

LET ME GIVE YOU MY CARD: A STUDY OF EVOLVING BUSINESS PROTOCOLS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

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ABSTRACT

Business cards have been in continual use in Europe since the seventeenth century. The footmen of aristocrats would deliver visiting cards to the servants of their prospective hosts solemnly introducing their arrival. There has been a great deal written about their symbolic, practical and cultural role in the establishment and development of business-to-business relationships (Usunier, 2009). The use of business cards has evolved and much dialogue has taken place with dissonance evident regarding the future prospects for business cards. Developments in technology and software continue to herald the extinction of the business card; but the business card survives and would appear to thrive.

Despite forecasts of a move to the paperless society, paper remains in offices. Legislation requires that records must be kept (and though digital storage methods are possible) and often these records are in physical form; invoices, statements, quotations, receipts can be received in paper format, direct mail pieces are sent by surface mail and courier, physical books and magazines continue to exist and so too the humble business card.

A business card is emotive, it conveys a desired image, and message the provider envisages. In Japan the business card is critical to your identification, but perhaps more importantly, your credibility.

The design of a business card can be rational (e.g. name, title, contact details, website, quick response code) and emotional (material, texture, font, ink, toner, thermography, card shape, size, embossing, foil blocking, recycled, logo/s, images, etc.). The formula is subject to other variables and infinite debate.

We decided to complete an interpretive netnographic analysis on business cards via a large business forum to investigate current themes for business cards and perhaps identify future trends.

KEYWORDS

Netnography, Virtual forums, Business cards, Stationery, Virtual ethnography.

Competitive paper

LITERATURE

Netnography was pioneered by Kozinets (Kozinets, 2002b, 2006, 2010) with origins in his earlier research which linked with ethnography (Kozinets, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2002a); the relevance in selection of the research method for this paper was self-evident, the subject matter and source of research data being appropriate. The netnographic research method prescribes a protocol for research 'Planning... entrée... data collection... analysis... reporting' (Kozinets, 2002b) and was utilised in studies relating to The X-Files, Star Trek, Burning Man and similar subjects. Virtual and physical communities were examined and observations analysed, extracting commercially valuable conclusions (e.g. processes of decision making, typologies of group members, influencing the groundswell, opportunities for manufacturer initiated market research, product feedback, etc.). 'netnography uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups' (Kozinets, 2002b).

'Brand-based online communities have demonstrated the potential benefits of dialogue flowing between consumers via two utilities: real-time 'chat' taking place in 'chat rooms' and asynchronous discussions that play out over days, weeks, and even months in discussion forums or bulletin boards' (McWilliam, 2000). Further 'The protracted nature of discussion forums allows for more thoughtful responses and greater editorial intervention' (McWilliam, 2000).

Much has been written regarding interaction, etiquette and behavioural norms on discussion boards and forums, and their value in revenue generation. Our focus instead, was to identify relevant output, which would be of benefit to sectors including design practices, printing organisations and students of communication; the relevance of forums to this process having been identified in various books, journals and magazine articles (Weber, 2011, Cooke, 2008, Croft, 2012, Maclaran, 2002, McWilliam, 2000). 'Increasingly, marketers will need to take into consideration the growth of electronic discussion boards, which have become an additional channel for product recommendations and endorsements between people who have never met' (Fong, 2006). 'Spaces where computer-mediated consumer-to-consumer interaction occur can be useful for marketers in building brand loyalty, generate consumer input in developing new products, and receiving consumer feedback' (Kim 2006).

A recent article (Johnson, 2011) in a high circulation (89,809, source: Audit Bureau of Circulations) business magazine (Management Today) advised 'Really shoddy [business] cards... do send a certain message... hugely expensive, bespoke cards for a shoestring start-up also tell a different story about the founders' attitude towards costs... worst the show-off who says either: *I don't need cards* or *I didn't want to waste my money on cards*'. The article it was believed may be a representative sample of what would be discovered in the research process.

The use of virtual communities for groundswell (and related terms), has been widely reported. Groundswell is defined as 'A social trend in which people use technologies to get the things they need from each other, rather than from traditional institutions like corporations' (Li, 2011). The study would be of value in identifying future market trends in stationery design and print. The observing organisation should be prepared for negative feedback and take action accordingly although; by listening they will identify feedback earlier. 'Through virtual communities, companies have a lens through which they are better able to understand a consumer market' (Kim, 2006).

‘Energizing the groundswell means tapping into the power of word of mouth by connecting with, and turning on, your most committed customers’ (Li, 2011), the study identified postings where the authors had promoted a manufacturer due to the groundswell generated by that manufacturer; the manufacturer sometimes being in absence during the debate (and sometimes not even a forum member).

The concept of *wikinomics* pioneered by Tapscott and Williams is also relevant to virtual communities. The identification of new routes to market, sources of materials and new market sectors are possible through virtual communities *‘Winning companies today have open and porous boundaries and compete by reaching outside their walls to harness external knowledge, resources, and capabilities’* (Tapscott, 2008).

Established virtual communities can show emotional characteristics associated with direct communication *‘Virtual communities can involve the same emotional commitment as “real” communities’* (Komito, 1998); *‘subscribers quickly come to regard themselves as members of a close-knit “virtual community”’* (Mayer, 1996). Relationships develop, sometimes resulting in physical meetings. Reputations are dependent on postings, the more established forum member is likely to place greater emphasis on the accuracy of his/her postings (and be more critical of others, particularly when in breach of forum legislation). The subject (and associated expense) of quality was discussed and was an emotional issue. Whether authors of postings were writing from actual experience was not known, but sometimes alluded to.

‘They [forum members] also make a decision about the level of their visibility by controlling the degree of their disclosure of identification due to the number of forum members’ (Bassett, 2002) it is not possible to verify the identity of each member versus the personal information provided; despite this a level of commitment develops based on member contributions. Members of the forum with longer standing membership, greater volume of postings, high number of registered thanks may be more accountable and cautious. This paper offers no data to support this published theory. *‘some forum members tend also to check with the query respondent’s post history, the presentation of their written communication and the usefulness of their recommendations as a proxy for the authority’* (Xun, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

A counter-intuitive netnographic approach was employed. Data was retrospectively recorded using the source UK Business Forums (UKBF) www.ukbusinessforums.co.uk. The UKBF are a highly active website currently owned and managed by Sift Media Limited who are located in Bristol, UK. The established and respected web information organisation Alexa rank the UKBF website as the 264th most visited website in Great Britain and 5,804 worldwide. UKBF has 129,605 members, carries 190,939 threads and contains 1,737,853 posts (accessed 10th March 2012). The researcher (Peter Wise) is an active member of the forum and comprehensively understands its rules and processes.

The UKBF is organised as a series of 22 business forums concerning varying subjects; the five most contributed to forums are *‘General Business Forum’* (548,776 posts), *‘Time Out’* (199,464 posts), *‘IT & Internet’* (155,304 posts), *‘SEO, PPC and Online Marketing’* (127,530 posts) and *‘Legal’* (107,534 posts).

In selecting the UKBF we selected a forum where we would have expected participants to be the most open to digital alternatives in building business-to-business relationships, and as a consequence the least receptive to card-based, face-to-face business tools. Through

participating in an active B2B online forum, we anticipated being able to gain a preliminary understanding of nature and extent of virtual relationship building.

Using the UKBF's internal search facility we employed the key words 'business cards' and searched entire posts. Threads were identified that were content relevant to the phrase 'business cards' and selected on the strict basis of thread chronology. All relevant threads were selected from the period commencing 1st June, 2011. Seven threads were identified, variously titled (three with identical titles but separate threads):

- business cards
- Quality/different business cards
- Printers
- Business cards
- shaped business cards
- Business cards
- Pay cheap pay twice

The seven threads contained a total of 121 postings; a mean of 17.3 postings per thread. The data collection process was concluded on 29th February, 2012.

The 'General Business Forum' yielded five of the threads; the remaining two (Business cards, and Pay cheap pay twice) were from 'Tradespeople'.

Data was extracted, recorded and coded using a manual process. All coding was completed by the same coder (Peter Wise) to ensure consistency. Postings that were immediately identifiable as unrelated spam, which had not already been removed by the forum moderators, were excluded from the analysis. Coding for recommendations was for supplier specific results only (other broad data e.g. *purchase locally; import from China* was recorded for qualitative analysis).

Qualitative data was analysed based on its relevance to categories of information. Six categories were determined in preliminary meta-analysis; quality, price, graphic design, order process, lead-time and delivery.

All data analysed is publicly accessible, but to promote anonymity, no authors' names or user names were included in the study.

RESULTS

Data extracted had been created by 76 unique UKBF members, each generating a mean of 1.6 posts. Posts on UKBF can only be created if the author is a member of the UKBF; basic membership is free and the application process is simple, however access is limited to 21 forums ('Private Forum For Full Members' and its sub-forums are excluded). Full membership requires the payment of £48 per year, including sales tax.

The 121 postings were further coded based on six emerging typologies:

Clarify: Where an author sought to clarify a point of information (e.g. *has the recommended supplier actually been used by the recommender?*)

Order: A point of order (e.g. a potential breach of forum rules; *this post is misleading and should be reported for removal*)

Recommend: The author was making a specific recommendation (e.g. *buy from China*)

Sell: Author is posting with the purpose of promoting his / her products (e.g. *we can design*)

and produce business cards for you)

Source: Actively trying to source goods or services (e.g. *does anyone have experience of a decent business card print supplier?*)

Wisdom: The forum member is adding perceived value by posting related wisdom (e.g. *in my experience buying online is risky versus local face-to-face*)

Fig.1 Typology analysis

Recommend	51	42%
Wisdom	23	19%
Sell	21	17%
Source	17	14%
Order	6	5%
Clarify	3	2%

The recommendations category in fig.1 which represented 42% of postings was further analysed to determine if recommendations were positive, and if recommendations were for suppliers of business cards who are UKBF members (the forum has a variety of graphic design and / or print companies who are members and identify business cards on their websites as a product offered).

Fig.2 Recommendations analysis

Positive non-UKBF member	16	31%
Positive UKBF member self-promotion	14	27%
Positive UKBF member	11	22%
Negative non-UKBF member	8	16%
Negative UKBF member	2	4%

Of particular note in fig.2 is the proportion of positive comments versus negative (75% excluding self-promotion; 30 of 40 postings). The greater volume of recommendations for non-UKBF member suppliers versus UKBF member suppliers is also noteworthy.

Comments for non-specific suppliers included positive and negative comments concerning trade with China, the merits of soliciting the opinions of friends (via facebook) versus the UKBF and the researching of special offers from suppliers 'trying to get off the ground'.

Fig.3 Businesses recommended

Non-UKBF members	11
UKBF members	10

The number of suppliers recommended in fig.3 (from the 41 positive postings in fig.2) who were non-UKBF members was marginally higher versus UKBF members. Excluding UKBF suppliers whose recommendations entirely originate from their own postings, the UKBF members' statistic is reduced to five (it is possible that the result should be reduced further if UKBF members recommending the UKBF prospective supplier have an undisclosed relationship with the supplier).

Fig.4 Authors of recommendations who have used the supplier recommended

Positive non-UKBF member	9	31%
Positive UKBF member self-promotion	n/a	n/a
Positive UKBF member	3	20%
Negative non-UKBF member	2	13%
Negative UKBF member	1	7%

Fig.2 detailed 51 postings which contained recommendations (positive and negative) however fig.4 indicates that 29% (15 of 51) of the posts were authored by individuals or businesses that had used the services of the provider for which an opinion was being promulgated (the percentage may be understated due to postings not automatically stating if they had used the provider being commented on).

Fig.5 Qualitative data

Price	59	30%
Quality	57	29%
Graphic design	25	13%
Order process	20	10%
Lead-time	20	10%
Delivery	13	7%

Fig.5 identifies that quality and price represent 59% of qualitative comments (in addition graphic design at 13% is closely related to quality). Processes (order process, lead-time and delivery) representing just 27% of comments.

Price

The most frequently used word was 'expensive'. The spectrum of price comments ranged through: bargain, cheap, great, good, affordable, reasonable, expensive, and excessive. Special offers and discounts were discussed 'you can use the discount at the bottom of the page', and 'Can be negotiated', and 'if you pick the right deals you can get a bargain'. Warnings of hidden delivery, artwork and sign-off charges; plus unsolicited marketing particularly associated with the cheaper offers were also extracted.

The word cheap (and derivatives e.g. cheapest, cheaper, cheap-ish) was met with irritation and negative comments which related to quality 'No point in being cheap', 'Don't go cheap', 'Dont cut corners', 'Cheap are a false economy' and 'Consider the value of the opportunities you are using them for'. One dissenting comment was recorded 'I've no idea why some people seem to think they [business cards] are so important and spend so much money on them'.

Offers of quotations 'happy to quote' whilst respecting forum etiquette 'can I PM [private message] you?' and invitations to visit websites 'prices online' and 'Take a look around our site' were frequent; despite the original poster (OP) in some instances requesting recommendations only (not responses from suppliers) 'I DON'T WANT ANYONE TO PM ME WITH THEIR SPAMMY OFFERS FOR THIS'.

Quality

The spectrum of comments regarding quality were broad; amazing, superb, awesome, brilliant, A++, great, impressive, professional, very pleased, good, looks pretty good, fine, unimpressed, rubbish.

The importance of quality was recognised 'Cheap make you look cheap', 'Give your customers a good impression', 'They [business cards] showcase your business', 'The looks you get when you hand over one of these cards almost guarantees you the business', and 'can do more damage than good',

Printing techniques were discussed, in particular advocacy for the quality of lithographically printed cards 'Digital and litho... samples so you can feel the quality', 'offset, Pantone inks';

as were options of card stock to differentiate and convey the desired image 'So many choices of material', and 'Nice and smooth'.

An underlying fear was evident in several posts regarding appointing a supplier who cannot be visited and about which little is known, other than comments on UKBF 'I don't just want to go with anyone as I don't have the time to send them back if they aren't of high quality', 'true that the cheapest options might not prove to be the best ones. But there are instances when really good work is delivered at very good price', 'People can tell a Vistaprint card and as much as they are good for a hobby type business they don't look brilliant for a professional', Virtual products are not tactile 'Know what it... feels before ordering'.

Weight of card stock was also related to and identified with quality 'heavier more professional look', 'All about the quality. 350gsm and above always', 'Always recommend 400gsm', 'Worth taking paper weight upto 400gsm'.

One alternative view to the broad consensus that quality was highly desirable was expressed 'I've never made a decision about a company or individual one way or another other [than] based on the appearance of their card'.

Graphic design

The ability to upload own images and not have to use the provider's design templates was critical 'Templates wasn't impressed' for the majority of postings.

Meeting the supplier in person was a concern for graphic design 'I quite like being able to meet the printer if they are going to design anything for me'.

In regard to the actual design several opinions were expressed in regard to the objective of achieving a great design result 'Always include a photo! People buy people', and 'remember with business cards is that it must remind the person you are giving your card to of Who You Are and What is the reason to do business with you'.

The ability to differentiate was also identified as desirable 'Something different - Spot UV or textured' and 'You can choose which corners you want rounding'; but not always agreed upon 'Are you sure you really want shaped ones? Any time anyone has given me weird/novelty ones I've binned them as they don't fit in my wallet'.

An alternative opinion on graphic design was expressed by one author 'Perhaps if they were a graphic designer and the card looked like it was designed by a child I would be bothered, but I generally couldn't care less how it looks as long as it tells me who they are, what they do and how I can get hold of them'.

Order process

Issues identified were diverse; the importance of being able to 'pay online' was most significant as identified by its consistent usage (The most frequently occurring phrase was 'Pay online').

The ease of ordering was mentioned several times 'great company to deal with', and 'Great customer service'.

One posting expressed an alternative market view that 'Chinese give better service'.

Lead-time

The most frequently occurring word was 'Fast'. The spectrum of speed comments was fast, quick, pretty quick, prompt and fairly quick. One supplier was keen to promote 'Turnaround 24 hours' as a unique selling proposition (relative to other postings analysed in this study).

For clients who expressed an opinion, the consensus was that paying extra for a faster lead-time was ineffective and that lead-time was not an issue from practical experience 'never waited more than a few day', 'Ususally 5 day turnaround', and 'I select the 21 day postage service and they usually arrive within a week' were representative comments.

One poster arguing the case for purchasing in the High Street and not online proclaimed the advantage 'No shipping time with local'.

Delivery

The most frequently occurring word was 'free'. Most comments related to delivery costs were that they bordered on insignificant 'Shipping costs almost nothing', in the context of the total purchase price; though 'free' was a selling point for buyers and employed as such by sellers. A few comments related to 'speed' as opposed to cost; one poster noting 'No shipping with local'.

Analysis

Several key themes in regard to the perception of the importance of business cards and their continued relevance were identified from the results.

Quality and price

Fig.5 identifies that price and quality (including design) are equally important. Despite various low price point online opportunities to purchase, consensus is that price and quality are linear; the purchaser *gets what they pay for*. A willingness to purchase online is evident, but caveat emptor (buyer beware).

Business cards can be a purely functional tool to convey basic information or they can be much more. Surprisingly minimal dissenting comments were recorded against business cards and expenditure on them. One member believed that he or she had never been influenced by business cards aesthetics and regarded cards purely from a functional perspective.

Of all the identified themes, quality was a topic that the largest number of contributors had an opinion regarding (it is not known whether all of these members have business cards or a commercial requirement for them outside the forum).

Products are sometimes developed without adequate market research and the forum has yielded interest in such features as printing techniques, textures of materials, weight of stock and the importance of good design. A business card is not a commodity.

Design

For clients confident in their design skills, online ordering was not an issue. For others, concern was expressed in not meeting a designer and being able to have a more direct input in the product during stages of development.

Input from and the skills of the designer were also identified as desirable in creating a differentiated result. Amongst opinions expressed, the vast majority of contributors preferred design versus functionality.

Loyalty

Despite the forum being UK based and UK market focused, comments expressed regarding geographic location of suppliers were positively concerned with the efficiency of Chinese suppliers. It is possible that the postings related to Chinese production originated in China but this cannot be identified due to the author exercising his / her right not to provide full contact details (and having unusually been banned two months after the relevant postings for reasons unknown).

Support was evident for geographically local physical printers and for suppliers who were not forum members.

CONCLUSIONS

The growth (and in a few instances decline) of social media (formal and informal) marketing has been stratospheric (each example followed by Alexa ranking: e.g. facebook 2, YouTube 3, twitter 9, LinkedIn 12, Xing 289, myspace 158, bebo 3,743, Plaxo 4,325, Friends Reunited 20,976). Opinions expressed in the media have been that the use of social media devices will necessarily signify the end for the physical business card. Data that would ordinarily be communicated on a business card can be virtually communicated as data from one device to another at minute speed. But yet the business card continues to survive and seemingly flourish.

A basic Google search for 'printing' reveals results for Vistaprint (Alexa: 6,944) printing.com PLC (Alexa: 82,736) and solopress.com (Alexa: 86,911) all actively promoting business cards at the top of the first page of Google results. A single click to each business reveals that business cards are the product being primarily promoted.

The function of business cards today (having made the role of the footman redundant) is not to announce the individuals arrival, but to physically convey key information and owners vision for how he would like his / her organisation to be perceived. Despite the inherent self-selection bias associated with discussing 'old' business practices through a contemporary medium, culturally and symbolically business cards have an important role in business-to-business relationships. We found that the importance of the physical card was enhanced in an environment where Google and the worldwide web provided buyers and sellers with almost unlimited information: having crossed the data-gathering threshold the parties in a knowledge-based transaction were now drawn into interpersonal relationships, often initiated at more traditional meeting places (e.g. trade shows, networking events and conferences). The business card is therefore used more sparingly, often as an invitation to carry on the initial face-to-face discussions in the virtual environment at a later date.

From the results analysed, business cards are as much in demand as they were in the twentieth century.

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