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Does Liking Lead to Loving?
Leslie K. John, PhD, Oliver Emrich, PhD, Sunil Gupta, PhD, and Michael I. Norton, PhD

Does liking lead to loving? When a customer clicks the like button on a brand’s Facebook page, what happens? Is that customer then more predisposed to have a favorable attitude towards the brand? Is she more likely to purchase products from that brand and tell others about the brand, simply because she liked the page? Or, does loving lead to liking? Did that customer just like the page because she already has an established relationship with the brand? Additionally, if a customer likes a page, will her friends be more motivated to like the brand, as well? Will this brand exposure lead her friends to start making purchases? Or are a customer’s friends already predisposed to liking the brand because they have similar tastes to the customer?

With the rise of social media, companies have poured financial and human resources into creating and maintaining online brands. However, 87% of those who have invested in social media marketing are not able to satisfactorily quantify the return on this investment. As we look for ways to measure the success of our marketing efforts in social media, we ask questions like those above. As consumers arbitrarily like pages, do those likes have value to a company? Or are they merely the click of a button? If liking leads to loving, then it makes sense to focus marketing efforts on increasing the number of customers that like your page. If loving leads to liking, then a different approach would be more effective. We conducted a study to address these questions, to provide a starting place for marketers to assess the value of a like, and to identify what strategies are most effective.

Our Study

There are three potential effects that could impact the relationship between a customer’s online association with a brand and their resulting behavior towards that brand. Using Starbucks as an example, the first possibility is that joining Starbucks’ social network causes a consumer to buy more coffee, or to tell others how much she loves Starbucks. This is called a treatment effect.

The second option is that a customer joins Starbucks’ Facebook page because she already has a loyalty to the brand; however, the additional act of joining the online community causes that
customer to buy more and rave more than those loyal customers who did not join the brand’s social network page. This is a treatment-by-selection effect.

Finally, it is possible that a customer liked Starbucks’ page simply because she likes Starbucks. In this case, liking the page would have no effect on the customer’s behavior. In other words, liking the page would not increase her coffee purchases or willingness to recommend Starbucks to others. It’s merely a badge of approval. This is a selection effect. Our study addresses the impact of liking a brand’s Facebook page, in light of these three effects.

We also looked at secondary effects, which are the influences one customer’s online relationship with a brand can have on her friends’ attitudes and behaviors toward the brand. There are two potential effects at work here, as well. The first is a sort of treatment effect in that the act of a consumer liking a page causes her friends to also like and purchase that brand. The alternative to this is selection, in that friends of a consumer have similar tastes to their peer, and are thus predisposed to like the brand.

In our first study, we look at pure treatment effects: does liking a brand’s Facebook page have any effect on consumer attitude or behavior? Some of our participants were randomly selected to be in a control group, others were merely asked to indicate whether or not they liked Coca-Cola, and others were randomly selected to like the brand’s page. All participants were asked to complete a survey measuring their favorability towards the brand. We compared the results among the different groups and found no evidence of treatment effects, since the favorability of those who liked the brand’s social page did not differ from those who were not asked to like the page. We conducted additional experiments to see if the results were different if the survey was completed after more time had elapsed, or if we used a more novel company. We found the results of these additional studies to be consistent with those of our first study. In fact, these additional results indicate a possible negative association between liking a brand and the resulting outcomes.

Our second set of experiments was created to determine if liking a page has any effect on those customers who are already predisposed to view the brand favorably, or if customers simply like a page because they like the brand. We determined which participants were willing to like Pepsi’s page. Then, we randomly selected some of those participants to be in a control group, some to attempt to like the page (they were told they were unable to like the page due to an error and this was a control group, as well), and some to actually like the page. As in the first experiment, we used the favorability survey to assess and compare the attitudes and behaviors of our participants.

There was no difference in favorability among the control, “error” control, or experimental groups suggesting that liking a page still does not have any positive effect on consumer behavior, even if they already favor the brand. However, favorability among those participants that were
willing to like or had already liked the brand was higher than that of those who were unwilling to like the brand. This suggests that selection effects are present, as we expected.

We ran additional experiments to determine whether liking a page would have a positive effect on consumer favorability when paired with advertising or if a longer time elapsed. Advertising itself was effective, but when combined with liking it still had no significant effect on brand favorability. Additionally, results showed that even over time, favorability was not affected by being a part of a brand’s network. Thus, there is no evidence to suggest that liking a brand on Facebook improves marketing outcomes, even if the consumer is already fond of the brand.

However, as mentioned above, those who were willing to like Pepsi’s page or those who had already liked it did demonstrate more favorability than those who were unwilling to like it. This is evidence for a selection effect, or the fact that liking a page does not affect marketing outcomes like consumer behavior and attitude. Our evidence suggests that consumers like brand pages just because they like the brand.

In our third experiment, we looked at the effect that a consumer’s affinity for a brand would have on her friend’s attitudes toward that same brand. We asked consumers to provide us with the names and email addresses of three friends. Those friends were then assigned to one of three groups and sent a coupon for a free deluxe sample set of Grace Choi BB Cream. In the first group, they were told that their friend was sending them a free sample. In the second, they were told that their friend liked the product and was sending them a free sample. Finally, in the third condition they were told that their friend had liked the brand on Facebook and was sending them a free sample. Results showed that the friends of customers were more likely to exhibit positive responses to the brand when they were told that their friend had liked the product in real life, not just on Facebook.

**Implications**

Overall, our studies demonstrate that liking a brand’s Facebook page does not have a direct positive effect on marketing outcomes, such as consumer behavior and attitude toward the brand. Several implications arise from the results of our studies.
Because simply liking a brand’s page does not seem to have any effect on resulting attitude and behavior, marketers should target their social networking efforts. Importantly however, our results do not imply that Facebook likes are entirely useless to marketers. Rather, likes can impact consumer attitudes and behavior, if they are used properly. The key is to use the like to spark further engagement with the brand. Real estate agents can apply this information to increase the effectiveness of their social media networks, particularly Facebook.

First, encourage involvement. Post a question and ask your clients to respond. Encourage clients to engage in discussion with each other. Consider sharing helpful information about the intimidating parts of home buying, such as financing options. In addition to encouraging involvement, this will also increase your credibility. Ask customers to post pictures of homes they like, or to share pictures of features they are looking for in a home. Post a picture of you with your clients meeting for the first time at a local coffeehouse and post another one when they’ve found their dream home. Feature your clients on your site, make them feel unique and valuable. Do they volunteer in the community? Post about it. Did they just have a major career victory? Share their accomplishment. Working with football fans? Wish their team good luck on game day. Wish them a happy birthday. Get your clients involved with you and with other clients who like your page.

Second, encourage friendship. Consider how your followers’ actions are affecting their friends. Encourage them to make meaningful recommendations to their friends, preferably offline and in person. Ask one of your former clients to host a coffee hour or game night in their new home. Invite current clients to bring their friends to meet you. Or, at Christmastime, decorate empty homes and fill them with music, lights, and cookies. Do a local homes tour and encourage your clients to bring their friends. Create social opportunities for clients to introduce friends to you, and for them to make positive recommendations.

So the key is to support likes with other marketing activities, including active management of your social media sites. However, our final recommendation for real estate agents is to not overinvest in social media marketing. Don’t neglect other forms of marketing and relationship-building. It might be worth considering how much time you are spending on social media versus how much time you are spending face-to-face with potential clients. Continue building relationships and using traditional marketing to further increase referrals.

Conclusion

Loving leads to liking. This is what we primarily found in our studies. For real estate professionals who are managing social media efforts, Facebook likes can be valuable, but not for the obvious reasons. Likes can have value in opening the door to more meaningful interactions. If real estate professionals want to maximize social media marketing efforts, we recommend using likes to create community. Encourage clients to put forth effort to connect with your brand, to be
involved with your online community, and to recommend your brand to their friends. This is how you can increase the chances that liking leads to loving.

Recommended Reading


About the Authors

Leslie K. John, PhD
Marvin Bower Associate Professor, Harvard Business School
Leslie John’s (PhD – Carnegie Mellon University) research centers around the seemingly paradoxical and sometimes self-destructive decisions that people make, especially as they pertain to two critically important domains: online consumer privacy and health. To explore these topics, she uses laboratory and field-based methods in a complementary and iterative fashion: field experiments (in collaboration with companies) document important real-world phenomena, and laboratory experiments nail down the psychological processes underlying these phenomena. Her work has been published in academic journals including the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Psychological Science, Journal of Marketing Research and The Journal of the American Medical Association. It has also received media attention from outlets such as The New York Times, Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, and Time magazine. She teaches the Negotiations course in the MBA elective curriculum, as well as in various Executive Education courses.

Oliver Emrich, PhD
Professor of Management and Social Media, Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz
Oliver Emrich (PhD – University of St. Gallen) is Professor of Management and Social Media at Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz. His research interests are situated in the areas of multichannel management, personalization, and the outcomes of social media activities for companies and consumers. His articles appeared in journals such as Journal of Marketing Research, International Journal of Research in Marketing, Journal of Retailing, and Harvard Business Review.

Sunil Gupta, PhD
Edward W. Carter Professor of Business Administration Chair, Harvard Business School
Sunil Gupta (PhD – Columbia University) is the Chair of the General Management Program at Harvard Business School. He is also the co-chair of the executive program on Driving Digital Strategy. Sunil's current research is in the area of digital technology and its impact on consumer behavior and firm strategy. His previous research focused on customer management, pricing, and return on marketing investment. He has published two books and over 80 articles, book chapters, cases and notes on these topics. His research has been well recognized in national and
international circles and his award-winning articles include 1993, 2002, and 2009 O'Dell Award and the 1998 and 2005 Paul Green Award of the *Journal of Marketing Research* for the most significant contribution in the field of marketing; the 1998, 2000, and 2003 Marketing Science Institute award for the best paper; the 2004 best paper award for the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* and the 1999 best paper award for the *International Journal of Research in Marketing*. His last book, *Managing Customers as Investments*, was selected as the 2006 winner of the annual Berry-AMA book prize for the best book in marketing. As a business expert, Sunil has frequently appeared on several national and international television programs, such as CBS, CNN, NPR and BBC, and has been quoted in *Forbes, The Fast Company, The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*.

Michael I. Norton, PhD  
**Harold M. Brierley Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School**

Michael I. Norton (PhD – Princeton University) has studied human behavior in domains ranging from love and discrimination, time and grief, to money and happiness. He is the co-author – with Elizabeth Dunn – of the book, *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending*. In 2012, he was selected for *Wired Magazine’s* Smart List as one of 50 People Who Will Change the World and his TEDx talk, *How to Buy Happiness*, has been viewed more than 3 million times.