source: Apple Retail Financials. Available: <http://www.ifoapplestore.com/apple-retail-financials>. (Accessed: 11 November 2011)

Besides offering a variety of products, Apple has established itself as a brand to which consumers relate deeply. In recent years, brands have moved from being names of products to being symbols of success that indicate that the consumer is indeed enjoying the kind of lifestyle that is perceived to denote the specific brand; in essence, the lifestyle that the consumer aspires to live (Smith & Wheeler, 2002:4). Branding is therefore vital in creating differences (Klopper & North, 2011:27).

The Apple brand is simple and highly recognisable as the company name is Apple and the logo is an apple with a bite taken out of it (Zaichkowsky 2010: 553). Though the logo had changed throughout the years, as seen in Figure 2, the basic element of the brand has not. The company makes use of the same Apple logo for all its products and packaging, making it easy for consumers to differentiate their products from its competitors.

Figure 2. The evolution of the Apple logo



Source: Lighten-up! Don't sit under the Apple tree with anyone else but me. Available: <http://ritakeller.com> (Accessed: 13 October 2011).

Brands have the potential to become assets that aid companies to convey values and meaning and have the ability to create a sustainable, competitive advantage (Neal & Strauss, 2008:47). For many Apple consumers, the presence of the Apple logo is a sign of quality and it provides sufficient motivation for repeat purchase, which could lead to brand loyalty.

2.1 Brand loyalty and advocacy defined

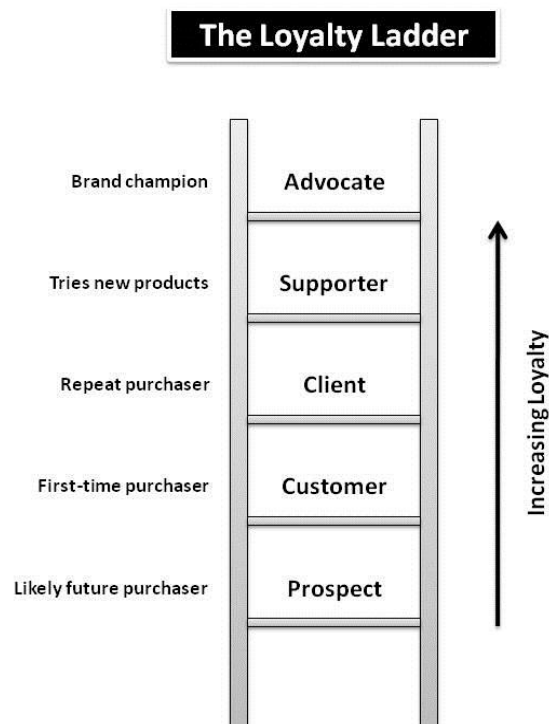
Brand loyalty could make a valuable contribution to creating a competitive advantage for a company (Khan 2009), as loyal customers tend to spend more - helping companies drive profitability over time.

However, not all product users start off with a company as a loyal customer. Brand loyalty tends to

follow a process of development as illustrated in Figure 3. The process begins with the prospect becoming aware of the brand, for example the Apple brand, like seeing an advert in a newspaper. Then an interest for the brand is developed and the prospect seeks out the Apple store locations. As the need arises for the purchase of a computer, the prospect compares the Apple Mac to other brands. When the prospect makes the actual purchase of an Apple Mac, the prospect becomes a customer. When this customer takes the Apple Mac home, the customer could experience this Apple product directly and then

realise the ease of use of the product. The customer becomes a client when they purchase another Apple product. After the purchasing of the two items, the customer could be so satisfied that he/she would purchase the next generation Apple Macbook when it is introduced. They will then become loyal supporters and will remain loyal to Apple. As the customers realise the platform that the different devices share, they become so impressed with Apple that they start recommending it to friends and family and that is when the customer is considered to be a brand advocate for Apple.

Figure 3. The loyalty ladder



Source: Adapted from Mutyala, S. 2010. *The loyalty ladder: a sideways look.* Available: <http://www.eightleavesmedia.com/2010/04/the-loyalty-ladder-a-sideways-look/>. (Accessed: 6 March 2012).

Brand advocates are loyal customers who have endured over time. They have overcome the relationship and value scepticism so prevalent between customers and suppliers today. The advocating customer has come to expect and believe that the supplier will deliver the best overall product or service experience (Lowenstein, 2011:77). A brand advocate does not represent the average person, member, customer, or citizen. They are on the fringes, driven by passion, creativity, and a sense of duty (McConnell & Huba, 2007:4). They are the fanatics who praise and constructively critique to make their chosen brand as good as it can be (Brown, 2010:48). Brand advocates are true believers and evangelists. Their faith in the brand drives them to analyse the daily progress of a brand, product, organisation or person. They praise great company efforts and criticise mistakes (McConnell & Huba, 2007:10)

because they believe that the company has the potential to do so much better.

Brand advocates are customers who select a single supplier from among all those they might consider, giving that supplier the highest share of spend possible and informally (without any form of compensation) telling others about how positive the relationship is and how much value and benefit they derive from it (Lowenstein, 2011:112).

These consumers are emotionally attached to the brand and possess a sense of ownership in the brand. Brand advocates support and are loyal to the brand, and would recommend and actively promote the brand via different channels (Rhoden, 2011:4–5). The concept of advocacy not only considers the likelihood of having an exclusive purchasing relationship but also incorporates both strong brand-based, emotional kinship and active, positive and voluntary

communication about, and on behalf of, the chosen supplier (Lowenstein, 2011:9).

Once a customer becomes an advocate, the firm has achieved a relationship of great closeness and trust. This is the most valued and sought after level of bonding, where word-of-mouth advertising flourishes (Griffin, 2002:40). Advocacy plays an increasingly pivotal role in influencing consumers' opinions and behaviour toward companies. McKinsey has found that word-of-mouth is the primary factor behind between 20% to 50% of all purchasing decisions, and as much as 50% to 80% of word-of-mouth comes directly as a result of personal experience with a product or service (Bughin *et al.*, 2010).

New technology developments have facilitated both the real and virtual world interactions amongst customers and their participation in brand communities. This trend of moving towards a brand community allows customers to share openly about each other's experiences, allowing many satisfied and loyal customers to congregate and initiate conversations about their beloved products and brands. When brand communities are built well, it can result in a positive, lasting impression, reinforcing customer loyalty behaviour which results in advocacy (Lowenstein, 2011:70).

2.2 Existing advocacy measurements

Reichheld (2003) developed the Net Promoter Score (NPS) to help companies' measure brand advocacy based on the customer's willingness to recommend by asking one simple question —*How likely is it that you would recommend [Company X] to a friend or colleague?* Based on the customer's response on a 0 to 10 rating scale, the customers are grouped according to their rating. A rating of 9-10 means a high likelihood to recommend, customers with a rating 6 or below are considered to be extremely unlikely to recommend.

Some authors (Symonds *et al.*, 2007; Blasberg *et al.*, 2008) made use of the NPS to measure brand advocacy for company growth and it was discovered that the more promoters a company had, the larger the company's growth was (Reichheld, 2003). However it is not a sufficient measure as there is a significant difference between promoters and advocates. Promoters of a brand recommend based on prior experience and not the current relationship. In many cases, the NPS is measured only when a company asks customers whether they would be willing to recommend. This marks the defining difference, as promoters are not likely to proactively advocate on a brand's behalf, in an unprompted manner (Rhoden, 2011:5).

Balter and Butman (2005) identified a type of quiet advocates who are likely to be brought out by negative word-of-mouth. They are the type of people who liked and are passionate about the product but have not yet talked about their experiences. They

might not be particularly vocal by nature and would only speak up when they feel that the product was being wronged.

Therefore word-of-mouth recommendations cannot be the only characteristic that differentiates brand advocates from other customers. Advocacy is not merely about customer purchase, referral, and communication behaviour. Essentially, advocacy is a more contemporary, real-world, and robust means for companies to understand drivers of customer marketplace behaviour (Lowenstein, 2011). It is also built on trust through real, authentic experiences. It occurs when customers select a single supplier from among all those they might consider, providing that specific supplier with the highest share of spend possible and informally telling others about how positive the relationship is and how much value and benefit they derived from it (Lowenstein, 2011:8).

Whatever the channel, a brand advocate embraces and revels in telling others about the brands they like or love. They own the brand and their passion for it. They want to share their love and bring shopping happiness to others (Edmison & Ricker, 2011). They share their feelings with likeminded people within their communities, and these interactions between community members fuel loyalty, not only to the brand, but also to each other. Apple user groups, for instance, receive support in many forms, such as providing promotional and training materials, as well as t-shirts and posters for local events, or hosting of user group events at Macworld (Koay & Eriksson, 2006).

Advocates are believed to be the golden prize for any brand or supplier organisation because they are extremely favourable toward their supplier. Furthermore, they are active, vocal, frequent, and positive communicators on behalf of that supplier (Lowenstein, 2011:15).

To further explore the concept of brand advocacy, Hayes (2008) identified the following four items for the Advocacy Loyalty Index:

- Item 1: Overall satisfaction
- Item 2: Likelihood to choose again for the first time
- Item 3: Likelihood to recommend
- Item 4: Likelihood to continue purchasing same product/services

The measurement process behind the loyalty questions plays a vital role in understanding the meaning of customer loyalty. The four loyalty questions were averaged together by Hayes (2008) to retrieve a more reliable measure of loyalty.

Advocacy loyalty (Hayes, 2008), however, encompasses aspects that are not only related to whether customers stay or leave. Companies need to examine their business closely and then select the appropriate loyalty metrics that best match them. Therefore the above items seem to be insufficient in measuring advocacy for Apple as items two, three and four are more behaviorally focused. Besides, overall

satisfaction, it does not appear to measure the emotions behind the advocacy nor take into account the situational characteristics. Besides word-of-mouth recommendations, the brand advocates tend to have an emotional connection with the brand they love, they enjoy being part of a community and they defend the brand and could overlook dissatisfaction.

This study therefore further explores the possibility of more items that need to be generated for brand advocacy for Apple. Every customer experience with an organisation, no matter how seemingly small and insignificant, has the power to excite and reinforce trust, creating loyalty and advocacy (Lowenstein, 2011:65).

3. Research methodology

The researcher made use of the qualitative approach to identify themes and keywords that the Apple consumers use to relate to brand advocacy through the form of a generic descriptive, explorative design. The researcher made use of informal conversations on two different online Apple community blogs: MacRumors and MacNN. Convenience sampling enabled the researcher to engage participants in a natural environment to capture a more authentic response and was both convenient and cost effective. This type of research tends to be more honest because respondents are anonymous to other respondents and tend to talk more freely (Kotze et al. 2011:314).

The researcher created a discussion on each of the forums to initiate a conversation with members of these virtual communities. The researcher asked a general question on both websites, “So as an

iphone/Macbook user, people have always asked me why we are so crazy about Apple, I can never quite pin it down... what do u think?”

After the collection of data, the conversations between the forum members and the researcher were critically reviewed; the keywords of the conversation were highlighted and were used to group into main categories. Words that described the relationship between the respondent and their Apple devices were highlighted. Essentially, what was being sought was a categorisation of the phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011:297), namely brand advocacy.

4. Results

The conversation lasted three days with comments by respondents from countries such as Finland, USA, England and New Zealand. The content from the information gathered through the Apple forum conversations was analysed and the common themes are listed below and the details of the analysis are recorded in Table 1.

- Word-of-mouth
- Level of expectations met in respect of value and product
- A level of trust with the Apple brand
- The functionality and design suits the needs of the consumers
- Consumers enjoy the sense of being in a Apple community
- Sense of superiority and irreplaceability compared to its competition.

Table 1. Themes categorisations

Theme	Respondents' response
Word-of-mouth recommendation	Word-of-mouth is a strong and recurring theme in the study of brand advocacy.
A level of expectation met in respect to value and product	“previous product experience”, “enjoyable experience”; “work well”; “consistency in making the quality of the products”; “excellent operating system”; “worth the price”; “products that live up to their hype”; “usable”;
A level of trust with the Apple brand	“they have an Apple logo on them”; “I just trust the Apple brand”; “I need them” “reliable products”
The functionality and design suits the needs of the consumers	“time-saving”; “trackpad”; “beautiful products”; “looks nice”; “suits my needs”; “very good robust, reliable products”; “live up to their hype”; “usable”; “great battery life” “excellent operating system”
Consumers enjoy the sense of being in a Apple community	The respondents who participated in these discussion forums demonstrated that they are part of a virtual Apple community. Brand community forms a strong theme in the study of brand advocacy.
Sense of superiority and irreplaceability compared to its competitors	“willing to overlook flaws that we perhaps won't overlook in other products”; “windows suck so badly”; “lack of any real competition”; “will check it out before looking at other brands”

The first theme identified was word-of-mouth recommendation, which has been used widely as a measure for brand advocacy (Blasberg *et al.* 2008; Reichheld 2003; Symonds *et al.* 2007). Another

theme is the level of expectations met in respect to value and product as the respondents mentioned how the Apple products are consistent, work well and provide an enjoyable experience. Third theme

identified is the level of trust the Apple community members have with the brand as some of them find the brand reliable and the Apple logo to be enough of a motivation for them to continuously purchase the products.

The fourth theme mentioned by the respondents was how the functionality and design of the products suit their needs when they described the products as looking nice and beautiful with an excellent operating system. Being part of the Apple community was the fifth theme. Brand communities are developing a closeness with brand advocacy (Lowenstein 2011: 70) as consumers are encouraged within a group to develop a lasting loyalty relationship with the brand. The last theme is the sense of superiority and irreplaceability of Apple compared to its competitors, as the respondents mentioned a lack of competition for Apple and they are willing to look for an Apple solution before trying out other brands.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Apple brand advocates are very likely to recommend the brand to others. Some authors (Symonds *et al.*, 2007; Reichheld, 2003; Blasberg *et al.*, 2008) use word-of-mouth as the only indicator for the measurement of brand advocacy. However, other authors (Lowenstein, 2011; Edmison & Ricker, 2011; Balter & Butman, 2005) suggested that brand advocacy exceeds recommendations by consumers.

In this study, Apple brand advocates were found to enjoy being part of the community. The Apple community members who participated in the research seem to enjoy partaking in the brand community, which allows them to share their experiences openly, with other satisfied and loyal customers. Apple consumers enjoy the unity a brand community brings and appreciate the emotional reward they experience when sharing excitement around the brand. The sense of excitement that precedes the introduction of new product launches often contribute towards the consumers' heightened sense of emotions. Apple users are known to stand in line for hours outside Apple stores in the anticipation of new product launches.

Apple advocates appear to trust the Apple brand and this trust could be grounded in the capacity of the brand to keep its promises. This trust could explain why so many Apple consumers would pre-order Apple products before its release date without ever seeing or touching the product. Without this trust, companies like Apple can quickly find that everything they offer including price, design, convenience and service can be easily replicated by competitors (Lowenstein, 2011:52).

The brand advocates' trust in the Apple brand appear to link closely with another theme identified as they have indicated their unwillingness to substitute Apple products with other brands. They find that the Apple products are inherently superior and they are

even willing to overlook flaws in the products and do not find that there are other products that could compete with Apple.

With a high level of trust, the Apple brand advocates also enjoy the usability and functionality of the Apple products. They seem to find the products beautifully designed, reliable and have excellent features that meet their needs. These Apple consumers also find that Apple has provided them with great value by creating product experiences that are exceptional and well worth the price.

The above-mentioned findings could be beneficial for future developments for Apple. As the company benefits greatly from the efforts of their brand advocates who both purchase and encourage others to purchase Apple products, the knowledge of the characteristics that surrounds brand advocacy could aid Apple to focus some of their efforts.

As this study was constructed around the opinions of the Apple brand advocates, the results could not be generalised to other companies and a full research study incorporating other companies should be developed for representativeness. It is suggested that a full measurement instrument for brand advocacy be developed so that it can be used to cross-examine the factors that contribute towards brand advocacy beyond word-of-mouth recommendations.

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