

Social Media Marketing and Brand Engagement: A Case Study of Haidilao

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Abstract. The competition of catering industry is increasing fierce in recent years, and the impacts of social media on consumers is gradually becoming obvious as well. As a result, digital marketing has become one of the most important marketing methods of how catering brands shape their images. Haidilao, which is a representative of service industry, is a typical research object since it is active on TikTok, Red Note, and Weibo. This study explores how Haidilao takes advantage of social media, especially short videos, User-Generated Content (UGC), and employee interaction, to improve customer engagement and brand loyalty, while also analyzing how its multi-platform strategy forms digital marketing ecosystem. By using literature analysis, this study concludes previous research toward digital marketing, UGC, and brand loyalty, while using case analysis to explain the strategies of Haidilao in Tiktok, RedNote, and Weibo. The findings show that Haidilao successfully enhances customer engagement and brand intimacy through short video, UGC, and employee interaction. It combines online content and offline service to create a digital ecosystem, while facing the challenges of content homogenization, rising management costs, and diffusion risks. This study provides management implications for future optimizing strategies.

Keywords: Social media marketing, customer engagement, brand loyalty, Haidilao, digital marketing.

1. Introduction

With the development of technology, social media has deeply affected consumer decision. For example, social media has changed how people choose restaurants since they will search for recommendations of short videos and check the evaluation online. As short-video platforms such as TikTok become more popular, people rely even more on fun, direct, and visually clear content when choosing restaurants. Many consumers now trust these recommendations more than traditional advertisements. In catering industry, which is a high-frequency consumption industry, the reliance of online exposure is increasing high. Therefore, digital marketing has become the key of the competition of catering industry, especially important in short videos, UGC, and interactive marketing. Lyu, Xi and Wang note that Haidilao's overall development strategy in the Chinese market depends heavily on service innovation and digitalization [1].

Haidilao is one of the most typical catering brands of digital marketing. It is innovative in its content of short videos, UGC, and employee interaction, and it has high research value that attracts

much attention. Haidilao uses TikTok mainly for entertainment and diffusion, Red Note principally for daily life and user reputation and Weibo primarily for topic heat and public opinion propagation.

Previous studies have explored how visual content and emotional value enhance user loyalty and influences consumers' willingness to choose Haidilao, and the huge impacts of digital marketing on consumer behaviors [2-4]. While also have concluded that younger people prefer novel, funny, and interactive content [5]. Moreover, research has explained that UGC can enhance brand credibility and loyalty [6]. Most research discusses the brand differentiation and images of Haidilao, but few systematically analyze the multi-platform digital marketing of Haidilao. This study is to fill this blank [7,8].

This paper targets at analyzing how Haidilao enhances customer engagement and loyalty through social media, and exploring its content, multi-platform, and interactive strategies, while also pointing out its facing challenges and optimization methods, by using literature analysis and case analysis. The following sections explain digital marketing strategies, facing challenges, optimization methods, and conclusion with management implications.

2. Haidilao's core social media marketing strategies

2.1. Content-driven marketing

Haidilao uses several content-driven marketing strategies. First, Haidilao uses short video strategy. It posts amount of funny and real short videos on TikTok, such as interactions between employees and customers, birthday surprises, dancing performances and creative shows. This strategy is effective because the form of short video is relaxed and widespread. Customers can get a sense of human interest through employee interactions, and the authentic videos can enhance the sense of truth and engagement. For instance, Haidilao can record videos about employees' performances, birthday dance and songs for customers. These contents encourage users to actively comment, forward and imitate, which will create a initiative diffusion. As Antczak mentioned, visual content and emotional values can enhance user stickiness [2]. Therefore, these short videos help Haidilao transform service experience into online stories, which will create a highly engaged brand figure [2].

Second, Haidilao also uses UGC strategy, which is user-generated content. Haidilao encourages customers to share, check and evaluate on platforms such as Red Note. It also guides users to share through topic activities, such as “#Service Experience of Haidilao#”. This strategy is functional since the content shared by users is more persuasive and trusted, which will strengthen their reputation. Moreover, the interaction between consumers will activate brand community. The UGC strategy allows customers to become both consumer and diffuser. According to Pei, social media plays an important role in marketing decisions, so the strategy will largely benefit Haidilao [9]. Overall, UGC strategy helps Haidilao change their one-sided advertisement to two-sided communication, which will enhance the engagement and emotional connection of customers.

Third, Haidilao uses platform interaction. Haidilao maintains their high exposure through popular topics, forwarding comments and lottery activities on Weibo. It will comment and interact with customers, and forward the content created by consumers. It will also post content by using the tone of brand personification. This strategy is useful since Weibo has a strong discussional and real-time system that is beneficial to create topics. Haidilao will improve its friendliness by communicating with consumers with a tone of consumers' friends. The platform interaction will keep its heat and public attention, and enhance the connection between brand and consumers, which helps Haidilao hold a high exposure through competitive catering market. Therefore, through the interaction on Weibo, Haidilao achieves a uniformity between online contact and offline service.

2.2. Multi-platform coverage

Haidilao selects platforms with different purposes. For example, TikTok is mainly for entertainment and diffusion, Red Note principally for daily life and user reputation and Weibo primarily for topic heat and public opinion propagation. It uses this strategy because different platforms have distinct users who have various backgrounds, such as their sex, ages and lifestyles. Yi and Lu point out that platforms such as Red Note rely on informal content creators, which supports the effectiveness of Haidilao's UGC strategy [10]. Therefore, multi-platform coverage can ensure maximizing coverage area. This can help Haidilao develop a multi-platform communication matrix, which enables the brand to reach consumers across multiple touchpoints. Haidilao also can enhance the total cognition of customers to the brand. Overall, this multi-platform arrangement helps Haidilao maintain stable exposure in fragmented social media.

Haidilao combines its official content with user interaction. Its official account posts new products and events, also encourages customers to comment, share photos and engage in topics. This builds a two-sided diffusion pattern that customers not only accept passively but also actively create. And this interaction can enhance the sense of brand community. Therefore, it can reinforce consumer engagement and loyalty. According to Guo & Zhai, if customers interact actively online, such as comment, sharing, giving a like or posting UGC, they will be more likely to develop loyalty to the brand. This combination of official accounts with customer interaction structure can improve brand interactive depth and loyalty [6].

Haidilao also combines their digital marketing and offline service experience. It attracts customers to reach experience through online events. Then new online events will be created by customers taking videos and sharing their experience. This combination develops a circle that online diffusion, offline experience and re-transmit, and the digital marketing serves offline operation directly. This will increase the rate of second glance of customers and transform social media flows indeed into consuming behavior. Overall, online digital marketing and offline services are mutually developing, which creates an efficient marketing ecosystem.

In general, Haidilao's social media marketing develops a digital ecosystem combined with emotional value and brand experience through content-driven, multi-platform orientation and consumer interaction strategies. These strategies effectively improve customer engagement and brand loyalty, which lays foundation for later analysis of challenges.

3. Challenges facing Haidilao's social media marketing

3.1. Industry competition

The competition of catering industry is intense, especially in hotpot markets. And there are more and more brands that mimic Haidilao's social media marketing strategies about short video, UGC and interaction events. For example, some rising brands post similar short videos of Haidilao about employee interaction and surprise service on TikTok. Their content is homogeneous.

Because of the homogenization, customers may feel that the freshness feeling is decreasing, which will highly influence brand loyalty. For Haidilao, its competitive stress is increasing, which means that they must continue to innovate to maintain diversity. According to Lu, by providing brands' unique service, products and marketing methods, these brands can divide themselves from other competitors, which is also called diversity strategy [7]. Diversity strategy is important for marketing since it can continue to offer feeling of freshness to customers. Meanwhile, customers' need of freshness and individualized content is also changing, which brings new challenges.

3.2. Changing consumer expectations

Younger customers pursue novel, funny and interactive content on social media. They focus more on authenticity and individuation rather than routinized marketing videos or content. If Haidilao's form of video is repeated or intentional, younger customers may reduce their interest in it.

If Haidilao does not continue to innovate and keep use its existing social media strategy, it may not fulfill all customers' demand. The quick change of younger consumers' preference increases the pressure of content update and interactive innovation of brands. According to Basu and Song, the habits of digital-native consumers who belong to younger generation contacting the internet and social media from childhood to look through, interact and consume are different from the last generation [4,5]. They prefer fresh, funny and interactive content. Therefore, brands must continue to produce novel and highly interactive content to maintain their engagement of users.

3.3. Platform and content management costs

Digital advertisement has a high cost, such as advertisement putting, creating videos and employee engagement events all need investment. If Haidilao updates its content frequently, the cost of employee training and management will also increase. Social media orientation also has reputational risks, such as negative UGC and some public opinion events.

Moreover, the high cost may influence Return On Investment (ROI), which is return on investment. For instance, organizing weekly employee challenge videos requires additional financial and staffing resources. If Haidilao does not carefully manage them, this high cost could reduce content update frequency, which may in turn lower user engagement and over ROI. If Haidilao has poor management of its content, the social media strategies may be weakened. Therefore, Haidilao needs to optimize its content management strategy, and select platforms and content form more intelligently.

3.4. Brand diffusion risks

Social media has become more open and real-time, which may improve exposure and interaction but brings reputational risks more easily. When brands are spreading quickly, they may face some public comments out of control. Videos posted by customers may contain some negative content, such as the waiting time is too long and some service failures, which are easy to be exaggerated and diffused. Moreover, if short videos focus too on entertainment or hot points, it may dilute Haidilao's brand image of high quality of service. Furthermore, if some negative behaviors of employee and food safety problems are magnified by social media, they may affect public opinion quickly.

Overall, Haidilao faces four big challenges in social media strategy, which are increasingly competitive catering industry, continuously changing expectations of younger consumers, the increasing cost of platform and content management, and brand diffusion risks. These problems remind Haidilao to continue to innovate, different position, optimize resource allocation, and construct a complete risk management strategy, which lay theoretical foundation for later optimizing strategies.

4. Optimization strategies

4.1. Continuous content innovation

Facing competitive markets and routinized problems, Haidilao needs to continue to innovate its form of content. For example, Haidilao can combine festival hot point, social topic and popular “challenge” to push creative videos. It needs to emphasize real customer experience and brand temperature rather than just advertising. According to Song, enjoyment and interactivity of digital marketing are the key to promoting engagement [5].

Haidilao can encourage employees and customers to create content together, which combines UGC and employee interaction, to reinforce the features of human interest. It also can organize some interactive events such as “Check challenge”, “Customer innovate menu”. After carrying out these strategies, Haidilao can enhance its brand exposure and improve the sense of engagement and belonging of customers. Innovative content can not only improve diffusion but also provide continuous power for brand differentiation.

4.2. Deepening brand differentiation

Haidilao needs to deepen its unique figure in content. It is not only about good service, but also about culture and history. It can use some regional culture, such as Chinese hotpot culture and regional taste, festival elements, such as Chinese Lunar New Year and sweet dumplings, to design content of theme. According to Lu, differentiation can improve brand identity and customer loyalty [7].

Haidilao can collaborate with other brands or cross-brand collaboration, such as anime, film and television works and fashion brands, to attract younger customers. Through visual identification, they themed restaurants and festival limited-time events to convey brand temperature. For example, during Chinese Lunar New Year, Haidilao can launch a themed challenge video showing customers enjoying special hotpot dishes, which encourages consumers to share and generates high user engagement. These can help Haidilao form a sense of unique symbol, which reduces the risks of being mimicked. Therefore, through deepening brand differentiation, Haidilao can maintain its cultural depth and lasting attraction in such a competitive digital market.

4.3. Platform efficiency optimization

Since the cost of social media orientation is gradually higher, Haidilao needs to allocate its advertisement resources more intelligently. It can estimate which platforms can bring the highest interaction rate and when is the most efficient time to post with the help of data analysis. According to Pei, data-driven digital marketing allows brands to improve efficiency by optimizing platform selection and content delivery strategies [9].

Haidilao can construct a cross-platform data trace system, which can help it evaluate the effects of short videos, UGC and advertisement. Haidilao also needs to reduce reliance on a single channel. For example, if TikTok modifies its algorithm, the total diffusion of Haidilao will not be affected so much. Moreover, Haidilao can increase its ROI to improve the efficiency of content management. Overall, through elaborate content and platform management, Haidilao can maintain its efficient and sustainable social media orientation.

4.4. Integration of technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools

With the increasing cost of platform and content, Haidilao can use technology and AI to improve efficiency. It can use AI to analyze user comments, interaction rate, video popularity and future trends prediction. For example, after AI analyzes the comments of users, it can find out that customers especially like a certain type of hotpot condiment, so Haidilao can push out limited-time taste of condiment based on this information. AI also can assist with creating short video titles and scripts and even optimize release time. Moreover, AI can be customer service that replies to consumers in time, which can improve interactive experience.

It is practical since AI can not only improve orientation efficiency but also reduce labor cost. It can adapt to algorithmic or trend changes, which maintains brand exposure, and help Haidilao achieve digital transition and enhance sustainability. Therefore, the integration of technology and AI tools not only optimizes efficiency but also maintains digital innovation and market sensitivity in competitive markets.

In general, these optimization strategies, which are continuous content innovation, deepening brand differentiation, platform efficiency optimization, and integration of technology provide Haidilao with practical guidance to strengthen its digital marketing performance and ensure long-term brand loyalty in a competitive market.

5. Conclusion

This paper explains Haidilao's social media marketing strategies and their impact on customer engagement and brand loyalty. Through case analysis and literature review, it was found that Haidilao effectively utilizes short videos, UGC, and employee interaction to create a dynamic digital ecosystem that strengthens consumer participation and emotional connection with the brand. Moreover, the integration of online digital marketing with offline service experience enhances the over customer journey and reinforces brand value.

However, Haidilao also faces several challenges, including intense industry competition, changing consumer expectations, high platform and content management costs, and risks associated with brand diffusion. To address these issues, Haidilao should continuously innovate content formats, deepen brand differentiation through cultural and thematic stories, and optimize platform management using data analysis and AI tools.

Future research could explore cross-cultural differences in digital marketing strategies, examine long-term effects of social media engagement on consumption behavior, and investigate the role of emerging technologies in enhancing brand sustainability. Overall, this study provides practical insights for restaurant management and digital marketing.

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