Uses and Gratifications 2.0

How Small Businesses Can Employ Modern UGT Research to Satisfy Users' Needs Online

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Introduction

In today's market, having a presence on the Internet is crucial for generating new business and building and maintaining relationships with customers (PR Newswire, 2017; Gholston & Kuofie, 2016). However, a significant amount of small businesses in the United States still do not utilize the web or social media (PR Newswire, 2017). Over three-quarters of small businesses in the United States are nonemployers, which are typically owned and operated by one individual (United States Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy [SBA], 2012; United States Census Bureau, 2015). In this case, the small business owner most likely specializes in a very specific business or trade (i.e. photography, event planning, jewelry making, etc.) and may lack skills in communications and marketing. Small business need to establish an online presence and maximize their time and effort allocated to creating and maintaining their online presence by rooting their tactics in a uses and gratifications approach.

Small business owners and the uses and gratifications approach have a key feature in common: a focus on the individual. The success of a small business is dependent on its customers' satisfaction. Adopting a uses and gratifications approach meshes well with small business owners' interest in the individual because the approach is centered on the individual as well. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) aims to understand how users satisfy their needs with the use of media. Small business owners maximize their businesses' ability to satisfy the needs of individuals in an online setting by centering their efforts in a uses and gratifications approach, which applies the findings of UGT research, in order to create and maintain websites and social media accounts.

Literature Review

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In the 1950s, communication research was largely focused on discovering what effect media had on people. Ultimately, media effects research on the persuasion element of communication lead to the conclusion that media has less of an influence on people than communication researchers originally thought (Katz, 1959). In response to this, Katz (1959) suggests a more holistic approach to studying mass communication: the uses and gratifications approach. The most basic assumption of the uses and gratifications approach is that no message, regardless of its potency, is able to influence an individual who has no use for it (Katz, 1959, p. 3). UGT is guided by the principle that individuals use media to satisfy different gratifications which are fueled by personal values and interests, social motivations and associations (García Jiménez, Cruz López de Ayala López, & Gaona Pisionero, 2012; Katz, 1959). In summation, media effects research asks, "What does media do to people?" while UGT research asks, "What do people do with media?" (Katz, 1959).

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973a) conducted seminal uses and gratifications research which took on a humanistic approach in studying media use. Katz et al. (1973a) outlined five key theoretical assumptions that were used to study the relationship between media and audiences. First, UGT defines the audience as active, assuming that individuals' media consumption is purposeful and goal driven (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 510). The authors sought to understand if patterns of media use were shaped by audience members' expectations of media sources' ability to fulfill their needs and deliver interesting, valuable content (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 511). Second, UGT research is not centered on the idea that media has generalizable, straight-line effects on audience members. Rather, the approach poses that the individual actively seeks out media and

determines the need gratification ability of media (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 511). In the relationship

between a media source and the individual, UGT considers the individual to be the most active

(Schramm, Lyle & Parker, 1961). Third, UGT does not assume that mass communication is able

to fulfill all human needs. Instead, the theory assumes that individuals fulfill their needs with

both conventional methods and with media (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 511). Fourth, UGT understands

that individuals are self-aware and are able to clarify and vocalize which needs they seek to

gratify through media use, helping to inform researchers (Katz et al., 1973a, p. 511). Fifth, Katz

et al. (1973) believe that it is best to separate the study of the cultural significance of mass media

from the study of audience orientations (p. 511). These five theoretical assumptions ensure that

the audience members and their needs remain the focus of uses and gratifications research.

From uses and gratifications research comes unique schemes which attempt to classify

the variety of gratifications which mass media is able to satisfy for audience members (Katz et

al., 1973a, p. 512). UGT research conducted by Katz, Gurevitch and Haas (1973b) discovered 35

needs that may be satisfied by mass media and placed them into five categories: cognitive needs

(related to strengthening information, knowledge, and understanding), affective needs (related to

strengthening aesthetic, pleasurable and emotional experience), personal integrative needs

(related to strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status), social integrative needs

(related to strengthening contact with family, friends, and the world) and tension release needs

(related to escape or disconnecting) (p. 167). This scheme's central notion is that individuals use

mass communication to be connected (or, in some cases, to be disconnected) to information and

other users. Katz et al. (1973a) assert, "Our position is that media researchers ought to be

studying human needs to discover how much the media do or do not contribute to their creation

and satisfaction" (p. 521). In UGT research, the main object of study is always the audience.

Major criticisms of UGT emerged after original research rooted in the theory was conducted. Katz et al. (1973a) admit that a weakness of UGT is the approach's individualistic nature. By definition, UGT seeks to understand individual's use of media which causes issues in producing generalizable results from studies (Katz et al., 1973a). Additionally, Severin and Tankard (1997) claim that audience members are limited in their ability to consume media in regards to gratifications they wish to satisfy because traditional media, which was studied in early UGT research (television, film, radio, etc.), was not customizable and, therefore, did not offer individuals the ability to actively and individually seek media in order to meet their specific, unique needs. Despite the critique that early UGT research received, the theory's usefulness in studying audience's consumption of media still holds true today.

Uses and Grats 2.0

Over fifty years later, UGT remains relevant in studying media in the 21st century. Liang, Lai and Ku (2006) speak to this universally applicable theory by stating that although the uses and gratifications approach has routinely been applied to traditional mass media, this theory is also useful in analyzing new media including the Internet (p. 50). Mass communication and mass media have changed drastically since initial UGT research was published. In light of this change, UGT has been reexamined and reapplied in order to evaluate how and why audiences use new media in response to the gratifications which it offers them.

Increased Interactivity of Media

The current conception of media has changed to encompass much more than it once did, which demonstrates the vast growth in communication technologies. In the past, media signified a few communication tools, including radio, television, newspapers and film. Today, the concept

of media has expanded by including new tools (smartphones, robots) and has adopted channels (Internet, cable) and venues on those channels (social networking sites, search engines).

Due to media's adoption of the Internet, Severin and Tankard's (1997) critique of traditional media's inability to allow audiences to independently satisfy their unique needs due to media's lack of customization no longer applies to the media of the 21st century. Rubin (2008) discusses UGT's relevance today by writing that because of the Internet, the idea of an active audience is even more evident today than it was when UGT was first proposed (Rubin, 2008, p. 504). In fact, Internet audiences are so active that individuals are instead referred to as "users" rather than "audience members" (Rubin, 2008, p. 504). Media has changed to allow a wide variety of actions for a user to take (Rubin, 2008, p. 505). For example, at one time, a radio offered audiences a dial which limited selection and the potential customization of their experience. Today, a computer offers almost countless options of actions for users to take in order to receive an almost completely customized experience with each use (Rubin, 2008, p. 505).

Further, these new tools, channels and venues give users the ability to interact with the machine itself or with other humans using the machines (Rubin, 2008, p. 505). Rafaeli poses that with this type of interaction between humans and new tools comes increased interactivity (as cited in Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 505). For instance, in the past, newspaper audiences read articles with no ability to offer instant feedback or personalize the experience. In contrast, Internet users today are able to read a news article online, engage with content and interact with other users in a personal way by liking, commenting and sharing the article. This allows for increased interactivity and engagement through which the user is able to instantaneously create personalized meaning and significance for themselves, satisfying specific, individual needs.

Satisfying Multiple Gratifications at Once

Research conducted by Sundar and Limperos (2013) found that the increase in user interactions with new media has introduced new gratifications that may be obtained from new media because it employs affordances (p. 505). Affordances are psychological clues as to how objects or interfaces are to be used. Users encounter affordances built in to the visual design of medium which give them suggestions on how to interact with the it. Norman (2013) argues that in this sense, modern media has the ability to at least in part dictate how users interact with the technology of the medium and define the gratifications which it affords (p. 11). Sundar and Limperos (2013) illustrate that a website's design, which includes affordances, drives users to encounter content that may satisfy several of their needs with the use of one medium, whereas in the past, audiences met needs one at a time using separate mediums (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 517).

García Jiménez et al. (2012) report that digital social networks allow the Internet to satisfy a combination of users' needs at once. Digital social networks offer individuals the ability to seek information while also accessing music, videos, photo exchanges and ideas from people that they have never met. Users are able to expand their social network while accessing a plethora of information, satisfying social integrative needs and cognitive needs (García Jiménez et al., 2012, p. 250).

The dramatic changes that media has undergone since seminal UGT research was conducted in the 1970's have required UGT to be revisited in today's digital age. Modern UGT research has resulted in the discovery of new expectations that users have of media and new patterns of use by users in order to satisfy multiple gratifications at once. These findings on how users interact with media are useful in creating media that is designed to satisfy users' needs.

Small Businesses' Online Presence

According to social media marketing experts, an online presence is imperative in order for small businesses to stay visible, engage customers, and generate new business in the 21st century (PR Newswire, 2017). Gholston and Kuofie (2016) write, "social media is a component of most business environments. Therefore, it is very important for small businesses to understand how to use social media networks" (p. 24). However, a 24% of small businesses have not adopted social media yet and 8% never plan to use it (PR Newswire, 2017). Jones, Borgman, and Ulusoy (2015) imply that this deficit may be due to small business owners' lack of technological knowledge and training in communication or marketing (p. 615). These individuals, especially nonemployer business owners, may face challenges in setting aside the time to create and maintain websites and run social media accounts in addition to running their small business. In order to maximize the time that a small business owner allocates to their business' online presence, they should adopt practices rooted in a uses and gratifications approach that seek to create content that satisfies the user. The following section will introduce online and social media marketing strategies rooted in UGT that small business owners are able to adopt in order to better satisfy both current and potential customers online, ultimately driving business.

Social Media Strategies for the Small Business

Frankly, it is no longer an option for small businesses to not have a presence on social media. Liang et al. (2006) found that users are most likely to be satisfied with content they find online while they are simultaneously seeking social interactions (p. 63). Subsequently, small businesses should aim to interact with customers while they are on social media platforms, seeking social experiences. To help satisfy users' social gratifications, and therefore gain customer attention and business, the small business should post frequently, connect with

audience members in a casual and personable way, and maintain a conversation with the audience on social media. Businesses can do this by sharing user-generated content and even posting about things in which customers are interested that are not necessarily directly related to the business (Gholston & Kuofie, 2016, p.34). Posting content that interests users builds networks, creates relations and fosters interaction between the small business and the user (Gholston & Kuofie, 2016, p. 37). This leads to customer commitment and retention (Sigmoidal, 2018). By interacting with customers on social media, businesses help users to simultaneously gratify cognitive and social integrative needs, fulfilling their expectations of media to satisfy multiple gratifications at once (Katz et al., 1973b).

Social media is the vehicle through which customers today reach businesses. According to an online survey conducted by MarketingSherpa (2015), 95% of adults aged 18-34 are most likely to follow a business on a social networking site. Businesses are reaching this age group, and older groups as well, by having a presence on social media. By investing time into creating and maintaining multiple social media accounts, small businesses become more visible to their target audiences (PR Newswire, 2017). In the United States, there are nearly 30 million small businesses (SBA, 2012). This large number illustrates the competition that exists in today's small business industry. To alleviate the hardship in finding their target customers, small businesses need to meet them where they tend to be. Today, that is on social media.

In order to reach the most users, small businesses should have a presence on more than one social media platform. Facebook is the most popular social media platform for small businesses, followed by Twitter. However, Joshua Dirks, CEO of Project Bionic, a creative marketing agency, believes that Instagram may be the best option for small businesses to invest time into today (as cited in PR Newswire, 2017). Alex Oesterle, owner of Blue Bear Creative,

believes companies should utilize Facebook because a company's customers are most likely on

Facebook as well, regardless of what the business does (as cited in PR Newswire, 2017). Social

media platforms are constantly adapting and gaining, or losing, popularity. Small businesses

need to have a presence on multiple social media platforms and be adaptive as time goes on

because audiences are ultimately fickle. In the case that Facebook becomes the least popular

platform for small businesses, those businesses with Instagram and Twitter accounts will have a

greater chance in continuing to reach their audiences. Principally, it is wise for small businesses

to have a presence on multiple social media platforms to meet their customers where they are and

where they may be in the future, as new platforms are introduced and old platforms lose

popularity.

In regards to who should run a small business' social media, Oesterle believes that there

is considerable potential for owners to operate the company's accounts. If the owners run the

company's social media, costs are nonexistent and the content is more likely to be genuine and

informed (as cited in PR Newswire, 2017). Oesterle's suggestion bolsters the argument that small

business owners should utilize the strategies outlined in this paper to manage their own online

presence using a uses and gratifications approach. To save time and stay organized, small

business owners can use social media management and evaluation programs like Hootsuite,

Buffer or Social Pilot.

Website Strategies for the Small Business

Once a user is lead to a small business' website via the business' social media page, the user

should be able to access important information about the business which further satisfies their

cognitive needs. Additionally, the website should feature interesting and helpful content that

allows the user to satisfying other needs, encouraging them to spend time browsing the site.

It is wise to consider the five categories of needs outlined by Katz et al. (1973b) as a guide to addressing multiple needs of the user at once. For example, consider an individual seeking a professional photographer. In order to satisfy the overall cognitive need for information, the individual finds a freelance photographer's Facebook page, and from there, proceeds to their business' website. The website yields plenty of information about the photographer's services and packages, fulfilling cognitive needs. The design of the website is sleek and displays high quality, colorful portraits of people and landscapes of exotic places taken by the photographer. This feature satisfies the user's affective need for an aesthetically pleasing experience. Further, if the portraits are linked to the subject's social media accounts, the user may have social integrative needs met by virtually meeting people with a similar interest. The landscape photos may allow the user to imagine transporting to another place, satisfying their tension release needs. By offering a variety of information and features, the website can satisfy multiple gratifications of users at one time. This prompts them to spend more time on the site, build a relationship with the company and consider giving it their business.

In line with the findings of Sundar & Limperos (2013), small businesses should include elements in the design of their website which encourage the users to interact with the site and with other users. A simple way to enhance interactivity is to include opportunities for users to comment, like and share content from the website. This boosts users' actions taken on the site, providing interactivity between the information and the other users visiting the site (Rubin, 2008, p. 505). To further increase user satisfaction, the small business should monitor comments and utilize user feedback to improve the site (Liang et al., 2006, p. 51). When users encounter features on websites that encourage interaction, their expectations are met and several of their needs can be satisfied (p. 505).

Conclusions

Each Internet experience has become increasingly personalized and unique, which allows individuals to fulfill countless gratifications. To capitalize on this feature of modern media, small businesses should attempt to satisfy as many needs as possible through their online presence. Audiences today expect that they will be able to fulfill their needs quickly by looking at one site (Sundar & Limperos, 2013, p. 512). To capitalize on this expectation of users today, small businesses need to adopt a uses and gratifications approach in creating and maintaining their online presence.

In UGT research, the main object of study is always the audience. Modern UGT research has discovered specific needs which each user may seek to satisfy while using the Internet or social media, often relating to the users' need to simultaneously connect with others and with information. The findings of UGT research, which outline how individuals use media to satisfy their needs, serve as a successful guide for small businesses in creating online content and maintaining their online presence. Both the uses and gratifications approach and the efforts of the small business share one main focus: the satisfaction of the individual. Therefore, the relationship between the two comes naturally.

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