Company Tactics for Customer Socialization with Social Media Technologies: 
Finnair’s Rethink Quality and Quality Hunters Initiatives

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Abstract
Social media technologies (SMT) provide unparalleled opportunities for customer relationship management. But these technologies also create a new, unfamiliar, and complex context that can challenge the company’s efforts to guide and steer customer behavior to ensure achievement of desired objectives. We report on a case study that illustrates how a company in the airline industry experimented with SMTs to socialize customers to participate in the company’s quest for renewing its brand. The case points out gaps in our understanding of customer socialization when behaviors rely on SMT and customers have no or weak identification with the company. The company in question used boundary-spanning agents that facilitated a more experiential perspective to customer socialization. The experiential perspective complements the prevailing information processing perspective of customer socialization in the existing literature. The case holds implications for customer co-creation theories.

1. Introduction
Central to the current interest in using social media technologies (SMT) in external enterprise activities is the proposal that they help renew stagnated brands, connect to new customer groups, and identify ways to maximize the lifetime value of customers [1]. This proposal is based on the assumption that SMT offer unprecedented opportunities to engage customers in dialog, learning, and co-creation. Evidence from this exists from high tech and innovative companies, such as, IBM, Microsoft, Starbucks, and Procter and Gamble [2]. P&G effectively used SMT to renew its stagnating Old Spice brand. By retargeting the brand toward a much younger group of 18-34 age males to whom SMTs are part of their everyday lives, the company did not only leverage technological developments but also capitalized on changing customer preferences and new logics of personalized service [3]. In a viral marketing campaign, the company released in one week 180 personalized videos that recorded nearly 6 million views and 22,500 user comments [1]. The key to P&G’s success was targeting to a digital native, a well socialized customer who has motivation and ability to participate via dialog, learning, and co-creation using SMT.

The existing online co-creation research has been largely preoccupied with identifying innovators and lead users, and those customer segments who are motivated and able to co-create [4, 5]. The other approach, much less researched in firm hosted online forums, is to invest in customer socialization of the current and desired future customers. Customer socialization refers to “a process pertaining to the development of consumer skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant” that facilitate customer-company interaction [6]. Customer socialization increases in importance the more the organizational outcomes are dependent on customer participation (e.g., a highly customized service) [6]. In the offline context, customer socialization has been linked to improved customer motivation and ability to participate in co-creation [6].

Earlier research on socialization in online contexts has focused on user behavior [7, 8], while the company perspective is lacking. Developing tactics for customer socialization is essential for those companies whose customer base does not comprise or is not limited to “digital natives,” yet, wishing to realize value from SMT. In this paper, we report on a case involving an airliner and the customer socialization tactics it experimented with in the SMT context involving a brand renewal from a regional focus to a global focus. By understanding the tactics deployed, we seek to obtain insight on how socialization of customers in the SMT context follows tactics described in offline literature and what the new aspects the online context brings and why.

We next identify the gaps in the literature that make the current case study revelatory. We then present the method and the findings. We conclude with implications to both theory and practice.
2. Theoretical background

Customer participation in service ideation, production, and delivery is an old and accepted idea for customer and company value creation including innovation [9]. Customer participation has grown in importance because of the new service-dominant thinking [10]. According to Xie et al [11], "customers participate to customize their own world." Customer participation is important in new product development [12] and, although less talked about, in brand design [3]. Through participation, consumers develop an emotional connection, increasingly identify with the brand [13], and perceive themselves and the focal organization as sharing the same defining attributes [14]. Customer participation can reduce marketing costs and the risk of brand failure [3].

2.1. Customer socialization in offline channels

In offline channels, it is accepted that customer socialization is a critical antecedent to customer participation, or co-creation (e.g. [6]). Through customer socialization, the customer comes to understand the expectations, values, and constraints of the customer-company interaction. Well socialized customers participate more and in the direction beneficial for both the company and the customers.

Building on the theory of organizational socialization [15, 16], Kohler et al [17] defined customer socialization to target three elements: role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance. A well socialized customer understands what is expected from each party, gains confidence in mastery of the tasks required, and feels accepted and appreciated. The literature on organizational socialization offers an expansive repertoire of tactics that companies can use to influence socialization experiences and the values, skills, and knowledge that the customer gains. The tactics range from highly institutionalized (structured) to individualized (unstructured) [18, 19].

The tactics can emphasize content, context, and social aspects of socialization [20]. Applying the tactics to customer socialization, the content can take an institutionalized form if it is formal and collective (e.g., training program or organizational documentation that is the same to everyone) and individualized if it is informal and individual (observing different others or exposure to different text). The context takes an institutionalized form if it is fixed in sequence and with a known timetable (e.g., initiative with start and stop dates) and individualized form if it is random sequence and with open timetable. The social dimension takes the institutionalized form if agents like salespeople help the customer and feedback is provided and the individualized form if no agent and no feedback are provided (see Table 1). The individualized content and context along with institutionalized social (agent present) are associated with innovative behaviors [18].

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2.2. Customer socialization in online channels

The models of online co-creation have not explicitly considered customer socialization. Yet, we argue that customer socialization in online channels is equally if not more important than in offline channels. The online literature has found that customers vary highly in their motivation and ability to participate [12]. For customers to learn the values, skills, and knowledge required for successful co-creation in different kinds of firm-hosted online forums, customer socialization is essential.

Different factors have been found to impact online co-creation when contributions are targeted at the community (e.g., an open source software development community [22]) or at the company hosting the forum (e.g., Dell Idea Storm [23]) [21]. In company hosted online forums, customer co-creation is dependent on the customer’s motivation and ability, sense of partnership with the company, and the customer’s identification with the company [21]. Extrapolating offline results to online context, customer socialization can increase the customer’s motivation to participate in terms of level as well as direction, and increase customer company identification, and harness the sense of partnership with the company [13].

Socialization has been examined in the context of online groups where individuals make contributions to the benefit of the group or the community, not to the benefit of the company as in our case study. Additionally, these studies have only looked at the tactics of the individuals, not what the forum provider does [7, 8]. In the online context, socialization has been studied in the delivery and support of banking services [17], not in the context of co-creation.
2.3. Customer socialization in SMT

Some research on SMT implies that there is a great need to focus on customer socialization to realize the potential and minimize the negative effects. In SMT, companies are reported to lack the ability to manage their message and influence the customer [1, 24-26]. For instance, Unilever successfully used SMT, but in the process it was exposed to much ridicule and mockery [27]. In the hospitality industry, customers have brought about irrevocable damage to brands with inappropriate and unjustified negativity [28]. There is a significant need to better understand as to how companies can socialize their customers in the SMT context for the desired outcomes. Next, we introduce a case study that aims to shed light to these gaps in the literature.

3. Method

We selected the travel and tourism industry in Finland for our study because media reports touted the use of SMT in customer relationship management and, the industry provided a business-to-consumer setting as much of the customer co-creation in online settings has examined the business-to-business context [12]. We initially interviewed six travel industry experts, including founders and board members of travel and tour companies; social media coordinator of a major newspaper with an extensive travel section; and entrepreneurs in the travel industry. The main focus of the interviews was to understand the extent and challenges of social media use in travel and tourism industry in Finland and find a revelatory case to study a key challenge further.

The experts all reported SMT use to be centered on marketing, public relations, and customer service with occasional experimentation in product and brand development. The use was motivated by the rapidly declining industry profitability, and an attempt to drive down costs in public relations and marketing. They all emphasized the possibilities of SMT in discovering new directions for services and in cost effective testing of concepts and ideas with customers. The experts cited examples of SMT use during travel related crises that provided a compelling cause for dynamic interaction with customers. However, all except one interviewee acknowledged that much of the value of SMT was unrealized because of difficulties of getting customers to participate. The participation tended to be sporadic as travel is not something that is constantly in people’s mind. The publicness of participation makes many customers weary, and highly cautious and self-censoring of their inputs. We heard of no significant instances of negative comments, for instance. Companies in some cases had moved to less interactive forms such as structured surveys. Another finding was that in those cases that customer input was gathered the firm processes were rather ad-hoc in further leveraging it in firm internal processes.

We learnt from a newspaper story that the national Finnish airline, Finnair, was using SMT as part of its major brand renewal program involving customer participation. We decided to pursue this initiative for a further case study upon an interview with the executive in charge of the initiative who approved our further interviews. The initiative deployed a number of socialization tactics to encourage customer participation. The reason for using a case study method approach [29] was to “help sharpen existing theory by pointing to gaps and beginning to fill them” ([30], p. 21).

3.1. Case context

Whereas many of the previous case studies involving SMT have involved companies with global brands and progressive and risk taking cultures (Starbucks, IBM, P&G), Finnair is one of the oldest firms in the mature airline industry. This midsized airline carries 7-8 million passengers a year with sales of over 2 billion Euros. The company is characterized by significant state ownership (60%), highly unionized labor force, and years of financial operating losses. The company has been affected by intensive competition by low-cost entrants and external disturbances including the Icelandic volcano ash crisis that resulted in the biggest grounding of European air traffic during peace time. With a small home country market, it needed a compelling service proposition to create awareness among other nationalities and overcome their preference to fly with their national airlines.

In late 2000’s, Finnair embarked on its image renewal that would help to support its growth strategy in the highly fragmented industry. The company positioned itself as a “boutique alternative [to the larger European airlines]” for the quality conscious traveler between Europe and Asia. The company goals were to become No. 1 airline in the Nordic countries by 2020, to be the most desired option in Asian traffic, and to be among the three largest operators in transit between Asia and Europe.

As a challenger, Finnair had to offer something unique. Finnair’s branding on quality centered on concepts “Peace of mind during your busy schedule,” “Designed from detail to whole,” and “Feeling Finnair with all five senses.” A manager explained,
“the idea was to put ‘Finnish sensibility’ and operational excellence to the word Quality: hassle free, functional, and reliable.” “Feeling Finnair” would require active customer involvement in the various phases of the customer relationship or the consumption of Finnair services on land. Such services might involve various customer participation activities prior to a flight, services at the airport (e.g., airport lounge iPad services), or onboard (e.g., flight specific social networking). An executive told, “The principles of quality need to be involved in everything from the first impression to signing up the customer for the frequent flyer program.” More than 1,200 Finnair employees were directly involved in the image renewal, and even more participated indirectly as the entire customer process inside was being rethought.

The image renewal included a Rethink Quality program that would engage customers in discussions about quality and, in the process signal that Finnair had a quality offering. Finnair was particularly proud of its business class service. Business travelers formed the target group of the Rethink Quality program. However these travelers did not necessarily represent “digital natives” with preference for customer participation in online forums. The company had instituted several initiatives to encourage customer participation and these initiatives provided opportunities to examine socialization tactics.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Our data collection focused on how Finnair engaged with customers using SMT in the context of its image renewal and specifically the Rethink Quality program. Data collection methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviews, media reports, and the analysis of social media sites. The employees we interviewed were told that we were studying how Finnair used SMT in its brand renewal and customer relationship management.

We conducted nine interviews at Finnair and at its partners that had been involved in designing and implementing the Rethink Quality and the Quality Hunters initiatives. Afterwards, we kept in contact with the key executive in Finland implementing the Quality Hunters’ ideas. We also attended a press conference that Finnair organized to launch its new logo and visual image.

Data collection and analysis were intertwined [31]. Each interview lasted about 1-2 hrs. The interview themes were: (1) respondent background, (2) history of SMT use at Finnair, (3) reflections on key miles stones and on impact on key stakeholders, (4) lessons learned, (5) future plans. Most interviews had two field researchers present. After each interview, the notes were retyped and the researchers discussed what emerging themes present. Interview questions were adjusted to reflect these themes to see if we could confirm, further explain, or deny emergent themes. We ended the interviews when the new interviews offered little new insights regarding customer participation and SMT.

Our initial case write-up as well as industry interviews highlighted the importance of customer socialization and what the company could do to facilitate customer learning. Thus, we next focused our analysis of case data on Finnair’s customer socialization tactics and how they leveraged institutionalized and individualized approaches (see Table 1).

4. Findings

4.1. Drivers for Customer Participation

Customer participation was critical for Finnair’s growth strategy that depended on creating awareness of Finnair’s high quality offering in the market of 15 million people who currently travel between Asia and Europe annually between the cities that Finnair serves. Although Finnair was ranked highly in various safety and customer rankings, much of the air traveling customer base had never heard of Finnair. A manager explained, “Finnair as a national airline is well known and well regarded in Finland, but the brand is largely unknown in many European markets and unheard of in remote markets such as India, China, Korea, and Japan.”

As a strong believer in service dominant perspective, the company saw it critical to promote interactions between Finnair and the potential customers to “feel Finnair.” Customer engagement would be the centerpiece in Rethink Quality Campaign. According to a senior manager, “The key to delivering quality is to innovate and act together with the customer.” Another executive explained, “The emotional tie is more sustainable than what can be bought with money or with frequent flyer miles.”

The company well understood that the key to successful interactions was to match the value orientation of its customers with its own values if it were to be successful in attracting a loyal customer base outside its home market. A manager explained, “The target group of new customers come from Asian economies. In China, there are more millionaires than there are people in Finland. A growing customer group are the “understaters”, who are
willing to pay for quality, but do not want to show off their wealth.” Finnair is a great match for this group, with its understanding that “quality is intertwined with practicality, solid reliability and operational excellence.”

But the big question that remained was how to get customers to engage in discussions about quality and in the process, signal that Finnair had a quality offering. The past experience had taught Finnair that it was very difficult to sustain active discussions with customers unless customers felt passionate about the topic or there were some disruptive forces at play that required constant adjustments. As one the industry experts we interviewed had emphasized, “travel is something that most people do not think every day. Getting business travelers who travel frequently engaged in discussion is difficult, particularly those at the CEO level.” The company had also learnt that it could not steer the discussion too much if it were to generate discussion, “The users need to feel ownership of the topic.”

Although regarded as a financially conservative company, the firm was not a stranger to technology enabled innovation. The firm has been recognized for its advanced use of information and mobile technologies particularly in passenger service and support functions.

With SMT, Finnair had taken a positive but a cautionary attitude. When some local firms were still technically restricting access to social media sites, Finnair did not but expected employees to follow corporate guidelines. But even this was interpreted by media that “Finnair fears Facebook” [32]. The Finnair guidelines specified that unless job responsibilities required interacting on the sites, the use should happen outside of working hours and use would be private. Later, there was more clarification on who should participate in online forums on behalf of Finnair.

“Finnair Runway” blog with contributions from pilots, members of the executive team, production managers, cabin attendants, maintenance managers, customer managers, and many others was launched in early 2009, followed by the official Finnair presence on Facebook and Twitter in early 2010.

The head of public relations and corporate communications championed the launch of Facebook presence and insisted that all board members use Facebook. The executive explained Facebook’s importance to the firm, “In social media, company is present where the customers are. In traditional advertising media, perhaps a larger group of people are reached but only a small percentage of those are interested in our offering. In social media, people interested in us come and read our Facebook page. 100% of those people are relevant for us.”

With its SMT strategy, the company has gradually shifted to technologies that relinquished more control to the customer, such as, Facebook. The gradual strategy has allowed the firm to develop internal competencies, knowledge, and policies to keep up with the changing environment.

4.2. Participation and Socialization Tactics

The Rethink Quality Program served as a broad arena for customer participation in Finnair’s image renewal and four distinctive socialization tactics. SMTs provided means for customer participation and the context for customer socialization. The socialization agents, Quality Hunters, leveraged the interactivity and transparency capabilities of SMTs in their roles as inspirational conversation leaders on quality in the world of travel.

4.2.1. Collective, formal, and sequenced program to convey Finnair values. Finnair’s 85th anniversary celebration in 2009 was an early effort to have customers participating using SMT. This was a formal program with a pre-specified starting and ending time. The initiative was important from the socialization standpoint by portraying Finnair values of quality, freshness, and creativity and yet reminding customers of Finnair’s long history, reliability, and adherence to tradition when it serves customers.

Rather than look backwards as is often traditionally done, the company decided to celebrate its longevity by looking forward 85 years and create organizational documentation around five future scenarios on “Departure 2093”, envisioning flying in 85 years’ time to be “popular, ecological, an adventure, good business, and personal”. The documentation was made available in a book and a website to promote discussion with customers. Although over a million people visited the site, the company found it difficult to generate discussion and get customers to share their feedback and ideas. More successful was a marketing survey on the website that involved a contest of round trip flight tickets. The executive in charge expecting to get 100 respondents was delighted that by the end date, over 14000 people had completed the survey.

The Departure 2093 campaign helped the company to gain attention, interest, and word-of-mouth effect in international markets. The initiative was mentioned in high visibility print and online articles, such as, National Geographic, The Hindustan Times and Wired. The progressive campaign also won industry media awards. It generated dialogue on
the campaign website but not to the extent that the company had hoped. The customers were more ready to respond to more structured surveys than open-ended calls of participation for ideas and suggestions. The lack of interactivity in conversations suggested that there was still wide psychological distance between the customers and Finnair. The program had opened Finnair and customers for future co-creation opportunities.

4.2.2. Individualized and informal social conversations during crises. Facebook became the most active media for co-creation although more for service delivery than service ideation initially. Finnair formally launched Facebook in early 2010 and set up a 7x24 hour support staff, making rapid responses to queries possible. The tool allowed individualized experiences. They were informal in a sense that the site did not categorize Facebook fans to current or future customers. There was no formal sequence or timetable when conversations would take place but rather were largely driven by the activity of the customers. The customers could also interact with other customers helping to convey social approval. During crises, Facebook represented individualized forms of participation and socialization although the activity could be followed by anyone with Facebook access. There were also some institutionalized use as Finnair made announcements related to crises on Facebook.

Facebook became under heavy use in during the Icelandic volcano ash and during the labor strikes all of which disrupted flights. In January 2011, Finnair’s Facebook had close to 40.000 “fans”. Facebook provided a fast and highly individualized channel for Finnair to serve a number of customers at the same time, and made it possible for Finnair’s fans to help each other. For example, during the “Ash Weeks”, Finnair posted “Finnair has to cancel all of its flights on Tuesday [...] due to the airspace restrictions by Finnish authorities.” (April 19, 2010). When a customer posted a question “Are Finnair offering a bus back to Helsinki from Berlin?”; six minutes later came a reply from another customer with information on a Finnair bus from Berlin to Helsinki via Tallinn.

Also Finnair representatives were quick to reply to customer inquiries posted under Finnair’s frequent Facebook updates: “Pablo -> The aircraft is in Helsinki and we are waiting for more information on when it will take off. ” Finnair received complements from many of its competitors’ fans for having the most up to date and valuable information on its site.

Facebook promoted customer socialization by allowing customers to feel part of, and to improve their efficacy to be part of the extended Finnair company on their own terms. No longer would they have to accept the company’s official announcement as irrevocable, but they could respond to them in their own terms, challenge them, and take a proactive stance in promoting another course of action. Facebook also promoted a sense of social acceptance by providing a forum for customers to convey how they interpreted the events and get feedback from other customers and Finnair. Customers could use the inputs to assess if their contributions were seen valuable. Facebook allowed to see other customers’ postings and replies to them. All of this could help increase the sense of norms and values of co-creation and improve customer role clarity. The executives conveyed that Facebook had done much to improve the partnership between customers and Finnair, “Facebook was the ultimate best way to interact at times of turbulence and uncertainty.”

4.2.3. Collective and informal customer-to-firm feedback. Facebook took also a more institutionalized and sequenced form in a sense that same information was exposed and paced to customers in a timetable although informal in a sense that there was no categorization of customers or restrictions to participation. In this more institutionalized form, Facebook was utilized for product development surveys. In Fall 2010, Finnair ran a series of weekly product development surveys among the Facebook fans, each including a set of five questions (e.g. “Tell us about your best ever flying experience.”). Although the surveys were not limited to current customers, an executive told us that most of the fans and discussions to date have stemmed from Finland.

Facebook was used in contests or draws, for example, “Question of the Week”: If you had a free hand to turn Finnair into your perfect airline, what would you do? What would you change and how? Tell us, and win a flight! (September 20, 2010). The first winner for this one was “Luz from Mexico”: This is her idea in brief: having an interactive map on the inflight entertainment system with info about your destination, local restaurants, hotels, car rentals, museums, etc... and ability to make reservations during your flight. (October 18, 2010). Both the original question posted by Finnair as well as the announcement of the winners received a number of “likes” as well as comments from the fans: “GREAT IDEA! When im on a long flight i rather watch the map than movies! it would b great to find out more about the destinations that are around your flight route! :)” However, less enthusiastic comments were also shared, for example “That is done on many
In connection with new routes, Finnair has run structured competitions of “fun facts” or trivia related to Finnair or the destination, where a winner could win airline tickets and vouchers for amenities. A trivia related question asked “What other name is Singapore known by? Lion City, Tiger City, Panda City or Puma City?” The feedback was both positive and negative. Some of the fans “liked” each and every update and some also commented: “hi! im singaporean and i can't wait to meet finnair planes at changi! (:.” But again, some have not been entertained by the campaign: “To be frank, it is quite annoying to read post about Singapore launch every day…”

The more structured use of Facebook reduces the variability in customer-firm interactions. Structured uses of Facebook may have helped to decrease the ambiguity and role learning that can be experienced in more open-ended interaction. People who were new to Facebook might have been more willing to participate because the structured forms of participation made the expectations, values, and appropriate behaviors more explicit. But on the other hand, structured uses of participation can impede innovative customer participation [18].

4.2.4 Social and interpersonal interactions with the Quality Hunters. The last tactic focused on social aspects of socialization (see Table 1). Finnair used the Quality Hunters (QHs) as socialization agents that signaled the quality and character of Finnair but at the same time were seen as a referent group with which customers identified with [13, 17]. By following QHs through their daily blogs and online conversations, even customers who did not post themselves built bonds that made it likely that the customers also found Finnair a more likely target of customer identification. QHs served as important boundary spanning agents helping to make cognitive and affective connections that then may have transferred to the company.

The QH idea was a variation of the “Best job in the world” campaign in 2009 at the Great Barrier Reef: offering a job so interesting and attractive, that a great number of people will apply, and even a greater number will follow the news. QHs travelled to key Finnair destinations for 61 days, in search of quality. QHs shared their thoughts and adventures with the public through personal blogs on the Rethink Quality website and generated conversations with customers around quality. The blogs and dialog helped co-create Finnair image around quality and helped customers internalize what quality meant in air travel. Additionally, Finnair received valuable advice to its service development, and was looking to "embellish the less tangible elements of service, that provide pleasure, travelling comfort, and the ‘WAU effect’ - something that the customer hadn’t been expecting and something that the competitors cannot copy.”

About 300,000 visitors visited the Finnair website to view the ad on “a dream job.” The local press covered QH initiative in print and online media in different countries. The recruitment of QHs was open for a month and generated 5300 applications from 90 countries. Key selection criteria included good English writing skills, energetic, engaging and independent personalities. One unofficial criteria was to have at least one business traveller among the selected. Eventually, four applicants were selected, two male and two female and all from outside Finland as Finnair was striving to grow outside its home country. QHS were independent and free to write what ever they liked, positive or negative. For instance, halfway through the campaign, one of the QH’s blogged: “After a month of travelling Finnair’s network, there are a few things I feel that I can fairly share. Firstly, the service is generally very good.” And then: “There are gripes. The ground staff (admittedly, not all of them Finnair employees, but nevertheless, your public face to passengers) have varied from super efficient (Shanghai) to bumbling (Sheremetyevo)”. For two months, they were officially Finnair employees, whom Finnair called “independent advisors appointed by Finnair” and who were seen as part of continuing efforts to improve Finnair’s service proposition.

None of the QHs had previously flown with the company, matching the target market of Finnair’s growth strategy. Each QH posted daily two blog entries with photographs. Over the next sixty days, each QH separately traveled to about 10 different destinations throughout Asia, Europe, and U.S. They generated 350 blogs and 1200 comments from followers. At no time during the process did Finnair interfere with the QHs blogs, not even make comments. A Finnair manager remarked, “the blogs had a very authentic feeling.” Another manager explained, “Open discussion was the only option...What might be a challenge for Finnair does not interest the customer. She is only interest in getting service that suits her/him”.

Besides Finnair, the Quality Hunters also used other airlines, mostly partners from the One World alliance, but also competitors’. A QH made the following comparison on a blog, “This [free sandwich] is much better service than on low cost carriers where you have to pay for everything - I
believe however SAS, Swiss and Lufthansa even give you free alcohol - which you have to buy flying Finnair.”

The QH blogs had well over half a million visitors during the two months and generated coverage in print and online media, but there was a challenge to keep the focus on the target segment, business travelers. Banner advertising was not having its expected effect. As one Finnair executive remarked, “how do you get the attention of a time constrained senior guy who reads Financial Times. It is not easy to get his attention on the web, let alone to get him looking at banners.”

QHs were socialization agents in the sense that their blogs and dialogue revealed not just Finnair’s openness to outside ideas but the quality and character of Finnair. The blogs did not dwell on air travel per se but the overall traveler experience highlighting Finnair’s quality concepts. The QHs had rather different content in their blogs but all exhibiting “creative individualism” [19]. QHs were adamant on providing personalized and positive responses to all customer posts, even the most negative ones. For instance, after one QH reported on problems related to a flight from Helsinki to Geneva, a reader commented: “Amazingly poor customer service and to top it off your luggage is delayed (or lost).” The QH’s response was conciliatory: “I would not come to the conclusion not to fly Finnair just because some parts of the travel package did not work properly. The role of the Quality Hunters is just to make these deficiencies transparent and encourage Finnair to look into the problems we encountered and take the appropriate steps to make the system better.”

Through their interaction style, responsiveness, empathy, and knowledge, QHs formed an inspirational key referent group to the customers, helping to build customer identification that is critical for customer participation and has strong impacts on customer loyalty, innovation, and satisfaction [13]. The majority of the Rethink Quality site visitors never contributed; however, following QHs for an extended period likely made them more receptive to consider Finnair as a target of identification.

5. Discussion and implications

Before implications, we want to acknowledge some of the many limitations that the study has.

5.1. Limitations

The paper is only an initial step towards improving our understanding of customer socialization with SMT. The company was only in the experimenting stage to understand customer participation and socialization using SMT; the firm was still charting its course in terms of linking customer participation to revenue performance. We have no access to actual costs of the different tactics and no subjective nor objective data on the outcomes of socialization such as identification, loyalty, innovation, and so on. We only examined one company although we prefaced the case with a set of industry interviews. The interview data reflects the view of Finnair executives and its partners, not the customers, as we focused on Finnair’s socialization tactics. To improve the validity of our findings, we recovered accounts on the same tactics from several key parties. We triangulated the interviews against each other, as well as compared them for consistency with information on websites as well as media reports.

5.2. Implications to Socialization Theories

Customer socialization refers to those processes that help customers to adapt and come to appreciate the values, norms, and behavior patterns of the company. Such socialization is critical as services become more customized and personalized and require online customer participation. Customer socialization facilitates customer company identification that is a necessary condition in customer participation. Customer socialization also develops the role clarity, self-efficacy, and social approval for active customer participation.

The case offers preliminary insight to the customer socialization in an online context. The Finnair case illustrates the use of varied tactics of socialization leveraging SMT to match the heterogeneity of customers to build identification with the company as well as improve their customer participation via SMT. Customer socialization was a mix of institutionalized and individualized approaches, well illustrated through the use of Facebook. The social approach, Quality hunters, involved a formal role, but the formal role promoted individualized aspects of socialization leveraging SMT. Hence, we saw little support for prior findings in offline channels that suggest that formal tactics (e.g., organizational documentation) are more effective than informal tactics (e.g., observing others) [19]. Moreover, in online contexts, the bipolar perspectives to socialization (individualized vs. institutionalized) seem narrow and limited. Both perspectives are leveraged but not just for their complementarity, but for their duality to promote different objectives.
Taking a predominantly an information processing perspective, the customer socialization theories building on organizational socialization focus on reduction of uncertainty by increasing role clarity, self-sufficiency, and social approval (Bauer et al 2007). With SMT, the experiential side of participation is as important as information seeking and processing. Particularly with the QHs, the blogs and dialog conveyed the emotional value from connecting rather than informational value. Hence, future research needs to develop the experiential perspective of customer socialization in online contexts.

Additionally, the future research needs to explore the implications of publicness in customer socialization and the role of lurkers. Not only active but also passive members in firm-hosted forums need to be socialized to fully leverage the potential of online channels for customer participation.

One practical implication is the need to attend to the context, not just content and social aspects of socialization. Finnair’s socialization tactics focused primarily on the content and social aspects of customer socialization, without any apparent explicit tactics focusing on context. The lack of context tactics can render customer socialization experience fragmented.

5.3. Implications to Co-Creation Theories

The co-creation theories have established the customer-company partnership and customer identification with the company to be critical for customer contributions to the company [21]. What is not well established are the mechanisms that can help build a sense of partnership in online context, particularly for those who are not digital natives. Moreover, customer co-creation literature focuses on customer participation with existing customers who already have some level of identification with the company. This study provides preliminary insight that socialization mechanisms can be important in customer co-creation. Future research is needed to enrich our understanding on the antecedents and consequences of socialization tactics.

An important practical and future research issue is how to leverage human boundary-spanning agents in customer co-creation [21]. There are important decisions to the choice of such agents and how they participate particularly in terms of the nature and frequency of their interactions with customers. The current case suggested that the company imposed little formal structure and control on the socialization agents and their interactions with customers. Is the decision on control influenced by the technology of SMT used to engage the customer? How much control should the firm seek in customer socialization process? How should the firm internally organize to manage the online context of co-innovation?

In this paper we have introduced the concept of customer socialization to the theory of co-creation in firm-hosted forums. We reviewed some key literature in terms of company tactics facilitating customer socialization in offline contexts. We also identified the gap in the current SMT literature regarding socialization. A case study was presented that illustrated the simultaneous use of institutionalized and individual approaches of socialization. Among the key tactics was QHs that emphasized the social aspects of socialization. The findings highlight the need to develop an experiential perspective customer socialization and company tactics. This need and other research questions provide ample opportunity to develop new theoretical contributions on co-creation around socialization and SMT.

6. References


