

Alternative Social Media as a Recruiting Tool for Generation Y and Generation Z

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Abstract

Organizations facing the challenge of a looming talent shortage often use internet job advertisements as a method of increasing their capacity to reach job seekers and appeal to potential employees. Many times job seekers make inferences from the content of these advertisements to form initial and sometimes lasting impressions about the company which could ultimately have an impact on their decisions about whether to continue further with the application process. This is especially true for younger candidates with fewer personal experiences to draw upon in evaluating information contained in persuasive messages. With the advent of social media as a significant candidate source, firms must develop new and innovative ways to engage their target audiences, thus developing a message strategy relating design and functionality to attracting qualified job applicants. Using the social identity theory as a theoretical framework, this paper outlines a research agenda focused on determining the most effective advertising strategy for social media recruiting by assessing the effect perceptions of message content and message style have on job-seekers' attitudes toward the advertisement and the organization.

Keywords: message strategy, social media recruiting, Generation-Y, Generation -Z, social identity theory

1. Introduction

Researchers acknowledge that recruitment is as much an advertising tool as a management activity. Much like marketing researchers study message strategy in the realm of product advertising, it is important for firms to understand and adapt an appropriate recruiting message strategy to reach their ideal target audience. To accomplish this, decisions must be made on what and how much information to provide, recognizing that the right message strategy executed in the proper framework is essential to eliciting a favorable response from job seekers. In addition, attention must be given to the demographics of the targeted talent pool, since interpretation and acceptance of the information provided in the recruiting message may be influenced by the characteristics of the group (Chattapadhyay, 2010).

As the marketplace becomes increasingly more competitive, it is incumbent upon organizations to solidify their positions in the hiring arena by devising processes to effectively manage access to human capital (Barber, 1998). Similar to the approach marketers take in understanding consumers reactions to information presented in advertising messages (Bettman, Luce, & Payne, 1998), organizations should examine job-seekers' receptiveness and acceptance to recruiting messages. It is important for companies to understand

job-seekers' application behavior (Rynes, Orliczky & Burk, 1997; Collins, 2007) and how recruitment advertisements are interpreted and processed in order to design messages that will appeal to them. This is particularly true for those companies attempting to understand what attracts younger workers to apply (Ng & Burke, 2006).

A stream of recruitment literature has focused on the content of recruiting message. Mason and Belt (1986) examined the impact of specific information being provided about candidate qualifications. Feldman, Bearden, and Hardesty (2006), investigated the effects of specific information being provided about the company and the job. Each of these was found to positively influence application intentions. Yet, with exception of a study conducted by Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober, and Keeping (2003) examining recruiting messages on company websites, and a review by Dineen, Ling, Ash and DelVecchio (2007) investigating the combination of content and aesthetic attributes, little attention has been given to the impact message content has on attitudes for online recruiting advertisements.

The Internet presents unique challenges for recruiters attempting to attract quality candidates while simultaneously maneuvering through its rapidly evolving, fast-paced environment (Capelli, 2001). Adding more complexity to the technology mix is the emergence of social media advertising. Social media is a broad term that includes text messaging, podcasting, e-mail marketing, search engine marketing, blogs, and Web sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (Joos, 2008). The Nielson Company report, "Internet & Social Media Consumer Insights," states that "73% of all US Internet households use social networking" (2016). Job advertisements placed on social media allows organizations broad access to both active job candidates, those who are unemployed, as well as passive candidates, those who are employed but would consider changing positions for the right opportunity (Joos, 2008; Zall, 2000).

Reeve, Highhouse, and Brooks (2006) urge researchers investigating internet recruiting messages to take a more "micro-level approach" to understanding job seeker's behavior. Thus, the primary purpose of this research is to explore the relationship between the design of the Internet recruiting message and the application behavior of a targeted group, Generations Y and Z.

Mauer, Howe, and Lee (1992) suggest "casting corporate recruiting as job marketing" (p.808). As such, the current study will seek to explore current theories on Web-based advertising and add to prior research on message strategy (Laskey, Day & Crask, 1989; Taylor, 1999) and message content (Fernandez & Rosen 2000) by focusing on the design of recruiting messages when advertising via popular social media. Specifically, this research will examine how perceptions of message content and message style affect attitudes toward the organization and influence intentions to pursue employment. This study is distinguished from extant literature on job advertisements as it will focus on those individuals commonly identified as Generation-Y and Generation-Z.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Profile of the Young Worker

There is much discussion in the literature as to the exact age of Generation-Y, with no true consensus on the exact dates that define them. However, this study will acknowledge the group using the definition given by Zemke, Raines and Filipczak (2000). Consistent with their definition, Generation-Y will include those born from 1980-2000. Today, this group would range in age from 10-30 years.

According to Markeiewicz (2003), Generation -Y represents approximately 76 million people in the United States. Researchers (Jurkiewicz & Bradley, 2002; Martin & Tulgan, 2002; Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 2000) have profiled them extensively as they have their own work-related values, attitudes and behaviors which are significantly different from those of their parents and grandparents, although, Loughlin and Barling (2001) suggest occupational research of younger workers is an under-researched area. Members of Generation-Y are well educated and high performing, with strong technological skills (Burke & Ng, 2006; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Zemke, et al., 2000). This group has enormous potential, and they are highly desired as new recruits; they are eager to learn and have been found to adapt more easily to corporate culture than traditional hires (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Van Vianen, 2000). With the changing demographics of today's workplace (e.g. retirement of baby-boomers), organizations will need to heavily rely on the skills of this group who are certain to be in high-demand. There is evidence in the literature that companies can adapt recruiting activities, such as job advertisements and recruiting materials, to attract desired applicants (e.g. Slaughter, Stanton, Mohr, & Schoel, 2005; Taylor & Collins, 2000; Turban & Cable, 2003). Therefore, investigating how to strategically attract Generation-Y to an organization by designing an effective recruiting message may prove beneficial to both marketing and management practitioners.

Generation-Z, also known as Post-Millennials, is the group that follows Generation-Y. The literature is inconsistent on the start and end dates for this demographic, however most typically use birth years ranging from the mid-1990 to early 2000 and ending from the late 2000 to early 2010 (Geck, 2007). A significant characteristic of this generation is they were born into the Digital Age. This is the first generation to have Internet technology so readily available at for their entire. With the web revolution that occurred throughout the 1990's, they have been exposed to an unprecedented amount of technology during childhood and adolescence. Many in this group have never engaged in comparing alternate research tools such as newspapers, journals or books because of their predisposition to the Internet. In addition, because of their early exposure to large amounts of data and colorful graphics from the Web, they are very comfortable with maneuvering varying digital environments and engaging with new online applications (Rothman, 2016).

2.2 The Role of Social Media

The speed and quantity of information available on the Internet has caused many companies to evaluate the effectiveness of their advertising and creative strategies (Cober, Brown, Levy, Cober & Keeping, 2003). Consumers access the Internet for information on a variety of important issues, and companies on the

leading edge are using advanced technology to communicate a focused message to their target audiences (Joos, 2008). As a result, social media advertising is evolving as an integral and necessary activity for marketers.

Historically, recruiting activities have been costly and time consuming (Walker et al., 2008). However, the Internet has changed many of the past recruiting practices, allowing organizations to provide a greater quantity of information to a larger audience, much faster and cheaper than traditional print media (Cober, Brown & Levy, 2004). What is not yet known, however, is the role that social media play in the online media line-up. Taking a cue from marketing practitioners, hiring managers are making use of social media as a method for communicating recruitment messages (Joos, 2008). However, no data was found evaluating the message strategy of those advertisements, and no empirical research studies have been identified which investigate how job-seekers' perceptions change when reviewing recruiting messages on this medium.

It has been suggested that job-seekers' perceptions of the organization's culture and values influence attraction (Barber, 1998; Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000; Cober, Brown, Levy Cober & Keeping, 2003). Relating this to the social identity theory (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquali 1994; Tajfel & Turner 1985), the message conveyed in a recruiting ad found on social media may influence the attractiveness of the job and the organization (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Breugh & Starke, 2000; Jones, Schultz, & Chapman, 2006; Highhouse, Beadle, Gallo, & Miller, 1998). This is explained further by suggesting that an applicant may choose to work for company that would improve their self-image and the regard others have for them. For instance, a candidate may interpret a company's advertisement as being progressive and forward thinking by virtue of its placement on a popular social networking site, drawing parallels to themselves and their community of 'friends' (referencing contacts made through social media). If several people in their friend group 'like' (acknowledge approval online) or become a 'fan' (subscribe to receive information from the page) of the organization and or the job advertisement, the company's recruitment equity increases and a positive brand image exists, which influences a positive attitude toward the brand (organization).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Vakratas & Ambler (1999) developed a theoretical model for cognitive response, suggesting a recipient's response to message content is filtered by their motivation and ability to process the information which can modify or change their choices or behavior. They contend that consumers examine content in the advertisement to determine their personal beliefs about the credibility of the brand and the message. However, there are times when consumers may lack the ability or motivation to process the content alone (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) and are therefore influenced by peripheral cues such as use of color, an attractive spokesperson, or the quality or creativity of the ad itself.

Relative to the process depicted in Figure 1 (Belch & Belch, 2009: 166), researchers have identified three basic categories of cognitive responses to persuasive messages such as those found in recruiting advertisements: product/message, source-oriented, and ad execution thoughts. (see Figure 1)

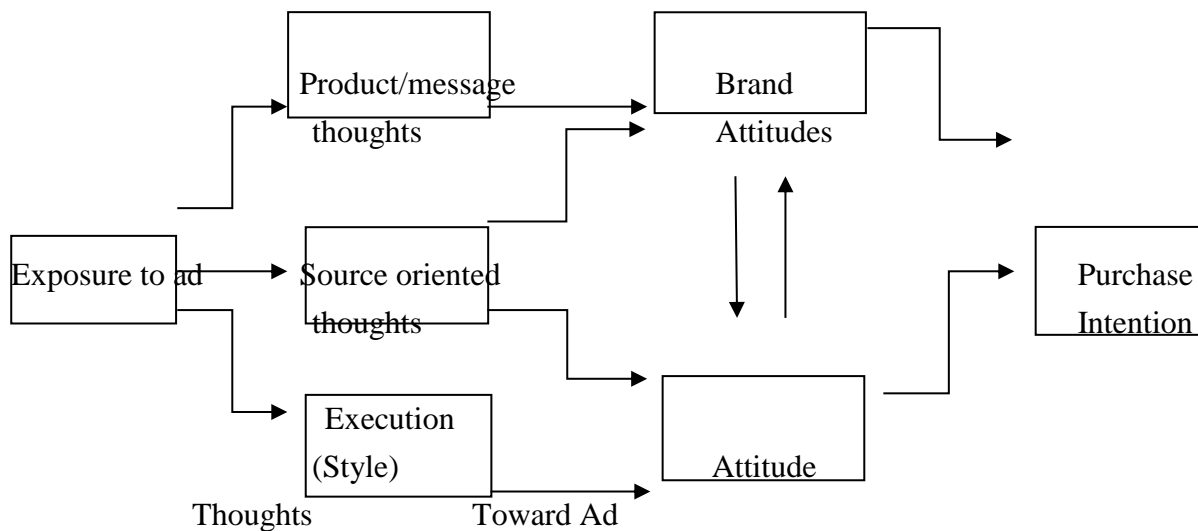


Figure 1 Three Basic Categories of Cognitive Response to Persuasive Messages

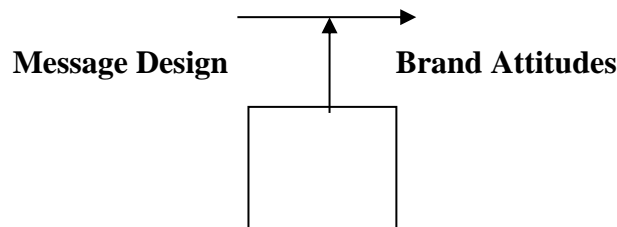
In regard to job advertisements, it has been suggested that exposure to recruiting advertisements in the early stage of the application process may influence applicant’s organizational perceptions (Barber & Roehling, 1993; Breaugh & Starke, 2000; Jones, Schultz, & Chapman, 2006; Highhouse, Beadle, Gallo, & Miller, 1998). Job-seekers will process the content of the information based on thoughts regarding the message, the source and the execution (style). These inferences and perceptions then help a candidate associate an image with the company (Cable & Turban, 2001), and the cognitive reactions eventually lead to the job seeker’s acceptance or rejection of the message and general attitude toward the ad, which then shapes their attitude toward the organization.

2.3.1 Social Identity Theory

Recently, researchers have begun applying the brand equity concept to recruiting (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Cable & Turban, 2003) equating brand attitude to organization attitude. As such, ‘brand’ and ‘organization’ will be used interchangeably in this study. Brand equity is defined as “the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand” (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009). Strong brand equity can create a significant competitive advantage for a firm (Aaker, 1996; Keller, 1993; Cable & Turban, 2003). Relating this concept to recruitment, an applicant’s attitude and perceived attributes of a company is defined as employer brand image (Collins & Stevens 2002). “The value of job seekers’ employer knowledge, which positively influences effectiveness of recruitment” was defined by Cable and Turban (2001) as recruitment equity (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009). Sometimes reputation determines how the market responds to the brand. Organizations with positive reputations have recruitment equity, which allows them to attract better skilled and higher quality candidates (Fombrun, 1996).

Social Identity Theory, originating in the field of social psychology, was developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979). The theory asserts that membership of a group creates in-group self- categorization and self-favoritism. In other words, individuals seek to belong to certain groups to boost their own self-esteem, and additionally, they must believe they are in the ‘right’ group as a distinction from other groups. Drawing on

the social identity theory, Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) suggest that employees attempt to maintain positive self-concepts by joining organizations with favorable public impressions and positive reputation. Essentially, just as consumers form beliefs about products as a result of marketing efforts, job applicants form perceptions about potential employers which influence their attitudes toward the organization and decisions about whether to pursue or accept job offers (Barber, 1998; Rynes, 1991). The preceding arguments are conceptualized in a basic model illustrated below in Figure 2:



Source

Figure 2. Basic Model of Effect of Social Media Message Design on Brand Attitudes

3. Experimental Design

A preliminary study was conducted on a sample composed of 89 undergraduate students enrolled in business courses at a university in the southern United States. An experimental design was prepared; two treatments of message strategy were used: informational (Ad 1) and transformational (Ad 2). Message content was divided into two levels: high specificity and low specificity. The results show a positive relationship exists between recruitment messages perceived to have high content specificity and the student’s attitude toward both the ad and their attitudes toward the organization (brand attitudes). Perceptions of message style, as operationalized by aesthetics and the use of peripherals impacted attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the organization (brand attitudes). Finally, social media messages that utilized transformational message strategies positively influenced attitude toward the ad and attitude toward the organization. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Table 1 Survey Results of Social Media Message Design on Brand Attitudes

	Ad 1 (High Content Specificity)	Ad 2 (Low Content Specificity)	Ad 3 (Control)
Favorable Impression of Content	47	33	9
Favorable Impression of Ad	57	28	4
Favorable Impression of Brand based on Ad based on Aesthetics	64	22	3

Ad most likely to attract attention on Social Media	52	26	11
Social medial ad leaving most positive impression of brand	57	28	4

4. Implications for Practitioners

Social media advertising provides companies with a powerful branding platform. Many companies venture into the complicated environment of social media marketing without completely understanding it, just to find that they are ill-prepared to be successful there. Firms must invest both time and resources into their social media marketing efforts to reap the full benefit of the medium. To offset the associated costs required to launch a social media advertising campaign, organizations would likely expect to experience a significant and timely return on their investment. Yet, despite the growing popularity of social media marketing, there is little information available to assist in the process of launching or maintaining effective social media marketing campaigns. Complicating the issue even further is the entrance of Generations Y and Z into both the job market and the consumer market. Having been reared in a media-rich, highly technical age, these individuals respond to advertising messages much differently than their parents did.

Recognizing the increasing importance of social media marketing and the apparent lack of preparedness many face, several progressive firms have created positions for “social media specialists” to help them navigate through the sea of tweets, blogs, links, status updates and video clips. The proposed study will help in identifying and developing advertising strategies that will appeal to and illicit favorable responses from those in Generation-Y, providing marketers and recruiters an exemplar for targeting young consumers and job-seekers.

5. Scope for Future Research

Several scholars have provided evidence to suggest that recruiting advertisements are often a person’s first source of information about a company (Fombrun & Shanley,1990; Gatewood, Gowan & Lautenschlager, 1993). With over 2 billion active Facebook profiles (Pegoraro, Scott & Burch, 2018), 200 million Twitter users (Sadri, et al., 2018), and millions of active blogs and chat rooms, the mechanism for receiving this information has more increasingly become some form of social media. Recruitment literature draws parallels between buying products and joining organizations (Maurer, Howe, & Lee, 1992). The preceding outlines a robust research agenda aimed at gaining insight into understanding the best process to achieve favorable message strategy when targeting Generations Y and Z. Thus, to maintain a competitive advantage in the talent market, firms must engage in a social media advertising strategy that captures the attention of the target audience and positively affect application behavior.

This initial study was conducted to test the relationships identified in the model. Future researchers may wish to expand this model or statistically analyze this model using a different theoretical framework in examining the relationship between the variables. For instance, the source credibility framework (Eisend, 2004; Porpitakpan, 2004) has been used to evaluate how message content moderates the effect of the recruiting source (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007). Given that social media recruiting is a relatively new activity for most organizations, it would be helpful for practitioners to understand and evaluate the many different social media sources in order to determine how best to approach each source. The current study will examine message strategy for recruiting messages to be placed on Facebook. Future research should seek to replicate this study using other forms of social media. Granted, there are many commonalities among all social media, however, each source also has characteristics unique to their respective communities. A review of sites such as Twitter, where user-generated information is continual and instantaneous, or the blogosphere where “word of mouse” (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007) is the primary source of information may prove fruitful.

The model developed for the current study is applicable to sources other than social media. Using the model to examine Generation-Y’s and Generation -Z’s responses to advertising messages when the source is traditional media provides an additional direction for future research efforts.

6. References

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