When consumers sabotage brands

When consumers deliberately attack a brand with the objective of causing harm to it, this is known as «consumer brand sabotage». Marketing researchers at the University of Bern have examined this phenomenon in more detail, identified backgrounds and motives of brand sabotage and present initial countermeasures.

In collaboration with the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas, a research team of the Institute of Marketing and Management at the University of Bern describes a type of consumer behaviour that has not yet been sufficiently addressed by research whereby consumers deliberately attack a brand. «In consumer brand sabotage, angry and frustrated consumers become hostile towards the brand and intentionally try to harm it», explains Andrea Kähr, first author of the study, of the Institute of Marketing and Management at the University of Bern. She and her co-authors have investigated the motives and backgrounds of brand sabotage. In a conceptual model, they show the escalation process from the initial behaviour of the company or brand to consumer brand sabotage. The study has now been published in the «Journal of Marketing».

Big potential for damage

On the Internet and especially in social media, consumers are able to purposefully attack a brand after a negative experience with that brand. «Now, similar to saboteurs in warfare, consumers can have a dramatic negative impact on a brand relatively easily, using these new technologies,» says Harley Krohmer, Director of the Institute and Professor at the Marketing Department of the University of Bern and co-author of the study. In a networked, digital world, even one single consumer can cause a brand to lose numerous existing customers and can alienate innumerable potential customers, which can result in millions of dollars of damage to a brand.

This can be illustrated by a customer of United Airlines who was extremely angry with the airline. After his guitar was damaged in 2009 during a flight and he received no compensation for the damage despite numerous complaints, guitarist Dave Carroll produced three music videos about his negative experience with the airline. Already the first video, «United breaks guitars», reached more than 15 million views and, within three days, the company has lost 10 per cent of their share value - a figure equivalent to 180 million US dollars in damage.

In their study, the researchers define consumer brand sabotage as deliberate behaviour by customers or noncustomers who have the dominant objective of causing harm to a brand through the impairment of the brand-related associations of other consumers. Therefore, consumer brand sabotage can be distinguished from a negative comment about a brand’s product or service on Facebook or Twitter - so-called negative word of mouth. A consumer brand saboteur tries to harm a brand by investing significant effort which aims at impairing the brand-related associations of other consumers.

Essential meaning for brand managers
The conceptual model developed by the research team shows that consumer brand sabotage is not a spontaneous reaction, but the result of a conscious mental process that often includes an escalation of multiple negative interactions with a brand.

«Due to the enormous damage potential, it is essential that we understand when and why consumers sabotage a brand, so that such behaviour can be recognised and prevented by adequate management measures in the future», explains Bettina Nyffenegger, assistant professor at the Marketing Department of the University of Bern and co-author of the study.

«Our study not only shows managers that brand sabotage is a relatively new and unique type of consumer behaviour, but also what damage potential it contains: A seemingly weak consumer (‹David›) can damage a strong brand (‹Goliath›) by targeting and purposefully mobilising other consumers.» Therefore, managers should have the opportunity to detect and prevent potential brand sabotage early on before it occurs. If this cannot be achieved, researchers recommend, for example, to respond to hostile consumers with an apology that is not only directed to the individual person, but also to the public. This behaviour should indicate that the company takes consumers’ concerns seriously and agrees to take adequate measures to continuously improve the values the company holds or their performance respectively, thereby increasing customer satisfaction.

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