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ABSTRACT
To build relationships with customers, sustainable engagements are crucial. Ostensibly, firm profits are derived from customers’ financial contributions; in addition, their non-financial contributions such as advocacy also increase long-term profitability. Today, the importance of such customer-to-customer communication has dramatically increased and is derived from enhancing customers’ brand experience. This paper explores how to incorporate C-to-C communication into brand experience with the goal of strengthening customer relationships, developing advocacy, and encouraging sustainable interactions.

This study introduces the novel approach called Ambassador Program which aims to build long-term collaboration with customers and promote advocacy from the participants. Through the case of the “NESCAFE Ambassador Program,” we found that this brand-new approach is effective in increasing customers’ brand experience and customers’ contributions. Consequently, customers can create new customers. The research empirically showed that even in such a low-involvement category as consumer-packaged goods, firms can build sustainable relationships with customers by adopting customer-to-customer relationships into their marketing strategies.

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KEYWORDS
Brand experience; communication; Ambassador Program; advocacy; sustainability

为什么与客户建立可持续的关系？-“大使计划”的效果
为了与客户建立关系，可持续的合作至关重要。从表面上看，企业利润来自于客户的财务贡献；此外，他们的非财务贡献，如宣传，也增加了长期盈利能力。如今，这种客户对客户的交流的重要性已经显著增加，这源于增强客户的品牌体验。本文探讨如何将C-to-C沟通融入品牌体验中，以加强客户关系，发展宣传和鼓励可持续互动为目标。

这项研究介绍了一种新的方法，称为大使计划，旨在建立与客户的长期合作，并促进来自参与者的宣传。通过对“雀巢大使计划”的案例分析，我们发现这种全新的方式能够有效地提高顾客的品牌体验和顾客的贡献。因此，客户可以创造新的客户。这项研究的经验表明，即使是在消费品这样一个低投入的类别中，企业也可以通过在营销策略中采用客户对客户的关系来建立与客户的可持续关系。

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Introduction

The goal of this research is to discover the position and strength of customers’ contributions in developing shopper relationships. Due to the expansion of online media, the importance of customer-to-customer (C-to-C) communication as a significant touchpoint has dramatically increased. In recent marketing literatures, “advocate” has been put forth as an ultimate objective (Kotler et al., 2016) or a goal of the customer decision journey (Batra & Keller, 2016). Moreover, during the customer decision journey, individuals are influenced by others’ word of mouth (WOM). In other words, customers could be both information senders and receivers regarding a brand. Consequently, C-to-C communication plays a significant role in brand-customer relationships.

Relationship marketing has shed light on the importance of creating a long-term relationship with consumers. This focus accentuates customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and firm profits. Ostensibly, firm profits are derived from customers’ financial contributions. Essentially, non-financial contributions such as brand/company advocacy has the potential to increase long-term profitability for the organization. The opportunity to acquire new customers through existing loyal customers is motivating. This research explores how to incorporate C-to-C communication into marketing activities with the goal of strengthening customer relationships that ultimately lead to increases in the firm’s profitability.

Early relationship marketing studies investigated business-to-business (B-to-B) relationships in industrial marketing (Dwyer et al., 1987). Next, the business-to-consumer (B-to-C) relationship garnered attention (e.g., Firdaus & Kanyan, 2014), and finally, customer-to-customer (C-to-C) relationships are beginning to hold center stage in relationship marketing. For instance, in Japan, major business organizations such as Nestle, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and 7-Eleven have adopted the approach called “Ambassador Program,” which is a long-term collaboration with customers. Though the activities vary from company to company, each “Ambassador Program” commonly involves the brand’s customers to create a brand experience and promote advocacy from the participants. This approach seems to advocate building sustainable relationships with the customers in order to increase firm revenues, however, little research has been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of such an approach. This research will focus on the new approach and explore its effectiveness.

Literature

Relationship marketing

The idea of relationship marketing dates back to the mid 1900s when Finnish academic Grönroos set his theory on the premise that marketing needed to establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other partners at a profit to be successful. Thus, he proposed the solution of “relationship marketing.” (Grönroos, 1994). As the markets have transformed from a relatively stable market system to a global deregulated system, researchers have since built on the idea of relationship marketing. According to Payne and Frow (2017), Relationship market is a result of the process of trust and commitment being transformed into cooperation, and finally, action. They posit that since September 11th, there has been an increased uncertainty in the financial markets
which through their study, has been linked to the growing interest in relationship marketing (2017). Furthermore, in their study, there is an emphasis on stability as a key component of relationship marketing. They speculate that, in creating more open relationships with stakeholders, customers, and suppliers, there is a possibility of recreating stability which will ultimately draw attention to value creating opportunities.

Previous researchers demonstrated important dimensions of relationship marketing such as trust, commitment, and communication, among others. In Gummesson, et al’s study, they revealed that relationship marketing predominantly focuses on “relationship maintenance”, essentially, the sustainability of the market’s relationship with its customers (2017). Studies like Gummesson’s reveal that when a firm succeeds in building long-term relationships with their customers, they may gain profit from the customer’s sustainability. Sustainable marketing as defined by Philip Kotler and Garry Armstrong, is “an organisation meets the needs of its present consumers without compromising the ability of future generations to fulfil their own needs” (Kotler, Armstrong, & Cunningham, 2008). Sustainable marketing in relationships is further explained by the co-creation of mutual value as a key strategy for firms (Paduraru et al., 2016). Furthermore, the strength and popularity of online social networks (OSNs), in which customers want to expand their networks and deepen relationships, bids well for building brands and sustaining relationships with customers (Jung, Ineson, & Green, 2013). Smith and Chen (2018) point out that consideration of the dimensions of brand experience can lead to positive word-of-mouth, which, in turn, directly benefits customers and brands via increased profitability. Though Ambassador Program has been not investigated enough yet, it aims to stimulate co-creation of values among brand and customers in which customers’ non-financial contribution would be indispensable. Thus, this study sheds light to the effectiveness of Ambassador Program especially focusing on customers’ non-financial contributions.

### Brand experience

Brand experience is a key factor that fuels relationship marketing. According to Moreria et al’s study on the correlation between brand experience and customer satisfaction, brand experiences can be more or less intense depending on the strength of the stimuli invoked (2017). Essentially, if the customers brand experience is positive, it can potentially be linked to increased customer loyalty.

As defined by Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello (2009), brand experiences are subjective, internal, consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) as well as behavioral responses. These experiences are evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand’s design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments. Moreria et al. highlight the fact that business models in marketing have put new emphasis on customer retention rather than customer acquisition to create longer lasting customer-to-market relationships. Furthermore, they hypothesized that brand experience, service quality, trust and satisfaction would be important for loyalty in a relational context. Their study can be linked with the relational dimension proposed by Schmitt, Brakus, and Zarantonello (2015) in the form of brand-to-customer interactions and customer-to-customer interactions with the brand or brand communities as the most important dimension with a positive influence on brand personality and brand
satisfaction. A part of our study, we anticipate that these relationships will become increasingly more important in the future with the expansion of digital social networks and sharing communities.

Ultimately, Brand experience has a very significant role in developing brand loyalty. While customer satisfaction and trust are important to consumers, their actual experience with the brand leads to brand loyalty (Baser et al., 2015). When a consumer experiences a significant, positive relationship with the brand, trust and loyalty to the brand will increase resulting in stronger bonds (Cleff et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2017; Kim & Yu, 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Shieh & Lai, 2017).

In summary, both relationship marketing and brand experience have significant influence on customer loyalty and customer satisfaction and aim for sustainable value creation. Furthermore, brand experience also sheds light on brand-to-customer and customer-to-customer relationships both of which are included in the Ambassador Program. Thus, this study examines sustainable marketing relationships from the perspective of brand experience through the study of Ambassador Program, and suggests the proliferation of meaningful bonds which might even strengthen over time.

**Customer advocacy**

Current research accentuates the importance and growth of Word of Mouth (WOM). It has become one of the most influential brand-touchpoints for consumers when making a purchase decision (Kotler et al., 2016). Thus, customers’ WOM contributions are measured with both financial and non-financial indices. Kumar (2018) introduced the concept of a customer valuation theory into marketing based on economic principles. He evaluated each customer with a direct economic value contribution, customer lifetime value, and indirect economic value such as referral behaviour, online influence on other customers’ purchases, and review/feedback on the products and services.

Nevertheless, customer engagement (CE) is believed to be the key to the quality and strength of loyalty a brand generates. In the decision journey a customer traverses a path that, “begins at ‘awareness,’ goes through ‘purchase,’ and ends with ‘advocacy’” (Batra & Keller, 2016; Kotler et al., 2016). Kotler’s customer path consists of 5 A’s: Aware, Appeal, Ask, Act, and Advocate. Each of the A’s is a stage the consumer navigates. In each step, firms need to create effective touchpoints for both online and offline locations. In addition, those touchpoints could be derived from C-to-C communication. For example, at the Ask stage of the customer’s path (Kotler et al., 2016), consumers collect the information about a brand before purchase decision through online searching, visiting stores, and asking their friends or family. The touchpoints vary in online and offline, B-to-C communication and C-to-C communication. However, online touchpoints and C-to-C communication have been relatively less understood than offline touchpoints and B-to-C communication.

Customer loyalty in online business relationships is enhanced when transaction expectations are met before, during, and after the process is concluded. Primarily, buyers require the performance of online companies to be responsive, informative, easy-to-use, trustworthy, and reliable before they are willing to engage in a relationship (Giovanis & Melanthiou, 2017). The higher the transaction rate, the more satisfied and loyal the customer (Ashraf et al., 2018).
Long-term relationships with customers is the desired outcome of these types of business engagements. To accomplish this, firms are required to provide sustainable brand experiences. Aoki et al. (2019) empirically revealed that brand experience increases customers’ contributions. Customers with positive brand experience showed a significantly higher frequency to advocate for the brand and increase purchase value. The Ambassador Program enriches brand experiences and postulates customers’ advocacy in the long-term relationships with customers. However, this has not been tested empirically. Examining the Ambassador Program’s effectiveness will bring additional insights in building sustainable relationships with customers. Thus, this research explores the key research question: What is the effect of the Ambassador Program on brand experience and customers’ contribution?

Methods

Case

As introduced initially, in Japan, some major firms adopted an approach to build a long-term collaboration with customers called the Ambassador Program. Among them, NESCAFE’s Ambassador Program, which is the largest in Japan and the world, has created thousands of loyal consumers. The program highlights include:

1. A person who wants to introduce the NESCAFE coffee system to his/her office applies as a NESCAFE Ambassador through the online application.
2. After an investigation, the person is authorized as a NESCAFE Ambassador.
3. After purchasing a coffee cartridge subscription, the Ambassador and his/her colleagues enjoy the coffee machine for free.

The Ambassadors are required to market the Program through the investment of time and effort in collecting money from colleagues to pay for the coffee cartridge, water, cups, and so on; however, they voluntarily introduce the system to their office without any monetary incentive. The NESCAFE program started in 2012, and by 2019, the number of Ambassadors had reached 400,000. This study examines the effectiveness of the Ambassador Program with the case of NESCAFE.

Sample

The investigators recruited 2,000 NESCAFE machine users (NESCAFE Barista and NESCAFE Dolce Gust) through a market research company. The screening questionnaire was sent to 40,000 male and female workers, aged 20 years to 59 years in accordance with the features of the Ambassador Program which is designed for the work place. Then, 2,000 NESCAFE users were chosen for the study panel that met the following criteria:

- All respondents own NESCAFE machines at home
- 25% of the respondents are NESCAFE Ambassadors
- Another 25% of the respondents are Ambassador Program participants (not the Ambassador himself or herself, but the Ambassador’s colleagues)
• The remaining 50% of the study panel are non-program participants

To examine the effectiveness of the Ambassador Program, the examiners secured the same size samples of program participants and non-participants. The respondents consisted of 492 NESCAFE Ambassadors, 508 Ambassador program participants, and 1,000 non-program participants. After excluding participants with lower reliability, 1,859 participants (Mean age = 43.1 years, 61.9% male); 435 NESCAFE Ambassadors (Group 1) (Mean age = 42.9 years, 63.2% male), 478 Ambassador program participants (Group 2) (Mean age = 41.2 years, 65.9% male), and 946 non-program participants (Group 3) (Mean age = 44.1 years, 59.2% male) were included in the analysis.

**Data and analyses**

This study investigates the Ambassador Program’s effectiveness in determining if brand experience and customers’ contributions have increased. We employed a brand experience scale which consisted of 15 questions (three items per brand experience domain: SENSE, FEEL, THINK, ACT), which Brakus et al. (2009) developed, and RELATE which Nysveen et al. (2013) developed (Table 1). Respondents described their chosen brand with a 7-point Likert scale.

Customers’ financial contributions were measured with purchase experience based on the respondents’ actual expenditure per month for a year; from (1) less than JPY500 (approximately 5 USD.00) to (5) more than JPY 2000 (approximately 20 USD.00). The expenditure describes in-home use, excluding office-use. The investigation compared the expenditure of the Ambassador Program participants and non-participants under the same conditions. Participants also indicated their future purchase intention on a 7-point Likert scale.

Customers’ non-financial contributions were measured as: (a) “the degree of fan” on a 7-point Likert scale and (b) the frequency of advocacy. To examine C-to-C communication in detail, respondents were queried about their face-to-face WOM, online WOM within a closed community, online WOM open to anyone else, sharing the brand’s SNS post within a closed community, and online reviews on a 4-point scale from (1) “never” to (4) “usually”.

The following analysis was performed:

(1) Cluster analysis by the level of brand experience using SSRI (Social Survey Research Information Co., Ltd.) BellCurve for Excel.

(2) Comparison of the distribution of the clusters among three groups (NESCAFE Ambassadors, Ambassador program participants, and non-program participants) using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.

(3) ANOVAs in customers’ contributions and multiple comparisons among the three groups using IBM SPSS Statistics 21.
The effects of the Ambassador Program on brand experience

Table 1 shows the results of the cluster analyses. Three distinct clusters emerged based on the level of brand experience. Cronbach’s alpha among the 15 brand experience items was 0.92, thereby demonstrating that they are internally consistent and have satisfactory reliability values. Adopting the k-means method, and after applying the number of clusters from two to four, the participants were classified into three clusters (Table 1). The level of brand experience, which varies from 1 to 7 (Likert scale), was converted into a score which varies from −3 to +3. Cluster 1 showed negative brand experience, cluster 2 was positive, and cluster 3 was neither positive nor negative. Thus, they were named (1) “Negative”, (2) “Positive”, and (3) “Neutral”. These are in line with Aoki et al. (2019).

Table 2 shows the distribution by participation in the Ambassador program. A chi-square test on the distribution revealed the distribution of brand experience differs in groups ($\chi^2 = 63.65$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$).

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**Table 1. The result of cluster analysis by the level of brand experience.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sense1</th>
<th>Sense2</th>
<th>Sense3</th>
<th>Feel1</th>
<th>Feel2</th>
<th>Feel3</th>
<th>Act1</th>
<th>Act2</th>
<th>Act3</th>
<th>Think1</th>
<th>Think2</th>
<th>Think3</th>
<th>Relate1</th>
<th>Relate2</th>
<th>Relate3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This brand makes a strong impression on my visual sense or other senses.</td>
<td>I find this brand interesting in a sensory way.</td>
<td>This brand does not appeal to my senses.</td>
<td>This brand induces feelings and sentiments.</td>
<td>I do not have strong emotions for this brand.</td>
<td>This brand is an emotional brand.</td>
<td>I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use this brand.</td>
<td>This brand results in bodily experiences.</td>
<td>This brand is not action oriented.</td>
<td>I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this brand.</td>
<td>This brand does not make me think.</td>
<td>This brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving.</td>
<td>As a customer of this brand I feel like I am a part of this community.</td>
<td>I feel like I am part of this brand family.</td>
<td>When I use this brand I do not feel left alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.96</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>3.54</td>
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<td>3.54</td>
<td>3.48</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M (n = 1,856)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>1 (n = 334)</th>
<th>2 (n = 344)</th>
<th>3 (n = 1,181)</th>
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</thead>
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<td>3.96</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>889.23 ***</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>703.94 ***</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>4.13</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>18.38 ***</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>965.57 ***</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>190.70 ***</td>
<td>2.72</td>
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<td>4.01</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>3.99</td>
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<td>848.80 ***</td>
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<tr>
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<td>43.38 ***</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.07</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>1,202.28 ***</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>3.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
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<td>1.17</td>
<td>81.93 ***</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>4.11</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1,376.64 ***</td>
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<td>5.15</td>
<td>3.90</td>
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<td>5.02</td>
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<td>1,347.11 ***</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>5.00</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>1.27</td>
<td>443.57 ***</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *** $p < .001$

Rows 3, 5, 9 and 11 are negatively phrased and reverse coded.

Results

The effects of the Ambassador Program on brand experience

Table 1 shows the results of the cluster analyses. Three distinct clusters emerged based on the level of brand experience. Cronbach’s alpha among the 15 brand experience items was 0.92, thereby demonstrating that they are internally consistent and have satisfactory reliability values. Adopting the k-means method, and after applying the number of clusters from two to four, the participants were classified into three clusters (Table 1). The level of brand experience, which varies from 1 to 7 (Likert scale), was converted into a score which varies from −3 to +3. Cluster 1 showed negative brand experience, cluster 2 was positive, and cluster 3 was neither positive nor negative. Thus, they were named (1) “Negative”, (2) “Positive”, and (3) “Neutral”. These are in line with Aoki et al. (2019).

Table 2 shows the distribution by participation in the Ambassador program. A chi-square test on the distribution revealed the distribution of brand experience differs in groups ($\chi^2 = 63.65$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$).
The effects of the Ambassador Program on customers’ contribution

The results indicate that not only Ambassadors themselves, but also their colleagues include significantly higher rates of the “Positive” cluster (Table 1). Furthermore, we compared the respondents’ contributions to the brand in three groups: Ambassadors (n = 435, Group 1), Ambassador program participants (n = 478, Group 2), and non-program participants (n = 946, Group 3). Using 10 items (α = 0.84), including financial contributions such as purchase value and purchase intention in the future, and non-financial contributions such as the degree of fan and the frequency of online and offline WOM, a comparison was performed. Table 3 presents the means of all variables. The results of ANOVAs showed that each factor did differ significantly: Purchase value (F(2, 1,661) = 17.06, p < 0.001), Future intention (F(2, 1,856) = 10.08, p < 0.001), Degree of fan (F(2, 1,856) = 5.85, p < 0.01), Have a coffee together (F(2, 1,856) = 42.00, p < 0.001), F-to-F WOM (F(2, 1,856) = 97.48, p < 0.001), eWOM to friends (F(2, 1,856) = 130.26, p < 0.001), eWOM open (F(2, 1,856) = 118.87, p < 0.001), Share brand’s post to friends (F(2, 1,856) = 145.72, p < 0.001), Share brand’s post open (F(2, 1,856) = 117.88, p < 0.001), and Online review F(2.86, 1,569.08) = 107.70, p < 0.001).

Next, differences in mean values were assessed using Bonferroni multiple comparison (Table 3). The results of multiple comparisons of means among the three groups suggested that the Ambassadors (Group 1) and the program participants (Group 2) showed significantly higher contributions to the brand than non-participants (Group 3) in 9 out of 10 criteria (p < 0.001) (Table 3).

The study results showed Ambassadors and program participants had significantly higher contributions to the brand than non-participants. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between the Ambassadors and their colleagues in both financial and non-financial contributions to the brand. It is remarkable that while there was no significant difference between Ambassadors (Group 1) and non-participants (Group 3) in the degree of fan, the program participants (Group 2) showed a significantly higher degree than non-participants (Group 3) (p < 0.001) (Table 3).

Discussion

This study sheds light to the effectiveness of Ambassador Program and the results showed that it enhances customers’ brand experience and consequently, customers’ contributions such as advocacy and the degree of fan. These are in line with the prior studies (Aoki et al., 2019; Smith and Chen, 2018). Moreover, we found such a sequence: first, brand acquires the ambassadors and builds relationships with them (B-to-C), then these ambassadors invite their peers into the community (C-to-C), finally, those peers have emotional bonding to the brand (C-to-B). So we empirically showed the power of...
Table 3. Customers’ contributions by the status in participation to the program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total (n = 1,859)</th>
<th>1: Ambassador (n = 435)</th>
<th>2: Program participants (n = 478)</th>
<th>3: Non-participants (n = 946)</th>
<th>ANOVA</th>
<th>Multiple comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Min</td>
<td>Max</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase value</td>
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<td>2.80</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future intention</td>
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<td>4.45</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of fan</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a coffee together</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-to-F WOM</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM to friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM open</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share brand’s post to friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share brand’s post open</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online review</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

In purchase value, respondents who chose “not sure” were removed from the analysis (n = 1,664; Group 1: n = 405, Group 2: n = 431, Group 3: n = 828).

Dependent variable in regression analysis is program participants’ dummy.
customers as partners in value co-creation which has been pointed out in sustainable marketing studies (e.g. Paduraru et al., 2016).

Furthermore, this study showed the importance of traditional WOM. NESCAFE Ambassador program is based on the personal relationships in the working places, thus people communicate in person and share the brand experiences. Then they spread their feeling about the brand through online media to their friends, and sometimes anonymous audience. Such WOM is not immediately potent, however, it could be qualified advocacy based on sustainable relationships among customers.

Conclusion and implications

Through the study, we determined that the Ambassador program is effective in increasing customers’ brand experience and customers’ contributions. In the case of the NESCAFE Ambassador program, it is logical that Ambassadors themselves who introduce the NESCAFE system into their workplace showed higher levels of contributions to the brand, and not only the Ambassadors, but their colleagues (the program participants) as well showed the same attitude towards the brand. It suggests that customers can create new customers (co-creation).

In conclusion, we found the Ambassador Program positively effects brand experience. Even though more than 60% of the respondents showed neither positive nor negative attitudes on the brand, the Ambassadors themselves and their colleagues claimed to have a positive brand experience that was significantly high. The research empirically showed that even in such a low-involvement category as consumer-packaged goods, firms can build sustainable relationships with customers by adopting customer-to-customer relationships into their marketing strategies. The results suggest that involving the customers in creating brand experiences brings many opportunities for firms.

Managerial implications

The findings indicate brand experience works in relationship marketing in two aspects:

(1) Be a part of customers’ lifestyles
(2) Stimulate C-to-C communication

Firms have to make efforts to increase frequency of use. In the case of the NESCAFE Ambassador program, NESCAFE is present in the participants’ office, and can easily become a part of the participants’ habits. In other words, it influences customers’ actions, and, consequently, enhances brand experience. In current business situations, expanding subscription programs has a similar effect. Smartphones or wearable device applications are also helpful in entering into customers’ lifestyles. Continuous stimulations and seamless availability enhance the brand’s presence in customers’ lives. Furthermore, if firms stimulate C-to-C communication, the brand experience would be amplified. In the case of the NESCAFE Ambassador program, the participants were connected face-to-face. In addition to such offline communication, enticing online communication such as sharing photos or experiences can be effective in amplifying brand experience.
Theoretical implications

Earlier studies have shown that when a firm succeeds in building long-term relationships with their customers, the firms can gain profit from the customers sustainably (e.g., Bolton et al., 2004). While prior research has focused on customers’ financial contributions, this paper sheds light on customers’ non-financial contributions and empirically demonstrates that the Ambassador Program, a long-term collaboration with customers, can induce customers’ financial and non-financial contributions. Thus, the C-to-C relationship has a positive impact from a relationship marketing perspective.

The research results show that the Ambassador Program is significantly related to positive brand experience and customers’ contributions. Aoki et al. (2019) empirically revealed that brand experience increases customers’ contributions with specific brand data which is in line with the results of this research.

Limitation

Through these studies, findings indicated advanced ideas, however, it is also preliminary. First, the data of NESCAFE machine owners was used and half of them participate in the Ambassador program in addition to using the machine at home. Given this, the data in the study could be from highly engaged customers. In addition, the findings were from the limited case and further research will be required for generalization. Furthermore, this paper focused on B-to-C brands, however, C-to-C relationships could also be as high a priority among B-to-B brands, and further research would be expected.

Disclosure statement

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