#Brand or @User? How Australian ‘Mass Brewers’ and ‘Craft Brewers’ Communicate with Consumers through Twitter

**Introduction**

The ‘brand orientation’ of a business refers to the degree to which the organisation values brands, and the extent to which its practices are oriented towards building a brand identity (Bridson & Evans, 2004). Researchers have argued, other things being equal, that a strong brand orientation may be an adequate strategy for survival (Urde, 1994), and that the functional quality of an organisation’s goods or services alone is no guarantee of success (King, 1991). A strong brand orientation aims at engaging consumers with a recognisable commercial identity over and above any immediate concern with what they buy. The consequent process whereby a person forms an attachment (emotional and rational) to a brand is recognised as brand engagement (Sprott, Czellar, & Spangenberg, 2009). Hollebeek (2011) defines Customer Brand Engagement (CBE) as “the level of a customer’s cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in specific brand interactions” (p. 565). Stimulating a positive and lasting CBE amongst its target market is therefore a key aim of organisations with a strong brand orientation.

Consumers have been shown to be less engaged with the products they consume, relative to their engagement with their preferred brands (Holt & Cameron, 2010). As such, engagement may be particularly important in order for an organisation to grow and reach the ‘mass market’ where consumers are more engaged with the brand than the product. For example, Nike started producing shoes for serious athletes. These first consumers were engaged with superior product quality. However, the mass markets were reached by engagement with a strong brand identity. The most difficult step in building a strong brand is making the transition between visionaries (early adopters) and pragmatists (early majority) (Moore, 1991). This means making the leap between engaging a small audience of ‘fans of the product’ and addressing a mass market engaged with the brand as a brand.

Recent trends in marketing suggest that social media can be used to engage consumers directly. By dint of businesses engaging in social networks, consumers can understand the personalities behind the scenes (Yan, 2011). This can prove more useful for smaller organisations because the principal can be the one who updates the Facebook fan page or ‘Tweets’. Social media allow the organisation to be more responsive to audiences and consumer demands (Yan, 2011). They are also more cost-effective than advertising or public Relations (Engeseth, 2009), and may be levelling the playing field for smaller enterprises.

With regards to social media usage, Twitter is mostly used for sharing up-to-the-minute news items, gossip and opinions relevant to events of that day (Langley, Hoeve, Ortt, Pals, & van der Vecht, 2013). It is a form of microblogging, which is made up of two basic yet powerful concepts: (a) the composition of ‘tweets’, or short 140-character messages; and (b) a ‘following’ mechanism to keep updated with other users’ tweets. Twitter provides a social media environment where consumers and businesses interact and many businesses have adopted Twitter in different forms and for different purposes. Most businesses use Twitter, amongst other forms of social media, to establish rapport with their customer-base and to maintain customer relations (Comm, 2010). Customers use Twitter as an informal platform for recommending preferred brands or services (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009), as well as for providing direct criticism and feedback on their purchase preferences (Wasow & Baron, 2010). As such, Twitter offers a forum for direct interactions between businesses and consumers and brand-oriented organisations should be able to effectively use this new
media in order to engage consumers with their brands. Nevertheless, promises of engagement with consumers may still be overstated. Social media was made for people, not brands, and professional markets are often unwelcome in this environment (Fournier & Avery, 2011). On Twitter, it seems that the following of celebrities, gossip, and current affairs is more prevalent than the engagement with brands. Brands and marketers are not dominating on Twitter; the most followed users are not businesses and their brands but movie and pop-stars and public figures (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). If people predominantly interact with other individuals in this environment, a further investigation of CBE though Twitter is warranted.

Research context and approach: Australian brewing industry

Australians are amongst the world’s heaviest users of social media (AIMIA, 2012). The social media usage of Australian organisations is therefore a valuable context in terms of understanding social media. Plangger (2012) argues that social media investment is related to firm value, especially in mature, highly competitive industries. The brewing industry in Australia fits this description, since it is an industry dominated by large multinational corporations (mass breweries) and it is also in overall decline in recent years. Despite this, the recent appearance of numerous small, independent ‘craft breweries’ is noteworthy. The two largest brewing companies (UK-based SAB Miller and Japanese Kirin Holding) control about 90% of the overall market (Datamonitor, 2013). The ‘craft movement’ started in the UK and the US in the 1970s and 1980s and is rapidly growing internationally. In Australia, the first craft brewery arrived in the late 1980s and by 2010, 122 were operating (Deutsher, 2012). Sales of craft beers in Australia are increasing even when overall beer consumption is decreasing (Watne, 2013). Craft breweries therefore operate in competition with the national and international mass breweries (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000).

Beer drinkers often cannot distinguish products from each other, or even pick out their favourite drink in a blind test (Jacoby, Olson, & Haddock, 1971). Since it is often hard to tell beers apart, tying strong emotions into a brand (CBE) has become an important promotional strategy. Large multinational brewing companies frequently appeal to their ‘country of origin’ to distinguish their product (Josiassen, 2011) and to stir patriotic emotions in consumers. For example, Foster’s are explicitly marketed as Australian, whereas Budweiser is marketed as American and so on. Large beer companies market their products internationally through mainstream advertising on television (Adams, 2006) and high profile sponsorships. Such promotions consistently foreground aspects of national identity (McCreanor, Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai, & Borell, 2005) which can thus be seen as an instance of strong brand orientation. For such brands CBE is typically attached to the sponsorships and/or feelings of national identity and patriotism. In a Twitter context, it is likely that large breweries will reflect the characteristics built into their brands through other means of marketing.

Craft breweries, on the other hand, tend to differentiate their products according to taste and the raw materials they use (Adams, 2006). Craft breweries in Australia have been shown to focus their marketing efforts on creating experiences around their products (Watne & Hakala, 2013) and on educating and socialising their customers about beer (Watne, 2012). Craft beer may be perceived as a ‘counter-culture’ to the large multinational mass breweries. Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) argued that the craft beer movement was partly fuelled by consumers’ shift from beer as a generic product, to craft beer differentiated by flavour. Schnell and Reese (2003) further argued that one of the main reasons for the craft beer expansion, was consumers’ desire to break away from the smothering homogeneity of popular, national culture. As a result, craft breweries may be less brand-oriented, more ‘product-oriented’ and so focus less on CBE in their Twitter interaction in order to distinguish themselves from the
large breweries. If they wish to grow out of their niche-position, a stronger brand orientation may be needed. There are always competing breweries with equally good products. As such, the craft beer brands that consumers engage with are the ones that are likely to grow and survive. According to Holt and Cameron (2010), US craft brewer ‘New Belgium’ made the leap to the mass market by becoming brand oriented and successfully building engaging personalities into the brand. Generating the CBE that is required to sustain mass-market penetration therefore requires a systematic and concerted brand orientation.

The Twitter environment is ‘neutral’ in terms of offering the same opportunity to generate engagement for organisations of any size. However, the differences outlined above between mass and craft breweries suggest that they may interact very differently with consumers – especially when it comes to CBE. We investigate, firstly, the difference in Twitter interactions that breweries of different size have with consumers, and secondly, whether those interactions relate to engagement with their brands. Our research question sought to investigate whether a difference in brand orientation could be found between Australian breweries of different size: How do Australian mass and craft breweries engage consumers through Twitter, and does size relate to how/whether they seek interaction about brands or products?

Method
Twitter has a wealth of metadata about its user-base and vast numbers of tweets are generated every day. In order to obtain Twitter data from different brewers, we used a ‘best-effort’ data collection strategy (Cheong & Lee, 2010) involving the ‘Twitter REST API’ (Application Programming Interface). The Twitter REST API is a service that obtains raw metadata about a particular user and their messages, allowing researchers to ‘harvest’ tweets from particular users. We harvested all the tweets posted by the four largest Australian beer brands by sales volume (VB and Carlton Draught from SAB Miller, and XXXX and Toohey’s New from Kirin) and the four most popular independent Australian craft brewers, selected according to the highest ratings on the international craft beer appreciation site ‘www.ratebeer.com’ (Murray’s Craft Brewing, Mountain Goat Beer, Feral Brewing Co and Bridge Road Brewers). The approach allowed us to study the dynamics and intricacies (as well as latent behavioural inferences) of social media brand orientation by different breweries.

We employed two tests to study the Twitter communication and behavioural patterns of both mass and craft brewers;

1. **Activity and efficiency:** Analysing the frequency of tweets and number of followers (Russell, 2011) and ratio of followers to tweets (Burton, Dadich, & Soboleva, 2013). This included looking at how often the breweries tweet, their popularity (number of followers) as well as their efficiency (ratio of followers per tweet sent).

2. **Interactivity:** Analysing entities within messages to infer communication style (Cheong, 2013), which involves checking tweets for the presence of specific indicators, or entities, of communication styles.

Results
In our first test, we looked at the total number of tweets, activity per month, the popularity in terms of followers, and the efficiency of the communication. In general, craft breweries tweet more frequently than mass brewers, both in total and on average per month. However, large differences exist in individual breweries with Bridge Road Brewery (@NakedNed) being substantially more active than any of the other breweries. Most of the brewery accounts in our sample had been active between 4 and 5 years. Of those, the craft breweries were still tweeting substantially more frequently than the mass breweries, indicating that the emerging
Craft breweries are seriously challenging the ‘establishment’ with regards to engaging consumers in this social medium. Further evidence of this is the substantially higher numbers of followers of craft breweries. It is worth noting that these small independent businesses have more fans on Twitter than well-established beer brands – some more than 100 years old.

The craft breweries are also more efficient in their communication. The exception is again Bridge Road Brewery (@NakedNed); as the brewer seems to use the Twitter account for both private conversations with friends as well as brand engagement with customers. Mass brewers are less efficient; some have high volumes of tweets to a relatively small audience. The exception is XXXX (@XXXAngels), who use their young female brand ambassadors (the XXXX Angels) as the official Twitter account for the brand – rather than the brand itself. They have twice as many followers as any of the other mass brewery brands.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brewery name</th>
<th>Tweets</th>
<th>Months active</th>
<th>Monthly Tweets</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>Efficiency</th>
<th>% URL</th>
<th>% @user</th>
<th>% #hashtag</th>
<th>% RT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>@carltondraught</td>
<td>2616</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>96.7</td>
<td>1307</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@vic_bitter</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>29.0</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@toohysnew</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@xxxxangels</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38.0</td>
<td>2885</td>
<td>76.0</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean mass brewers</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>1315</td>
<td>43.0</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@NakedN</td>
<td>19357</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>363.8</td>
<td>3852</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@murraysbrewing</td>
<td>1558</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>2206</td>
<td>63.5</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@feralbrewing</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>2052</td>
<td>94.2</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>@goatbeer</td>
<td>3422</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>5483</td>
<td>75.8</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean craft brewers</td>
<td>6211</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>128.2</td>
<td>3398</td>
<td>60.9</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In our second test, we looked at the use of entities; URLs, ‘@user’, ‘#hashtags’ and ‘retweets’. We found that both the craft brewers and the mass brewers posted URLs (i.e. website addresses) on their Twitter accounts. For the mass brewers, most of these links were re-directs to other social media sites such as Facebook; comments or references to their current TV advertising campaigns, or commentary on recent media exposure of the brand. In contrast, the URLs posted on the craft beer sites were directed towards less media-specific items such as beer tasting and appreciation events, or information on the beer making process. Further, @user entities (used to direct tweets to another user) were used extensively by two mass brewery brands, VB and Carlton Draught from SAB Miller. The direct engagement with Twitter followers by these brands included for example many tweets related to customer support regarding promotions. The other two mass breweries do not directly engage with their audience through Twitter, but seem to use it merely as a means of posting other advertising-related material. @user entities were present in all craft brewers; the approach taken, however, is different compared to commercial brewers. ‘Social chatter’ by craft brewers tends to focus on personal communication or encouragement of their target audience to explore craft beer in general, even competing brands. The engagement created through Twitter is clearly more related to products than brands for the craft breweries while the mass breweries hardly mention products at all and focus on maintaining a consistent brand position.

The use of #hashtags (to create ‘trends’ on Twitter or attract users to a discussion) by mass brewers was mainly for references to their own brands or sponsored sports activities like AFL football (“#AFLGrandFinal”), rugby (“#MaroonCrusade”) or cricket (“#Ashes”). In contrast, craft brewers use #hashtags to highlight craft beer appreciation events, which are absent in tweets by commercial brewers (e.g. “#GoodBeerWeek”, “#DarkBeerMonth”). Such hashtag-based tweets were also cross-posted by different craft brewers, emphasising engagement with the industry rather than individual brands. Finally, we looked at ‘re-tweets’ (tweets by a third-party user, subsequently reposted by the breweries). In general, the mass brewers would seldom or never re-tweet content from others, while 25% of the craft brewers

Table 1: Twitter activity of Australian breweries
tweets were re-tweeted from other users. This suggests that while the mass brewers are focused on controlling and restricting interaction with their customers, the craft breweries are more open to interacting with and engaging the Twitter community.

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that if a business of any size chooses to use Twitter as a one-way channel it does little to promote customer brand engagement (Yan, 2011). The argument goes that businesses that use Twitter as top-down media risk making themselves look ‘above’ their supporters, and that this goes against Twitter’s community ethos of transparency and oneness. Tendencies towards a top-down approach were certainly evident amongst the mass brewers tweets. Heavy usage of advertising slogans, lack of personal @user tweets and an unwillingness to re-tweet other users’ content might be seen as contributing to the perception of mass breweries as being somewhat distant, and as such partly explain the lack of followers compared with the craft breweries. Twitter seems to be an incidental publicity medium for mainstream brewers whose marketing strategies primarily target television advertising and sponsorship of sporting and related events. This ‘conservative’ approach may be related to the fact that they sell alcoholic beverages. The brand needs to be controlled and positioned responsibly, in a time where research suggests a relationship between social media usage and youth binge drinking (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Griffiths & Casswell, 2010). For them, Twitter is a means to augment established off-line ‘safe’ campaigns – hence #hashtag references to media comments on those campaigns and sponsored sporting events. The interactive affordances of Twitter may usefully suggest that the brand is somehow approachable – but the evidence presented here suggests this is at best a rhetorical suggestion of the possibility of interaction rather than any actual interactivity per se (Turner, 2013). On this basis we see mass brewers’ presence on Twitter as largely token – a matter of simply being seen not to be absent. That is, it is a way of maintaining the ubiquity of the pre-established brand.

It was evident from our analysis that craft brewers actively engage with their audience on Twitter more personally and more directly than do mass brewers. It is also evident that they are relatively more concerned with products and services rather than brands. Relative to market share and length of business, the smaller organisations are engaging proportionately larger and seemingly devoted audiences. In the Twitter environment, the small and independent newcomers in an otherwise mature industry are in many ways outperforming their more established competitors. Craft breweries are more active contributors, more followed, more efficient in their communication and more interactive with their audience. However, like Nike in its early days, the craft breweries are interacting with consumers who are ‘fans of the products’ rather than attempting to engage them more suggestively by means of a strong brand orientation. Many of craft breweries are ‘mixing business with pleasure’; the owners are both tweeting about their aspiring brands whilst also carrying out their own incidental correspondence from the same account. To make the leap into the mass market, craft breweries may need to consider turning up the level of their brand orientation rather than tweeting about personal matters, isolated events or craft beer in general.

Generating CBE through Twitter is somewhat paradoxical, as users seem more interested in niche-products than large brands (at least when it comes to beer). The craft breweries in this study are certainly generating more interaction than their large competitors, but not about the brands. This supports previous research suggesting that social media was made for people, not brands. As such, Twitter alone offers a limited capacity to generate CBE; a wider approach including a variety of different media may be needed in order to engage consumers with brands and grow the business into the mass market.
References
Brïdson, K., & Evans, J. (2004). The secret to a fashion advantage is brand orientation. International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management, 32(8), 403-411.


