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Digital Word of Mouth: Motivating and Engaging Millennials with Shareable Content

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Digital WOM: Motivating and Engaging Millennials with Shareable Content

by

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of Science in Business Administration in Marketing

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Introduction:

There are a vast number of consumer touch points along the complex path to purchase today, and at each touch point, lies an opportunity for engagement. When you consider the “Millennial generation’s massive size and strong purchasing power, estimated to be $170 billion per year,” it makes sense that their loyalty is so highly coveted by brand marketers (ComScore, 2012). There is a battle among these marketers to engage with this generation and earn their brand loyalty today, so that they will have their dollars locked in tomorrow. As social mavens by nature, Millennials offer an unparalleled opportunity for brands: “They’re the founders of the social media movement—constantly connected to their social circles via online and mobile” (Millennials: Breaking the Myths, 2014). If businesses can understand this unique group of consumers and how to effectively engage them, they can leverage their social connectivity to earn powerful advocating for their brand.

However, a 2013 Forbes article states that “[w]hile consumers continue to tune out traditional, intrusive marketing communications, they increasingly crave the type of genuine, customer-focused information that content marketing delivers” (DeMers). This is why smart marketers have begun entering the realm of content marketing. The Content Marketing Institute defines content marketing as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract, retain, and engage a clearly-defined audience…” (n.d.). The types of content forming these campaigns tend to be digital, including social media, blogs, company/brand websites, online communities, emails, events, mobile apps, and more. DeMers explains that content marketing delivers authenticity in a way that sparks natural conversation and focuses on building the relationship with the consumer rather than driving the hard sale (2013).

Content marketing is important because it is one of the most effective driving forces of earned media, which is the vehicle that drives traffic and engagement and around a brand. The Titan Search Engine Optimization agency states that “earned media is essentially online word-of-mouth (WOM), usually seen in the form of ‘viral’ tendencies, mentions, shares, reposts, reviews, recommendations, or content picked up by 3rd party sites” (Machin, n.d.). For the purposes of my research, I update this definition to include tagging account(s), hashtagging, liking, and favoriting. Given the difficulty of reaching Millennials through traditional marketing platforms, I chose to concentrate my research on social media and online platforms. However, due to my thesis topic and interest in WOM in the digital and physical world, I also include offline conversations within this definition. Furthermore, I consider the influence of owned media, “any web property that you can control and is unique to your brand” (Machin, n.d.). Examples of owned media include website, mobile site, blog site, and social media channels. Throughout this report, you can think of content marketing and earned media as synonymous to WOM marketing and WOM—where the WOM marketing is the “input or conversation starter,” and the WOM is the “actual output or conversation” (Wommapedia, n.d.).

Many marketing professionals consider WOM to be the cornerstone of marketing. The focus of this thesis is on WOM for two reasons. The first reason arises from the
perspective of the consumer. According to Nielsen’s 2013 Global Survey of Trust in Advertising, “eighty-four percent of consumers around the world say they trust WOM recommendations from friends and family, a form of earned media, above all other sources of advertising” (Earned Advertising Remains Most Credible, 2013). The second reason results from the findings of a 2013 survey conducted by the WOM Marketing Association (WOMMA), which found that expert brand marketers believed WOM was the least expensive, yet most effective form of marketing (Murray, 2014). After all, “brands can pay anyone to love their brand publicly, but the real power lies with customers who ultimately choose whether to share engaging content to friends, family, and often times complete strangers” (Wommapedia, n.d.). Brand marketers should be knowledgeable of the potential that “shareability” has to enhance WOM marketing campaigns. A term coined by Saatchi & Saatchi’s Kevin Roberts, shareability is the degree to which a consumer finds a brand’s story relevant (M. Rapert, personal communication, Fall 2014).

This is why companies are leveraging shareability in their content marketing campaigns to drive brand engagement among consumers, with the hope of achieving the most important form of brand engagement today—WOM. After conducting a thirty-six-question survey among 260 Millennials and holding in-depth interviews with two local business owners, I have explored the aforementioned ideas. Throughout this report I will examine the following themes from the perspective of both the consumer and the brand as they relate to my topic: (1) brand engagement through social media and online platforms, (2) motivation as a means of participation in WOM marketing campaigns, (3) the potential for shareability to propel WOM.
Research Methods

Using a three-tiered study involving a complete and exhausted literature search, survey research, and two in-depth interviews, I explored the aforementioned themes. I first used an exhaustive literature search to obtain relevant secondary research from credible sources such as Nielsen and the WOM Marketing Association. I then focused on gathering unique information from sources related to the marketing field, such as blogs, articles, and interviews. The information gleaned from these various sources allowed me to develop my first primary research method—a thirty-six question survey targeted to Millennials. In addition to obtaining demographic information, this survey examined Millennials’ thoughts and perspectives on a number of topics related to my research: brand engagement through social media and online platforms, motivation and incentive behind brand engagement, and shareability of branded content. I also explored several more granular ideas that relate to each of these topics, such as trust in sources of product and service information, factors determining willingness to participate in marketing campaigns, and the amount of brand engagement occurring through WOM among Millennials today.

The Pew Research Center defines a Millennial as someone “born after 1980—the first generation to come of age in the new millennium” (2010). In other words, Millennials are currently age 35 or younger. A total of 260 Millennials within the greater area of Arkansas completed my survey. All participants provided demographic information, such as gender, age, academic status, income, and household size. Given that all participants were Millennials, it was unsurprising that the sample’s demographics were consistent with the broader Millennial population.

A majority of the survey respondents were female, making up 78% of responses while males made up only 22%. Between the age ranges of 18-22, 23-27, and 27-35, 75% of respondents were within the age range of 18-22. 20% were between the age ranges of 23-27 and 27-35, and the remaining 5% were “other,” meaning above the age of 35 or below the age of 18.

In addition, I was interested to know how many respondents were currently in college. As Millennials are sizing up to be the most educated generation in history, it made sense that 81% of my respondents were in the process of earning their undergraduate degrees. However, as a college student myself, I drew from a convenience sample and this could have skewed such data. A fourth factor that I wanted to consider was income level. I broke income levels down into the following categories: none, $0-$20,000, $20,000-$40,000, and $40,000+. Provided 81% of respondents were still in college, it was not surprising that a majority 46% reported no annual income level. The second largest segment was 35% earning an annual income level between $0-$20,000. The remaining 20% reported earnings between $20,000-$40,000 or $40,000+. Considering the strong focus of my research on social connectivity, I desired to know how many people the respondents currently lived with. Almost half of the respondents, 49%, reported to live with 2-3 others, while 27% lived with only one other person, and 24% lived with 4 or more people.
Following survey data collection, I performed in-depth interviews with two local business associates, male and female, between the ages of 25-30. These constituents were ideal for my thesis as their target markets and areas of business interest aligned closely to those of my research. The two businesses regularly interact with Millennials, are operated by Millennials, and are social media savvy with strong reliance on digital platforms. Therefore both were familiar with content marketing and its ability to drive WOM. In addition, the demographics of their target markets aligned with those of my respondents. The first interviewee described their target market as “youth between the ages of 18-27,” with the idea that by catering to the younger market around age 18-22, “they’ll also cater to those age 14-18 in high school.” The next interviewee described their target market as “females age 18-35,” including, “college girls, young professionals, and stay-at-home-mommies.”

I wanted to gain a fresh perspective from a business owner’s point of view in regard to the aforementioned topics. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and consisted of 14 questions. Using a recording device on my laptop, I recorded each interview and then carefully transcribed our conversations. Observing the inner workings of these local businesses and interviewing their associates allowed me to gain insight into the necessity of remaining technologically savvy and authentic in order to thrive among the unique Millennial audience.

I have categorized my data to ensure that the questions asked and information gleaned specifically address each of my research themes. Based on my findings from secondary resources and primary research with a survey and two interviews, I will present both insights and recommendations for businesses and brands interested in amplifying their content marketing, brand engagement, and shareability.
Theme 1: Brand Engagement through Social Media and Online Platforms

The relationship between Millennials and technology has transformed the relationship between consumers and brands today. This is because brand marketers can take advantage of how “technology has increased social connectivity, making it easier than ever for [their] consumers to do [their] marketing for [them]” (Whitler, 2014). Many companies are increasing their efforts on social networking sites, in part due to the high level of trust consumers place in friends’ recommendations and online opinions. Furthermore, Nielsen reports that 60% of consumers learned about a specific brand or retailer through a social networking site while researching products online (How Social Media Impacts Brand Marketing, 2011). This explains why “the latest trend marketers are using to get customers recommending their products is online social media marketing” (Wommapedia, n.d.).

There is a clear connection to digital as Millennials spend roughly 14.5 hours per week using their smartphone devices, equivalent to more than 2 hours per day (MarketingCharts, 2014). As these consumers have taken the clear lead in seizing the new platforms of the digital era, “what used to be a one-way conversation is now a multifaceted, 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week dialogue between brands and their customers” (U.S. Chamber of Commerce). Perhaps this is why two-thirds of marketers (64%) believe WOM marketing and social media are “more effective than traditional marketing,” and why 70% say their company will increase spending on social media, more than any other marketing channel (J. Murray, 2014). One of my interviewees further confirmed this when I asked what her overall marketing strategy was and she replied, “Social media to a T.”

The rapid expansion and adoption of such platforms by businesses and Millennial consumers make evident why I have established online WOM as a critical element of my study. With Millennials having grown up during the digital and information ages, it is crucial that brands reach them through the appropriate platforms. However, identifying the appropriate social media and online platforms to engage with this unique set of consumers can be an arduous process; therefore, I have used the following research to determine just that. After developing a clear understanding of how these consumers behave and interact in relation to various social media and online platforms, I have identified the platforms that Millennials use to engage with brands most, what factors could propel or repel that engagement, and the level of importance of each. The purpose of this segment of research is to identify best practices for enhancing engagement and building relationships with Millennial consumers through social media and online platforms.

In order for companies/brands to optimize their digital platforms, they must be certain that their customers are using the platforms on which their content is present. Therefore I first explored the popularity of various social media platforms to determine the ones with which Millennial consumers are most likely to engage. The following graph provides a percentage breakdown of memberships with various social media accounts.
The above results show that Facebook and Instagram are nearly equal in the number of account memberships they have with Millennial consumers. My first interviewee confirmed that his business’ two largest platforms were Facebook and Instagram. Platforms that his company was looking to develop were Pinterest and blogs. The other interviewee said “as of now we are mainly focused on Instagram, a little bit of Twitter, and most recently Snapchat.” Despite these concentrations, each area of her business has a Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter page. Her business is also active on Pinterest, with around 20 boards that are pinned to periodically throughout the day.

However, the more important question is whether or not Millennials are engaging with companies/brands on their social media accounts. When asked if they followed any local businesses, large retailers, or brands on social media, 86% replied “yes.” Therefore brands are wise to be amplifying their social media platforms, but which accounts should they be using to engage with their consumers most? The graph below reveals a percentage breakdown of the accounts that are most often used to follow to businesses and brands.
The same two social media platforms take 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} place here as before. Yet in this case Instagram outperformed Facebook with an additional 14\% of consumers declaring their preference for brand engagement through the Instagram platform. Perhaps this is due to a combination between the different content that is offered by each platform and the way that the Millennial brain reacts to it. Nielsen released an interesting report in 2013 comparing the brains of Boomers to those of Millennials. The report found that “younger brains are most stimulated (better attention capture, engagement, and memorability) with elements of dynamism such as rich media, lighting or rotations…” (The Me Generation Meets Me). The report also stated that Millennials respond better to “intense color palettes for online ads,” and “highly arresting visuals (special effects, unexpected visual elements)” (2013). Considering the many filters, settings, and tools that were created by Instagram for the purposes of enriching content, the platform seems best suited for use by Millennials. Twitter came in 3\textsuperscript{rd} with only 41\% of respondents claiming to use the platform to follow businesses/brands. Based on my interviews, it seems that both businesses’ digital presence aligns with their target markets. Both brands are operating in the same digital spheres and are relying the same platforms for consumer engagement.

Nonetheless, both interviewees affirmed the strong effort they put into their Instagram accounts. In fact, one owner believes in the Instagram platform so strongly that her business has four accounts, one of which has over 112,000 followers. The other interviewed business was not far behind with three accounts, and their most popular one having around 25,000 followers. Both strive to be as visually engaging as possible because they believe that their shoppers are also very visual people. This is what makes Instagram such an ideal platform. One owner said, “Instagram is kind of our little niche…we love Instagram.” The other said, “you have to pair the medium with the media that you are distributing.” With Facebook being one of the most well-established, tenured platforms among the group, both constituents seemed to feel that it was an account that carried itself in a way. One owner said that although they’ve “sort of dropped off of Facebook altogether, (they) still have 750,000 “likes.” Both remain on Facebook because

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**On which social media accounts do you follow local businesses, large retailers, or brands?**

- Instagram: 85\%
- Facebook: 71\%
- Twitter: 41\%
- Pinterest: 23\%
- LinkedIn: 14\%
- Snapchat: 10\%
- Tumblr: 1\%
- Groupme: 0\%
- Other: 0\%

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they know they must continue to cater to all of their platforms and targets. After all, both owners can streamline their marketing efforts relatively easily by sharing their Instagrams to their Facebook accounts each time they post.

Although only 10% followed brands on Snapchat during the time of my data collection, I want to highlight that it is a platform poised for growth. In a recent article the Executive Vice President of The Marketing Arm stated, “In 2015, Snapchat is the fastest growing social app” (Edwards, 2015). This platform is even more relevant to my research due to “the fact that almost 50 percent of U.S. users aged 12 to 24 have tried [it]” (Edwards, 2015). The heavy use of Snapchat among a younger audience was also supported by a 2014 report by Comscore: “[Snapchat] has already established itself as one of the most highly used apps among Millennials (18-34 year olds) at 32.9 percent penetration, trailing only Facebook (75.6 percent) and Instagram (43.1 percent)…” (Lipsman). There are several unique elements that position Snapchat as a successful platform for brand engagement among Millennials. Consider Snapchat’s “my story” location-based feature for example, which “leverages content from events and allows others not attending to directly experience the events” (Edwards, 2015). Snapchat claims that their platform is unique in the way that it is “built around the idea of connected engagement versus reach and frequency” (Edwards, 2015).

According to one of the interviewed business owners, Snapchat is their new favorite. She explained that they use it for a behind the scenes look at what’s going on in their store, and that they’ll even post exclusive offers on their “story” for their Snapchat friends. The other interviewee was also seeking to connect with their audience in a unique way. He explained that whenever something interesting is going on in their world, he tries to post about it right then so that “consumers feel that energy of being present.” The ability to reach an audience and provide an experience that extends beyond the physical store is perhaps the most important feature this app has to offer. Edwards suggests that “my story” can help brands can amplify their authenticity by enabling them to interlace their story with user-generated content versus content that has been pre-produced (2014.) By allowing brands to engage with their audiences without making them feel like they are being marketed to, I too anticipate rising popularity for this platform.

It was also interesting to find that only 41% claimed to engage with brands on Twitter despite 78% having Twitter accounts. Both interviewed business owners asserted that this was a platform they didn’t necessarily see progressing, and therefore put little marketing effort toward it. When I asked Millennials about their time availability on a daily basis, I found that 78% considered their time to be “somewhat restricted” or “restricted,” and 15% reported their time to be “very restricted,” or “no free time.” Only 7% claimed that their time was “not at all restricted.” Millennials are more likely to be strapped for time, and this could be attributing to their lack of engagement with the Twitter platform. Ultimately, it is easier for the consumer to grasp content that is presented in a photo versus having to read text from a tweet. These inhibitors may seem minor, but they could be the factors preventing consumer engagement.
I was further interested to know the types of factors that consumers consider when determining whether or not to engage with a company/brand by adding them on social media. Before asking respondents about specific factors, I asked the following open-ended question: “Imagine that you are trying to decide whether or not to follow/add a company/brand. As you explore their account, what are some of the factors you consider to help determine whether or not to follow/add them?” Many of the responses were related to how frequently the company/brand posted, the company/brand being relevant or of interest to the consumer, content quality, and overall popularity. Due to the large number of responses, I have compiled a list of the quotes that best exemplify the various consumer opinions that were received.

- “How often they post, quality of their photos, how many followers they have.”
- “I look for visually pleasing aspects—either cool and artistic photographs, layouts, etc. I also like when things are straightforward and simple, easy to read and understand.”
- “If they post too much I will not follow them.”
- “How often they post (don’t want it to be too much), whether posted content is actually something of interest to me and not just advertising.”
- “Easy to comprehend…very visual and doesn’t require much reading.”
- “Relevance of their posts.”
- “Information about sales/discounts. Showing what is new or "cool". Personally, I feel that a little goes a long way with social media marketing. Avoid cheesy ads. Focus on the products.”
- “I try to see if there are any deals or advantages by following them. I’m interested in what they can offer or save me.”
- “I won’t follow them if they post more than once a day, the quality of the photos they post, I don’t want to see low quality work, I only like to follow if I can gain information by following them that I wouldn’t otherwise know (special deals, offers, promoting new items that come out).”
- “If the pictures are interesting and cool. Does it relate to me. Are the captions witty.”
- “Ratings and Reviews, Number of likes/followers, How many of my friends liked/followed.”
- “Are they sharing sales, discount codes, sweepstakes promos, or other perks of following them?”

These open responses revealed intriguing insight regarding consumers’ opinions on following companies/brands. How frequently the company posted was a consistent concern. Many of the respondents were very specific, stating that they do not follow companies that post more than once per day. Others standards varied, saying that they would be okay with a company posting two to three times per day. Many of the respondents mentioned that they would be more likely to follow a company/brand if there was incentive. For example, one respondent said, “I try to see if there are any deals or advantages by following them. I’m interested in what they can offer or save me.”

Evidently these consumers are not willing to follow a company/brand unless there is
something in it for them. These respondents also gauge the company/brand’s popularity based on how many followers/likes they have, or if their friends are following them.

After learning their opinions on factors that influence brand engagement, I wanted to determine how some specific factors could propel or repel that engagement, and the level of importance of each. Therefore, I requested the following: “Please rank the following factors based on their importance to such a consideration (deciding whether or not to follow/add a company/brand).” Participants were then able to arrange these factors by order of importance; with a ranking of 1 meaning it was the most important consideration, and a ranking of 6 meaning least important. I have averaged the rankings for each factor and provide their overall rankings below.

1. Quality of content (images/information)
2. Updates on sales promotions (discounts/coupons)
3. Frequency of posts
4. Updates on product availability (new items, replenished stock)
5. Entertainment (humor, interesting information, etc.)
6. Contests/events

Quality of content was ranked the most important consideration while opportunities for contests/events was ranked least important. This ranking aligns with the overwhelming number of respondents that mentioned factors related to content quality in the previous question. The WOMMA defines content quality as “the degree to which the content is well written, well timed, engaging, visually appealing and audience specific.” This result further affirms the importance that I place on brands utilizing content marketing. It is important that marketing managers focus on distributing brand-relevant content as opposed to distributing content for the sole purpose of having a presence among audiences. One of my interviewees addressed this idea when he explained that his main marketing strategy was “creating something that is meaningful.” He explained that he tries to distribute a variety of content in order to reach all members of his target audience. For example, his goal is to do three social media posts per day: one that is featuring a product, one that is “purely emotionally engaging,” and one that is capturing an event or some type of interaction occurring in his community. Brands should remember that Millennials “respond to characters that are relatable to them and their life stage” (The Me Generation Meets Me, 2013). I found that “frequency of posts” and “entertainment” received the greatest response variation, meaning these were factors that respondents had difficulty agreeing on. Frequency of posts and interesting information were mentioned in many of the open responses. However, respondents seemed to feel that if they were truly interested in the content being distributed, then how often the company/brand posted mattered less. Nonetheless, maintaining relevance among one’s audience rises as the most key factor determining consumer engagement.

More specifically, I asked if any of the above factors could deter the survey respondents from following a company/brand. I wanted to identify factors that brands should be wary of in order to avoid serving as a deterrent to their target audiences.
According to the above results, companies/brands that post too frequently are less attractive to potential followers, by far. Three respondents elaborated on this under the open response option stating, “I just don’t want my social media to be filled with one companies stuff,” and simply, “too many posts.” Although quality of content was ranked much lower than the number one factor, it was still important to 1/3rd of respondents. Two participants addressed content quality in the open response option explaining, “it would deter me if the company did not post professional, accurate information,” and “bad quality of pictures to show clothing, etc.” Only five of the open responses claimed that none of the factors would deter them.
Theme 2: The Potential for Shareable Content to Propel WOM

In 2008, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg espoused what became known as the “law of social sharing.” In accordance with Facebook’s data, Zuckerberg’s law predicted that individual’s sharing activity would double year on year (Hansell, 2008). Whether this theory is accurate remains to be seen, but when you consider the rate at which digital platforms are expanding in addition to the Millennial generation’s degree of social connectivity, brands are nearly obligated to create shareable content.

Yet in order to create this kind of content, the kind that leads to the successful execution for a WOM campaign, “one must understand how advocacy works and how to provide customers the portals with which to voice their opinions” (Wommapedia, n.d.). Further word from the wise—“Propensity does not come easily, one must cultivate the experience” (Wommapedia, n.d.). There are a plethora of factors that coincide to influence the “shareability” of today’s WOM marketing campaigns. Every consumer touch point offers an opportunity for engagement. However, brands must have something compelling to offer if they want to transform this interaction into valuable WOM. As one of my interviewees explained, “It’s about creating really quality media that people feel is valuable enough to share.”

To understand this phenomenon, one must be familiar with the definition of content marketing, which I provided earlier during the introduction. Also recall the Forbes article, which explained that what gave rise to content marketing was consumers’ continued tendency to shut out the traditional world of advertising (2013). Taking content marketing one step further is content engagement, “the extent to which other people recirculate or propagate the content” (Wommapedia, n.d.). Content engagement can be thought of as a measurement of earned media, which is essentially online WOM.

As the above paragraph asserts, you must have a clear understanding of your audience in order to create content that they will find “shareable.” The following research will examine how a number of factors can make content more or less shareable, and therefore impact the potential for WOM among Millennials. Along with this, I will explore why these factors are believed to influence content’s “shareability.” This combined analysis will allow me to identify which are the best methods for earning WOM during the age of social sharing and connectivity. As stated by one business owner, “with so many platforms out there, there’s so many places for consumers to talk and spread WOM.”

Before delving into this topic, I first needed to know how Millennials were sharing. With this knowledge I could then identify their current propensity to share. The chart below provides measurements for various forms of content engagement, in addition to highlighting which sharing behaviors are most prevalent among these unique consumers. Each of these behaviors is considered to be a form of WOM.
The above information makes it evident that Millennials have a strong propensity to share, and therefore engage in WOM. This engagement goes both ways as 93% claim to have tagged someone in a post before, and 97% claim that they themselves have been tagged in a post before. However, their propensity to share varies depending on the form of engagement. As the sharing behavior becomes more involved, for example tagging multiple people versus one person, the likelihood of engaging in the behavior decreases. Although “‘hash tagging’ the name or phrase associated with a company/brand” was used least among respondents at 64%, these numbers reveal that Millennials are engaging in WOM more often than one might expect.

While it is important to know how these consumers are engaging in WOM and which methods are being used most often, it is even more meaningful to know whether or not these actions are serving their purpose. I wanted to compare individuals’ likelihood to “push” shareable content to their friends versus how often they explore content their friends have shared. The below graph explores how likely the following WOM methods are to move their audiences to action.
The above is good news for companies/brands that rely upon social media sharing for WOM. Perhaps it is the element of discovery that often piques these respondents’ interests. One business owner discussed her company’s infamous hash tag, which “you see everywhere to point that it kind of becomes comical, but, it has 15,000 posts to it…so that is a huge, huge source of WOM for our store.” The other interviewee explained that if they were doing something on social media that they wanted a lot of exposure for, they’d ask their audience to tag 1-5 friends for a chance to win one of their products. He said that the reward is always a product and never money so it is like they are “doubling down on WOM because then they’ll get that product,” and then “tell their friends how they got it just by tagging on Instagram.”

Directly tagging a person in a post appears to be the method most likely to move the consumer to the action of exploration. This aligns with my earlier finding that 93% of Millennials have tagged another person in a post. I found it surprising that even when the respondent was not directly tagged in a post shared by another person, 98% explored it. This introduces an interesting insight regarding online WOM. When individuals share content online, it doesn’t necessarily require a person-to-person interaction in order to serve as WOM. An individual can share a post through their account and it be considered a form of WOM as soon as their followers/friends begin viewing it. For example on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, users can view when their friends have tagged others in posts by simply scrolling through their newsfeed. After all, “you should consider the fact that those who read the post could potentially have millions of offline conversations with friends, families, acquaintances,” or even complete strangers (Whitler, 2014).

Having identified the WOM methods best suited for contagion with the above data, I could begin delving into several factors that might influence content’s shareability. Below is a chart that captures how much influence each of these factors has when it comes to sharing company/brand content.
WOM is most simply defined as “the act of someone sharing something interesting with someone else” (Wommapedia, n.d.) Perhaps this is why 85% of respondents claim that they are more likely to share content from a brand that they view as “interesting.” Sernovitz (2006, p. 6) suggests that the most important rule of WOM marketing is to “be interesting” and that “nobody talks about boring companies, boring products, or boring ads.” Millennials may be more likely to share content that is interesting with the belief that it will make them appear interesting themselves. Therefore, brands must ensure that their content marketing campaigns are novel and exciting, surpassing their consumers’ expectations in some way. One business owner said that sometimes they post to Instagram and tag the location as, for example, “somewhere in the Ozarks.” This way they’re adding a little mystery to potentially draw the consumer in and lead them to want to discover more. He says this is what the brand is all about—“that series of discovery, that adventure.” He explained that they also strive to align with their consumer’s values. “People are always trying to identify their own values…so as much as they can represent their own values through your brand,” you’ll have that loyalty.

Another factor that these owners are leveraging in order to stay relevant to their target audiences is similarity. The second owner said that her business has such a strong connection with Millennial women because the employees that are responsible for its livelihood “are all 25 and under.” This same business was also recently awarded by the National Retail Federation for its “love branding.” She said that they have achieved a strong level of shareability among their audience because of the way that they portray their business to their customers in a way that they can envision themselves as a part of it. For example, when they receive a new shipment they will post about it so that they are “sharing that moment of excitement and discovery.” In addition, this business is aiming to be unique. They do everything in house—photography, graphic design, social media,
buying, styling, modeling, and more. The owner believes that this is what gives them their uniqueness—“people love to see that, that authenticity.”

As established previously, Millennial consumers share and engage with branded content on social media. However, I wanted to know how often they share their own content. When they were asked, “when you post on social media, do you also share the post to your other social media accounts?” 47% said “sometimes,” 38% said “no,” and 15% said “yes.” I found there was a statistically significant relationship between those that shared sometimes or always, and those that did not. With nearly half of the respondents responding “sometimes,” I’m led to believe that consumers sharing behaviors vary depending on the social media platform. This could be for a number of reasons, but I would assume that this activity depends largely on the audiences that the consumer’s face on each platform. Buzzfeed’s CEO Jonah Peretti affirms this belief stating, “users behave very differently depending on where they are on the web” (Tierney, 2013). I was curious as to whether this held true from a marketer’s perspective. When I asked the local business owners about their sharing behavior, I found that they nearly always shared their posts from one account through to their other accounts. The ability to share provides businesses a relatively simple method for streamlining their marketing efforts.

I further explored the above thought by asking the following question among the 62% that claimed to streamline their posts on social media.

![Which accounts do you typically share to?](image)

The majority of these “sharers” shared to Facebook. Perhaps this is because Facebook is a platform well suited for varying types of content, whether it is photos, text, videos, blog posts, and more. While some of the above platforms are concentrated to specific media forms, it made sense that users would most often share to Facebook. On the other hand, it could be due to the respondent’s audiences on Facebook. I found this interesting after one of the business owners said that Facebook was their “opinion platform.” Despite there being so many places for people to talk; she’s noticed that Facebook is the platform where their consumers share their opinions, complaints, and praises most. She has also noticed that “[p]interest sort of carries itself, it is [their]
biggest referral for [their] online store.” Once again, this highlights the idea that WOM does not necessarily require active person-to-person interaction. This is something that this owner understood. She explained that all of their business is a result of WOM, “whether it be WOM on social media, which most average people might not think about as a concept, but that is WOM because it can be shared through the use of tagging pictures, a hash tag, and then there’s this whole other world of bloggers.”

Finally, and most importantly, I wanted to identify the message vehicles that are best suited for contagion. The chart below provides five different methods for sharing experiences with a company or brand, in addition to including the option, “do not share.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you &quot;share&quot; your experiences with a company/brand?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth (communicating in-person, texting, online messaging)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share the company/brand’s post on your social media account(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write a customer review on company/brand website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide customer rating on company/brand website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write your own post about the company/brand on your social media account(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not &quot;share&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Confirming one of the main focuses of my research is the fact that 82% of Millennial consumers share their brand experiences through WOM. Not only is this method of sharing most prevalent among Millennials, it is also the most trusted source of advertising. In 2013, Nielsen concluded that “eighty-four percent of consumers around the world trust WOM recommendations from friends and family, a form of earned media, above all other sources of advertising” (Earned Advertising Remains Most Credible Among Consumers). Based on the definition of earned media provided earlier, all of these methods of sharing would be considered forms of earned media. Therefore, brands should be delighted to know that among the various forms of earned media available, 82% are participating in the most valuable one—WOM. When considering whether or not to write a customer review, provide a customer rating, or just write about a company/brand on social media, this chart reveals that 66% are participating in the creation of such content. In the same Nielsen report mentioned earlier, it was found that “sixty-eight percent of global respondents…trust[ed] consumer opinions posted online” (Earned Advertising Remains Most Credible Among Consumers, 2013). The only response under the “other” option was “commenting on one of their posts expressing a satisfactory experience.”
Theme 3: Motivation for Participation in Content Marketing Campaigns

“WOM is not created, it is co-created. People will only spread your virus if there is something in it for them”- Hugh MacLeod (Macleod, 2006). According to my research, this quote holds true. Consumer participation is a marketing objective that has existed for quite some time. However, participation has become increasingly difficult to achieve in the highly interactive omni-channel world today. In an article written for The Hub Magazine, Tyler Murray states “participation is a more valuable attribute because a shopper who actually participates in a marketing program is far more likely to remember the message, act on the information, or share the content with others” (2014). The use of contests and giveaways has become an increasingly common tactic for brands looking to transform participation into WOM. The requirements to participate in these campaigns vary, yet some of the most common requirements include having to “share” the original contest post, tag friend(s), follow account(s), or hashtag the name or phrase associated with the brand/company. The goal is to create one continuous process in which one consumer’s expressions form another’s new, hopefully positive, impressions. However, “the more you ask of users, the less likely they’ll be to participate” (Murray, 2014). One of my respondents affirmed this, stating, “if there are too many steps to enter the contest, I won’t do it.”

The following research will explore the above ideas as well as answer how brands can better connect with their consumers and encourage them to spread WOM. We have previously established where and how Millennials spread WOM, but we haven’t explored why. According to Murray, “the more effort we require of shoppers, the higher their expectation of returned value will be” (2014). He believes that the marketers who can optimize both sides of the ‘return on effort’ equation are the most likely to succeed in achieving participation (Murray, 2014). What makes participation one of the key focuses of my research is its close relationship with “shareability.” While shareability is more closely related to the nature of the content itself, participation reflects the willingness of consumers to exert effort in sharing that content. For a consumer to participate in a marketing campaign, they must typically share content with their audiences through social media, and thus spread WOM.

By creating shareable content, brands are better positioned to evoke consumer participation. Yet before I could explore shopper participation and the motivations behind it, I first needed to learn how many respondents have actually participated in a brand contest. When asked this question, 54% of respondents claimed that they have “shared” a post in order to participate in a contest, while 46% have not. However, this may not come as a surprise after learning about the difficulty that brands face when it comes to evoking consumer participation. I wanted to know how companies could motivate their consumers to engage with their brand. Therefore, I asked respondents to imagine that a company/brand that they follow was having a contest in which the winner would receive some special offer. The following data examines the different types of offerings for which respondents claimed they would participate in a contest.
Tyler Murray claims “shoppers will act only if they believe the perceived value is greater than the effort required to obtain it” (2014). The above numbers reveal that as the perceived value of the offering decreases, so does the shopper’s willingness to participate for it. However, if the gift card had a greater value than the free product, then the consumer’s response might change. This goes back to the idea of return on effort. Only half of the respondents claimed they would participate for a discount, which is an offering that would require more effort on their part versus simply coming in to redeem their free product or gift card. I then wanted to know if there were any additional incentives that brands could offer in exchange for consumer participation. Respondents were asked an open-ended question as to whether there were any other factors that would increase the likelihood of their participation. Below, I have provided a list of quotes that exemplify the various responses received.

- “An immediate discount or prize, not something that I would be entered to win or would possibly win in the future.”
- “Free shipping.”
- “Free items.”
- “I would rather everyone get a small 5-10% discount than a chance to win.”
- “Guaranteed to win at least something, even if it was small.”
- “If I’m guaranteed a discount or something just by sharing the product. For local businesses especially, I feel that typically when its like ‘share this post for a chance to win ______,’ they are usually fixed and not very random.”
- “Follow back.”
- “If there was a greater chance of you winning (more people picked).”

Most of the respondents expressed that if there were a greater to chance to win, they would be more likely to participate. Also, four respondents mentioned that a philanthropic reward would better incentivize them to participate. It was interesting that respondents mentioned being followed back. Companies do not typically follow back
their followers, but if they did, this could be a gratifying experience for the consumer that has a clear interest in their brand—especially if the company acknowledged their followers’ posts on occasion by “liking,” “favoriting,” or “sharing” them. Perhaps brands should consider the idea of mutual engagement.

I then wanted to explore how some of the most common requirements for contests or giveaways might influence the consumers to participate. Specifically, I was interested in identifying which had the greatest potential to increase or decrease engagement.

By observing the effects of these requirements, I provide insight into why some stipulations have greater influence on participation than others. I found that requiring a consumer to “share” a post was the most likely to “decrease” or “somewhat decrease” their likelihood of participating at 77%. On the contrary, 21% claimed that having to tag a friend in the shared post would “somewhat increase,” or “increase” their likelihood to participate. This makes sense because Millennials tend to seek peer affirmation. According to a report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “Seventy percent of Millennials are more excited about a decision they’ve made when their friends agree.” At 23%, the requirement to follow another account(s) was most likely to have no effect on the probability of the consumer participating.

To delve more deeply, I asked Millennials to identify specific factors that would make them less likely to participate in a company’s promotional event on social media:
As previously reported, 54% of respondents have shared content in order to participate in a contest. Though more have shared than haven’t, they say that they don’t prefer it, and here is why. A majority 77% of the respondents claimed that having to share a post would make them less likely to participate. One respondent said “liking, tagging, commenting is okay, but I would be more inclined to participate in something if I didn’t have to share it to win.” The second most influential factor was the requirement to “tag a friend(s)” at around 50%. Interestingly, a previous question revealed that 14% would participate for the reward of being a featured winner, however, this question reveals that it would make 10% of respondents less likely to participate. Whether “featured winner” is a reward or requirement, it does not seem to help or hurt a promotional giveaway.

Next, I determined the “why” behind the preceding question. I asked participations to answer the following: “Why would the factors that you selected, or listed under the option of “other,” make you less likely to participate?” An overwhelming number of responses, over 80, were related to the participants self-conscience feelings not wanting to “annoy,” “clutter up,” or “spam” their followers and friends news feeds. Some even believed that it would cause them to lose followers or friends. Many also believed that the requirements were too time consuming considering their “small chance of winning.” Another common response was that they did not want their personal profile to become an endorsement for a company—many found it embarrassing or obnoxious. Below, I have provided some of the open responses that I believe capture the perspectives of the consumers most effectively.

- One said they’d be more likely to share if the post wasn’t “too embarrassing or overly commercial,” they wouldn’t want to feel like they were “plugging a product on (their) personal account.”
- “I don’t want to consume other people’s social media with ads.”
- “I know a lot of people that follow me would not be interested in the post and can't relate to it.”
• “The likelihood of me not winning the competition and looking dumb for always posting but never winning.”
• “I am hesitant to turn my social media account into a billboard.”
• “I don’t mind following or tagging friends, but I feel like it’s intrusive to make me repost or “share” as well as hashtag.”
• “I don’t want to lose followers by having to share a generic post…I don’t want to waste a follow on an account I’m not interested in.”
• “I’m not a puppet. You have to earn my recommendation without some gimmicky contest.”
• “Honestly, it’s because my chances to win are so small that I would rather not annoy my followers by sharing it.”
• “Too much work, commercializes my social feed.”
• “Time consuming, annoying.”
• “Too much to ask for.”
• “Don’t care enough to waist my time to do this. Not going to advertise for them for free.”

I was intrigued to find the most informative open responses following this question. The respondents seemed eager to express their honest opinions as to why they did not like to participate in brand contests. The respondents offered valid reasons for their arguments, and these were thoughts that I felt brands would be interested to know. After exploring Millennials’ motivations for participating in online WOM marketing campaigns, I uncovered one final motive—what motivated them to share their experiences with a company or brand.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why do you &quot;share&quot; your experiences with a company/brand?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give recognition to a positive experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform or protect others from a negative experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To show your support for a company/brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To provide feedback/recommendations to company/brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To receive a discount or prize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spark conversation/interaction with others about a company/brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You identify with company/brand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brands should do their best to provide excellent customer service and favorable experiences, because 66% of respondents claim that they share their experiences with a company/brand in order to highlight their positive experience. I found this number rather fascinating because the WOMMA holds that “on average, Americans speak ‘positive’
about brands during WOM conversations 66% of the time” (Wommapedia, n.d.) These percentages aligned perfectly. A report titled ‘What Makes Online Content Viral?’ provides a reason as to why this might be. “Consumers often share content for self-presentation purposes (Wojnicki and Godes, 2008) or to communicate identity, and consequently, positive content may be shared more because it reflects positively on the sender.” However, if consumers have a negative experience, 57% will share it to inform or protect others. These respondents seem relatively brand loyal as nearly half share experiences to show their support for a company/brand. Also, with 34% sharing their experiences to provide feedback or recommendations to the company/brand, we know that the two-way dialogue between the brand and consumer exists.

Considering the trust that consumers have for WOM (Earned Advertising Remains Most Credible, 2013), I wanted to know if its importance also held true among Millennials specifically. The following topics relate to consumers’ trust in various sources of information. Though unrelated to consumer motivation in participating in a marketing campaign, the results reveal the marketing vehicles that consumers rely on most for information. Therefore, the messages that come from the vehicles may be more likely to motivate a Millennial consumer to engage in WOM.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Which of the following are preferred sources of product or service information?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations from People I Know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Social Media Account(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Ratings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial Content (Newspaper/Magazine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Ad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emails I sign up for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I expected to find “recommendations from people I know,” to be the most preferred source, considering that it was cited as the most preferred source by Nielsen at 84% (Earned Advertising Remains Most Credible, 2013). However, my survey was conducted among Millennials specifically, and it was ranked as the second most preferred source with only 1% ranking it below “company/brand website.” On other hand, 64% preferred consumer reviews and 43% preferred consumer ratings, both of which are considered sources of WOM. When you consider these percentages in addition to the 79% that prefer recommendations from others, it is safe to say that Millennial consumers have high regard for sources of organic content. I believe that company/brand website was ranked so highly as consumers have become increasingly self-reliant. Overstreet (2014) claims “one of the most profound issues that we’re facing today is a consumer with abysmal
levels of trust in everything.” She says “going online helps people trust a brand,” by tapping into their feelings that they’re doing the research themselves (Overstreet, 2014).

One of the interviewees said that he typically communicates with his customers through his company’s website, email blasts, and social media. He is making a wise decision to communicate with his audience through the company website; however, he may want to reconsider the effectiveness of email efforts, since only 14% of the Millennial survey respondents reported to trust consumer-consented email messages. This is an important consideration as Millennials are his company’s target market.

More important than the Millennials’ preferred sources of information was the level of trust that they have in each of the aforementioned sources. I examined respondents degree of trust by asking them to answer, “Do Not Trust, Somewhat Trust, or Trust,” for each of the following information sources.

### To what extent do you trust the following forms of product or service information?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information Source</th>
<th>Do Not Trust</th>
<th>Somewhat Trust</th>
<th>Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emails I sign up for</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Sponsorship</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editorial Content (Newspaper/Magazine)</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Ad</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Social Media Account(s)</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations from People I Know</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Reviews</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Ratings</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company/Brand Website</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although a company/brand website was the most preferred source of information among Millennials, recommendations from people they know are by far the most trusted information sources. 58% of respondents said they trust the company/brand website, versus 75% saying they trust recommendations from people they know. Once again, I wanted to look at how consumer ratings and reviews compared as they are examples of user generated content. I found that 96% considered these sources trustworthy, or somewhat trustworthy. On the other hand, brands should note that online ads, emails, and sponsorships were the least trusted sources for product or service information.
Conclusion:

After thoroughly analyzing the information and results gleaned from each original theme, I have extracted the findings that are most relevant to my topic. In the beginning of this report, I established the importance of the Millennial generation and the strong interest that brand marketers have in them, as they will soon possess the largest purchasing power in the U.S. Along with this, I addressed the degree of social connectivity among Millennials and their potential to be utilized as a vehicle for WOM. In addition, I spoke about how the decreasing effectiveness of traditional marketing techniques has given rise to content marketing. After addressing how content marketing and earned media are analogous to WOM marketing campaigns and WOM, I suggested that shareable content was key in propelling WOM.

In the first section, I identified the platforms that Millennials use to engage with companies/brands most, what factors could propel or repel that engagement, and the level of importance for each factor. I learned that the social media accounts most prevalent among these Millennial respondents were Facebook (97%), Instagram (94%), and Snapchat (84%). I also learned that a majority (86%) of survey respondents followed a company or brand on one of their social media accounts. However, the accounts that these respondents used to follow companies or brands most often were Instagram (85%) and Facebook (71%). Although 78% had Twitter accounts, only 41% used theirs to follow a company or brand. While both businesses interviewed had Twitter accounts, they claimed to put more marketing effort into Instagram or Facebook platforms. Therefore, I found that the presence of these brands and their consumers aligned. As for the importance of factors that could increase or decrease consumer engagement, “quality of content” was the most important factor to consider before following a company/brand. Following closely was the consideration of a company/brand having “updates on sales promotion.” The least important factor for respondents was the account offering “contests/event.” The only unmentioned considerations that the respondents offered were the account’s number of followers/friends, or the company/brand’s reputation for customer service. Looking into deterring factors specifically, 80% said accounts that post too frequently would prevent them from following them.

In the second section, I examined the potential for shareable content to propel WOM among Millennials. I first looked at their propensity to share before exploring how several factors could influence content shareability and why the factors were considered influential. After asking respondents about their participation in various forms of online WOM, I found that the forms most often used were tagging someone in a post (93%), tagging multiple people in a post (88%), and sharing a post (83%). Furthermore, 99% have explored a post they’ve been tagged in, 98% have explored a post shared by someone else, and 83% have explored a hashtag posted by someone else. After examining these forms of online WOM, I began exploring what made content more or less shareable. 85% of respondents claimed that they were more likely to share content from a company/brand that they viewed as “interesting.” At 80%, credibility was also likely to enhance the respondent’s propensity to share. Both interviewees highlighted the effort they put into making their brand content interesting, authentic, and visually
engaging. As for streamlining sharing activity, 47% of respondents shared their posts from one social media account to another account “sometimes.” The 15% that always re-shared were most likely to share to their Facebook accounts (81%). On the other hand, the interviewed businesses almost always shared their posts from one account to another account, enabling them to streamline their marketing efforts. Perhaps the most important takeaway from this segment was how Millennials share their experiences with a company/brand. The focus of my research on WOM was confirmed when a majority 82% of respondents said they use WOM to share their experiences. The second most common method was used far less frequently with 31% claiming that they share the company/brands post on their own social media account.

Using the third and final theme, I was able to explore the motivations that lead to participation in marketing campaigns among my Millennial respondents. I first established that 54% of respondents have shared a post in order to participate in a company/brand contest. Specifically, the top two offerings that they would participate in a contest for were free product(s) (81%) or a gift card (69%). I found that as the perceived value of the offering decreased, so did the respondent’s willingness to participate in a contest for it. When I inquired as to whether there were any additional incentives that could earn their participation, I found that respondents most often mentioned a greater likelihood to win. Other responses included receiving an immediate/automatic reward, a smaller reward that could be granted to all participants, or a philanthropic reward. As for requirements influencing the likelihood of my respondent’s participation, 39% said having to share the company/brand post was most likely to decrease their participation. Although I cannot conclude that any requirements increased participation, 8% claimed that the requirement to tag a friend in the shared post was likely to increase their participation. The requirement to follow another account(s) had no effect on participation for 23% of respondents. My respondent’s frustration with having to share a post was further confirmed when 77% said this factor would make them less likely to participate. After analyzing open responses, I discovered that participants made these claims for the following reasons: they did not want to annoy their followers/friends, did not want their profiles to be used as billboards for brands, and simply did not feel that requirements to participate were worth their time or effort provided the small chance to win. As a follow up to a question introduced in theme two, I explored why respondents chose to share their experiences with a company/brand. The top two reasons for sharing experiences with companies/brands were nearly opposites—to highlight their positive experience or to inform/protect others from a negative experience.

Within this theme I also unveiled respondent’s preferences for sources of product or service information, and the level of trust they place in each. At 80% and 79%, Millennial participants preferred the company/brand website or recommendations from people they know. This data also revealed that participants were interested in WOM sources such as customer reviews or ratings. When it came to the level of trust had with each information source, 75% trusted recommendations from people they knew, but only 58% trusted the company/brand website. Although 80% of respondents preferred the
company/brand website for sourcing product or service information, they were more likely to trust information coming from their peers.
Recommendations

I used primary research to explore the perspectives of Millennials and local businesses, in addition to using secondary research to obtain input from well-established businesses and brands. Therefore, the applicability of my findings may vary depending on the nature of business. The following recommendations may be relevant to any brands that target Millennial consumers, rely on digital platforms as a primary means for marketing, or that have general interest in learning more about mastering the marketing technique of WOM.

Theme 1: Brand Engagement through Social Media and Online Platforms

Businesses should use their Instagram and Facebook platforms to drive engagement, as these were the most popular social media accounts Millennial consumers used to follow businesses/brands. The businesses that rely on Twitter may want to reconsider where they are placing their marketing efforts. Far fewer respondents use Twitter accounts to follow businesses/brands compared to Instagram or Facebook. The businesses that were interviewed also felt that Twitter might be digressing as a platform for consumer engagement. Although only 10% of respondents used Snapchat to follow brands, both of the interviewed businesses were enthusiastic about establishing or increasing their presence on this platform. Considering the support that many secondary resources provide in regard to Snapchat’s growth, I would recommend that brands give greater focus leveraging this unique platform among Millennial audiences.

While looking into specific factors that could increase or decrease brand engagement, I discovered that consumers found “quality of content (images/information)” to be the most important factor they considered before following a business/brand. Opportunities to participate in “contests/events” were the least important. Brands should strive to balance between providing interesting, high quality content and content that is specifically promotional. Brands should also be weary of filling followers newsfeeds with posts—80% of respondents said that accounts that posted too frequently would deter them from following their account.

Theme 2: The Potential for Shareable Content to Propel WOM

In this section, my goal was to unveil which methods were most successful for propelling WOM among Millennials. I found that Millennials indeed have the propensity to share, as 83% claimed to have shared a post in the past. However, at 93%, the most common WOM engagement among these respondents was tagging someone in a post. Being a Millennial consumer myself, this was not surprising. My friends tag me in posts on social media nearly every day. The content of the posts that I am tagged in are often from brands that provide highly visual and interesting, informative information. This form of engagement also proved to be highly effective, with 99% of respondents reporting that they click on/explore the posts that they are tagged in. Therefore, I recommend that brands strive to interact with consumers on a personal level as much as possible. This can be difficult to do when a brand has a very large audience, but it is
worth it even if it means engaging with a portion of followers. It is likely that those consumers will inform their friends about the engagement, further pushing that valuable WOM. Also, brands that have hash tags should continue to use them, and the ones that don’t should develop them, because 83% of participants have further explored a hash tag that was posted by somebody else.

Examining factors that might impact content shareability, I found 85% to claim that they would share content from a company/brand that they viewed as “interesting.” This further confirms my own personal experience, which I just discussed. Brands should also strive to establish their credibility as this was the second most motivating factor behind sharing content. Furthermore, “WOM (communicating in-person, texting, online messaging)” was the message vehicle best suited for content contagion. Brands should take note that 82% of respondents have used WOM to share their company/brand experiences. Also, with 66% sharing their experience by writing a review or providing a rating online, brands should be focusing greatly on their efforts to achieve positive WOM.

Theme 3: Motivation for Participation in Content Marketing Campaigns

Although I learned previously that consumers are least interested in opportunities to participate in business contests/events, 54% have shared posts in order to participate in a contest. My results revealed that the best way to motivate consumers to participate was by offering “free products” at 81%. The chance to win a gift card was selected by 69%. In the open response question that asked about any additional incentives that would increases their willingness to participate, respondents often spoke about having a greater chance to win. If brands could provide multiple winners or hold contests that required a small amount of participation on the parts of all or a majority of their followers, in exchange for a smaller prize but prize for their entire audience, respondents would be more likely to participate. I would recommend that brands pay closer attention to the “return-on-effort” ratio when creating promotional contests.

Also, when creating such contests, brands should consider that 77% are less likely to participate when “sharing a post” is required. Unfortunately, this is the easiest way for brands to spread WOM. An overwhelming number of consumers were concerned with their profiles becoming billboards for brands and cluttering up their followers newsfeeds with posts related to company contests. Brands will have to get even more creative in how they present content for contests/events. The more organic the content and the less that it looks like an advertisement, the more likely consumers will be to share it among their followers.

During theme 2, we asked respondents how they share their experiences with companies/brands. In theme 3 we explored the “why” behind this sharing behavior. Fortunately, 66% are motivated to share experiences to “give recognition to a positive experience.” At the same time, 57% will share their experience to “inform or protect others from a negative experience.” Though the WOM is positive more times than not, this highlights the importance of brands providing the best customer service they can, as
well as being as responsive to consumers as possible. My results also revealed that 80% of consumers prefer the company/brand website for information on products and services. However, following closely behind was “recommendations from people I know” at 79%. 64% and 43% of respondents preferred consumer reviews and ratings, which are also forms of earned media (online WOM). This further supports the importance of brands propelling positive WOM among Millennial consumers.

I finally explored my respondent’s level of trust in various information sources. The importance of WOM was confirmed once again, with 75% of respondents having the greatest trust in this source of information. Consumer reviews and ratings were also trusted by just under half of respondents, therefore I would encourage brands to work on elevating these platforms and making them more accessible for their consumers to view. I learned from my interview participants that email blasts were a huge source for getting information to consumers, however, even though consumers have signed up for the emails themselves, 57% “somewhat trust” them and only 19% fully trust them. Perhaps brands should focus on integrating trusted WOM recommendations through their emails. For example, highlighting positive, authentic customer ratings and reviews, or asking customers who have made a recent purchase to provide a product a rating or review for a discount off of their next purchase. To appear authentic, it is essential that brands get more creative in the ways that they weave WOM recommendations through their main sources of product and service information.

Although I conducted extensive research on my thesis topic, there are several ideas that could be considered for further exploration. For example, as social media and online platforms evolve, so do their users and audiences. By comparing different age groups, such as Boomers versus Millennials, one may discover why certain age groups concentrate certain platforms. It would also be beneficial to explore whether, and why, certain generations are more likely to share than others. Such research could provide insight into what types of content different generations share, and whether the content they share varies depending on the platform. This same analysis could be done when looking at the motivational drivers behind participation in promotional campaigns. A final suggestion for future research is identifying whether gender differences have an effect on sharing behaviors and word of mouth. There is much additional insight that can be gained by conducting this research among differing age groups, ethnicities, and genders.
References


