

ONLINE COMMUNITY MARKETING OF SKI RESORTS



***AN IN-DEPTH BEST PRACTICE STUDY
OF ASPEN/SNOWMASS AND
BRECKENRIDGE RESORT***

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JUNE 2013***

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BRECKENRIDGE SKI RESORT*

by

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Master Thesis within the profile of International Business

Spring semester 2013

NHH Bergen

NORGES HANDELSHØYSKOLE



"This thesis was written as a part of the master program at NHH. Neither the institution, the supervisor, nor the censors are - through the approval of this thesis - responsible for neither the theories and methods used, nor results and conclusions drawn in this work."

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
ABSTRACT	6
1. INTRODUCTION	7
1.1 Background	7
1.2 Purpose	8
1.3 Contribution	8
1.4 Outline	9
2. THEORY	10
2.1 Objectives	10
2.2 Definition of Online Community	10
2.3 Definition of Online Community Member	12
2.4 Framework Review	12
2.5 The Framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities	13
2.5.1 Two Axes, Four Types	14
2.5.2 Earned Media	18
2.5.3 User-Generated Content	20
2.5.4 Online Word of Mouth	23
2.5.5 Online Influencers	26
2.6 The Framework of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building	29
Interaction of Practices	32
Effects of Practices	33
Concluding on Practices	34
2.7 Identifying Value for Brands	35
2.8 Research Questions	36
3. METHODOLOGY	38
3.1 Literature Review	39
3.2 Interviews with Key Informants	40
3.3 Netnographic Case Analysis	44
3.3.1 Case Sampling	44
3.3.2 Applying Frameworks	45
3.3.3 Research Principles	46

3.4 Triangulation	50
3.5 Interpretation	50
4. CASE ANALYSIS	52
4.1 Key Facts on Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Ski Resort.....	53
4.2 Breakdown of Social Media Presence of Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Ski Resort	54
4.3 Implications of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities	61
4.3.1 Classification by Types	61
4.3.2 Implications of Types	62
4.3.3 Types Summarized	67
4.4 Implications of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building	68
4.4.1 Examples of Practice Interaction.....	78
4.4.2 Practices Summarized	79
5. CONCLUSION	80
APPENDIX	83
A1: Complete Analysis of Aspen/Snowmass by Framework of Practices	83
A2: Complete Analysis of Breckenridge Ski Resort by Framework of Practices.....	86
A3: Interview with Gregg Blanchard	89
A4: Interview with Charles Townsend.....	90
A5: Interview with Jeff Werkheiser	92
A6: Interview with Morgan Bast	96
A7: Interview with Yann Benjamin.....	102
A8: Interview with Dave Amirault.....	109
REFERENCES	114

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Ingeborg Kleppe, my thesis supervisor at NHH Bergen, for the freedom she entrusted me with, the constructive advice on how to communicate thoughts she granted me with, and the help in connecting with minds such as Sean Moffitt and Robert Kozinets.

I would like to thank NHH Bergen, my home university, for being a highly enjoyable international environment with the most fruitful student union in Norway, and for being a stimulating place where input from students is valued.

I would like express formidable gratitude to Molly Holmes, the sharpest, most creative, most enthusiastic, and most supportive person I have met. Her professional marketing feedback and creative eye helped me greatly in finishing this paper with confidence and delight. Her kingly manner of talking me up in synergy with her proactivity brought me connections among ski resort marketers; a value I wish to take further.

I would like to thank all the six interviewees for their willingness and priceless insights. I wish for the resulting text to enrich their perspective on the online practice of ski resort marketing. I also wish that they enjoy ten days of waist-deep Colorado dry sparkling champagne powder for every minute they have spent on answering me.

I would like to thank my intelligent parents for curiosity and ambition they raised me with. Their vehement inquiries about the progression of the paper helped me focus and deliver in time.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Five years ago, this thesis could not see the light of day. Positions of the key informants in this paper either did not exist or they were marginal. Two years ago, few would believe that giving free tickets to unprofessional internet users with online clout could earn a major ski resort more online coverage than X Games, the true Olympics of freestyle skiing and snowboarding. Today, there remains to be lack of clarity in how effective marketing will be in a year.

At the same time, there is a consensus that social media is communication on steroids (T4G Research, 2011). To prove that, Aspen and Breckenridge, through applying social media strategies described in this paper, reach hundreds of thousands of mountain enthusiasts a season without spending money on advertising. Outstanding content, creativity, and two-way communication now count more than budget size (Technorati, 2013). Consumer voices can be heard more than ever before, and brands such as Bear Mountain enjoy more Youtube reach and engagement than competitors with bottom lines a couple digits longer. The social media phenomenon is new, but brands vehemently grab opportunities, and the dynamic environment shapes new best practice notions on daily basis.

Among important ingredients of communication in social media are two-way conversations, common interests, lasting relationships, shared values, and utility. Consciously or unconsciously, individuals, groups, and businesses thus form online communities. Leveraging them by brands is a demonstration of changing relationships in the marketplace, where consumers co-create the marketing itself and play a crucial role in developing communication of value. Online communities have a new and distinct power that is drawn from the way they remove geographical borders and regroup people based on interest instead of physical location.

As elaborated further, it is a win-win situation that brings brands closer to finding the holy grail of marketing: getting the right message, to the right people, at the right time. This trend changes the perception of marketing as we know it today, with its notorious flaws of exposing people to irrelevant messages. There is a wide range of roles that different bodies play in the process, and this paper shows how two leading ski resorts exemplify. Both are recognized for marketing innovation and performance beyond their region and industry.

Aiming to bring clarity to the rapidly evolving domain is challenging and requires solid grounding. To be able to contribute, this exploratory study combines a variety of methods and sources. Tens of research articles have been read and topped by delving into a long list of industry publications. The acquired understanding was verified by interviewing six ski resort marketers, and applied in an elaborate community analysis. Tentative implications were verified by expert feedback throughout the process.

To summarize the interest of the study, it addresses an intriguing question: How do online brand communities create value for both the consumer and the company?

1.2 Purpose

Aspen, Breckenridge and other ski resorts mentioned herein are fascinating examples of online community marketing, but the ski industry has not traditionally been at the forefront of marketing innovation. There are gaps that in-depth case studies of industry best practice can fill. Resorts know they attract high net-worth guests, but they do not always know what makes the guests tick (Benjamin, 2013). In addition, lack of clarity in effectiveness of social marketing is among the most common causes of not choosing this communication channel as a suitable alternative (Moffitt, 2013).

This paper aims to foster better understanding of antecedents of brand performance in online communities, and it does so by examining success stories of two innovative brands. For the purpose, the author constructs a tailor-made methodology. By pervasive and documented triangulation, the methodology is verified and deemed appropriate. It is made to examine two major ski resorts, but by virtue of the universal design, it can be applied to any other content-intensive and multi-platform online brand community. Future application of the methodology by others may or may not happen, but what remains fixed is the goal to bring insights and perspective that will be useful for both small and large online brands.

Further, the purpose is not to capture an entire process of value creation in online communities, for that is neither feasible nor necessary. Instead, the paper elaborates on a valuable snapshot in time, a snapshot that is explained as a direct consequence of past efforts. With past and present in mind, the approach yields implications applicable in near future.

It is thrilling to watch how new online marketing positions are created, how these positions are given high status, and how people who perform them enjoy decision making freedom. Now is the time to grasp the opportunity and help direct the online marketing debate.

1.3 Contribution

The contribution lies in various benefits of carrying out a study that is not paralleled in the practice of ski resorts. Many marketers discuss the hot topic of social media marketing and online brand communities, but few use both academic and industry resources in order to gain understanding. Many marketers analyze best practice studies but few go as deep as this paper. Many marketers measure success and identify the most effective moves, but few look thoroughly for causes of the effectiveness. And finally, few have the opportunity to spend as much time and resources on one analysis as this study demanded. The author has a strong affection for ski resorts as well as for online communication. His ambition is to use the acquired knowledge in a position at a leading ski resort, and his educational institution has allowed him to devote an entire semester to constructing implications.

The combination of the named qualities results in contribution to ski resort marketers who are now free to use implications without carrying out the research themselves. By elaborating on how the best actors in the field create value in their respective online communities, the paper allows all other marketers to devise their own combination of community building practices. For marketers that shared their thoughts with the author, it provides a complementary perspective on fruit of their own work. Moreover, for researchers enthusiastic about a related topic, or for agencies that could make use of an in-depth analysis of their clients, the study offers a verified methodology.

To be coherent with values that are applauded herein, the author is going to build an online version of the study shortly. The goal is to contribute to the dynamic discussion and listen to feedback in the most interactive manner possible. Before the online version is finished, please feel free to contact the author at branokral@gmail.com or [@branofsho](https://www.instagram.com/branofsho). All queries and feedback will be highly appreciated.

1.4 Outline

Chapter 2 presents a selection of theory that all notions used later build on. Defining key terms is followed by elaboration on analytical frameworks. Along with research methods, the frameworks provide an understanding of terms and implications related to a variety of aspects of online community marketing. The text is intertwined with schematic figures.

Chapter 3 describes detail of applied methodology. Interviews with key informants and netnographic case analysis serve for collecting data which is then processed by triangulation and interpretation.

Chapter 4 is the main source of contribution of this paper, as it presents the case analysis itself. Succinct profiles of the two focal ski resorts are presented first. To put them in the industry context, their own social media performance is broken down and concluded upon, and they are compared with competitors. Next come implications of the framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities, and the chapter ends with elaborate implications of the framework of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building. Since the two resorts share many crucial traits, they are presented together in each implication. Yet, their relevant and outstanding differences are highlighted at every opportunity.

2. THEORY

2.1 Objectives

Theory in this chapter is presented to support understanding of community marketing of ski resorts. This marketing approach is complex and has a character of an ongoing process rather than a project, and the notions below are included to help build implications. To be able to process the collected data in its full amplitude and variety, two frameworks are chosen and supported by description of key concepts. The chapter starts off broad and gradually narrows down, and the terms presented herein are frequently referred to throughout the paper.

First, online community and online community members are defined in order to establish clarity in terminology, and a framework review is presented in order to justify the choice for this paper.

Second, the framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities is introduced. It examines communities in rather broad terms and provides thorough understanding of structure of interactions in online communities. By how it is conceived to uncover patterns, it can be well used to find actionable implications for the focal ski resorts.

Following the section explaining the two axes and resulting four types are sections on specific elements of community marketing (earned media, UGC, WOM, influencers). These elements are fundamental in online consumer behavior as understood by the framework and highlighting them not only explains the framework in pertinent detail, it also makes it more actionable. Since sources used to describe these elements are a combination of the framework article and business literature, they provide for an effective triangulation of used notions.

Moving on, the framework of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building is introduced. It works with very specific notions and allows for a well narrowed-down analysis of particular actions that are taken to market the skiing experience through online communities.

Building on the presented theory, the chapter is concluded by verbalizing a narrow research question.

2.2 Definition of Online Community

To be clear about what this paper refers to, let us specify how exactly online community is specified herein. In literature, 'online community' is interchangeable with the term 'virtual community', and as businesses tend to use the former, this paper adheres. The goal is to use a definition that will be "succinct, comprehensive, and stand in the test of time" (Owyang, 2007).

The first paragraph presents a selection of definitions used in the academia, the second highlights key traits, the third narrows the thoughts down to brand communities specifically, and the fourth quotes the final brief definition that this paper settles on.

Internet pioneer Howard Rheingold (Kozinets, 1999) defined the term as "social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 2000). Kozinets (1999) further states that community in its most fundamental sense is a group of people who share social interaction, ties, and a common space. The space is sometimes physical, other times computer-mediated and virtual. The perception by Porter (2004) is congruent: "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms." Marketing professionals Sean Moffitt and Mike Dover add that a community "connects" (Moffitt, Dover, 2011, p.198).

There are several traits outlined in the above definitions that merit elaboration. First, the communication is normally public and even when there are barriers to entry, they tend to revolve exclusively around the activity in the core of the community. Personal interest and competence, not personal background, is usually the main prerequisite. Second, interaction is key, and as consumer creativity comes in play (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, Schau, 2008), the interaction is a major ingredient in the content creation of a community. Interaction happens largely, but not exclusively, online. Third, shared interest is the foundation. Where the shared interest is a shared passion, it creates a strong connection to the community (Moffitt, Dover, 2011, p.202). Fourth, technology mediation is the feature that makes online communities novel. Technology facilitates overpassing geographical limitations and makes "physical-world" background of participants less relevant in favor of involvement in the core activity. It catalyzes creation of common norms and values, and makes messages spread in speed without a precedence in history.

The four traits are points of parity of all communities, but as a subgroup, brand communities have their points of differentiation. Both in offline and online world, the shared interest of participants revolves around the brand or the activity represented by the brand, and the community becomes specialized (Muniz, O'Guinn, 2001). From a marketer's perspective, the specialization makes communities a very effective and organic targeting tool. Moreover, technology allows online activity of a community to be directed, and that is commonly done to a much larger extent in brand communities than grassroots ones. On owned platforms, paid marketers create a major part of the content, measure performance, and adjust in order to reach specific business goals.

The above paragraphs provide a definition of online communities that is detailed and exhaustive from the point of view of the objective of this paper. The following quote of a web strategist and a partner in Altimeter, a leading research and advisory organization, serves a concise summary: “An online community is where a group of people with similar goals or interests connect and exchange information using web tools” (Owyang, 2007).

2.3 Definition of Online Community Member

Just as there are different ways to define a community, there are different ways to define a community member. As this term is used frequently in all sections, it is crucial to state what exactly is meant by it.

For the sake of this paper, a member of an online brand community is defined from a broad perspective: a reached individual that has interacted with the brand online. “Interacted” means any reach of a user by brand content: from passive viewing to rating, providing opinions, and proactive posting of own creations.

The paper chooses to work with the broad perspective because even passive viewing of content creates incremental value for other members. For instance, visible subtle actions such as Facebook likes or YouTube views influence other community members directly by making content more attractive. Furthermore, subtle actions that are not visible to general audience do so, too. Proprietary analytical data captures statistics such as page views and time spent per page, and helps marketers adjust content for future. An individual whose actions are recorded in this way can help shape better channels or content and create value for the community even without intending to do so. That qualifies even people with minimal engagement as community members.

Nonetheless, the interviewed community managers testify that more active members are, or at least should be, a prioritized goal in the ski industry (Bast, 2013a, Werkheiser 2013, Benjamin, 2013, Amirault, 2013a). Why so, and how to escalate engagement to turn a passive viewer into an active contributor or even an influential advocate, a goal that the CEO of Vail Resorts, Robert Katz, titles “the holy grail of social media” (2011), is discussed throughout the paper.

2.4 Framework Review

Online communities are created and fueled in a plethora of ways and to be able to compare and learn from industry case studies, a suitable research framework is needed. One that is grounded and made for systematic analysis of separate steps in community building, one that takes consumer behavior into account, one that examines how value is created, and one that considers actions of all the different types and roles of community participants. This type of framework should allow for analysis of brand communities and inspire a

set of implications. The following starts with a non-exhaustive yet representative overview of established online community frameworks offered by the academia, with the goal to introduce the academic interest and give an overview that a curious reader can use as leads for own research. The section then concludes by justifying the choice of the very two frameworks that this paper applies.

Since the end of the nineties and even more so with the rise of social networking, online communities have been a popular field of study that yielded a number of different research frameworks. Kozinets, the father of netnography and pioneer of online communities, created some of the first frameworks ever adapted to this field in his paper on E-Tribalized Marketing (1999). His work explains how to understand and schematize consumer behavior and interaction specific to “virtual communities”. Continuing, The Typology of Virtual Communities by Porter (2004) elaborates a multi-disciplinary foundation for future community research. There, sounding much like the classic five Ps of the marketing mix, the author lists her five Ps of virtual communities. She allows for description of communities based on attributes of interaction. There is also the Online Community Framework based on semiotics by de Souza and Preece (2004), and the Ecological Cognition Framework based on motivations and cognitive tools by Bishop (2007). They both present systematic approaches to analyze communities by categorization of processes that take place in communities. More recently, Gunawardena et al. (2009) published a spiral framework that actively considers Web 2.0 tools, social networking, and building of collective intelligence.

The listed research pieces all have their qualities and discover missing pieces of the ever-changing puzzle, yet a choice of two other frameworks was made: The Wisdom of Consumer Crowds by Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau (2008), and How Brand Community Practices Create Value by Schau, Muniz and Arnould (2009). Their common quality is focus on value creation online, and their differences make them complementary: the former examines activity from the point of view of users, and the latter from the point of view of marketers. Also, the framework of Types uncovers general patterns that greatly facilitate analysis of specific Practices. Together, they fostered actionable implications, a quality expected after realizing how hands-on the frameworks are. The method of thinking broad first and specific afterwards proved to be effective in analyzing social networks with their typically overwhelming amounts of content.

Being suitable for abstraction and comparison, analysis using the combination of the two frameworks was systematic in approach and yielded results. It is safe to say that studies of many other brands could be carried out in the same way, for instance in practice of marketing agencies.

2.5 The Framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities

The first analytical framework applied in this paper is presented in The Wisdom of Consumer Crowds: Collective Innovation in the Age of Networked Marketing, and built by three recognized online community

scholars: Robert Kozinets, Andrea Hemetsberger and Hope Schau. It dives into the point of view of a community member and the underlying goal is to classify ways in which users are organized and motivated when creating value. A classification of a community by means of this frequently cited typology makes it feasible to compare different communities across the online field, in the case of this paper to compare two communities of ski resorts with distinct brand personalities.

As the frameworks unveil, community marketing is a result of aggregated actions of all participants, both marketers and target audience. Talking about social profiles of Aspen/Snowmass, Dave Amirault confirms (2010): “It’s called social networking, right, it’s NOT automated networking, it’s not something that can spit out of your snow report every morning.” With that in mind, engagement built by encouraging users to generate content and talk for the brand is a major part of the job, and the Types below explain why.

2.5.1 Two Axes, Four Types

The framework is graphic and categorizes using two axes. The first one is *orientation* of collective innovation, where the range is from *telo-specific* to *commune-ludic*. If the community is oriented deliberately toward particular outcomes, and focused on specific goals of value-creation or innovation, it will be termed *telo-specific*. If the community is playfully oriented toward lifestyles, interests, hobbies, or just the pursuit of a consumption habit, it will be termed *communo-ludic*. Playful character is typical for brand communities, where individualistic seeking of fun and pleasure is encouraged. Also, immersed marketers can measure and analyze member activity in order identify organic innovative tendencies and develop the community. As Dave Amirault says, “by being engaged with the platforms you personally develop a sixth sense”(2013a).

The second dimension is *concentration* of collective innovation, where the range goes from low to high. When there is only a small group of members that contribute with the vast majority of work or content, the activity is concentrated and termed *high* concentration of collective innovation. When the activity is distributed among a broad array of contributors, many of which contribute modestly, but where the aggregate value is significant, the community has *low* concentration of collective innovation. The four Types based on these two dimensions are not static, rather they are useful simplifications of reality. In practice, they can overlap or manifest themselves each in a different stage of life of the same community.

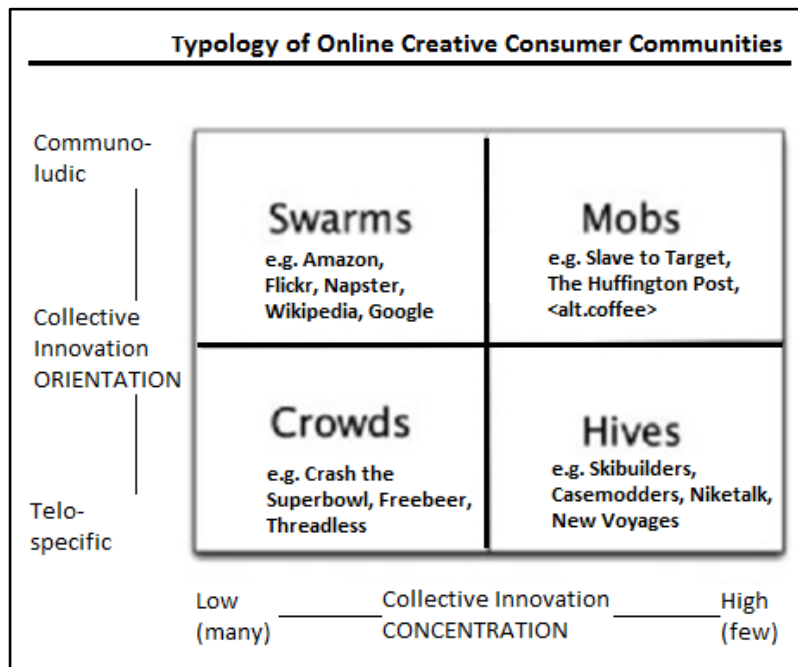


Figure 1 – Typology of Online Creative Consumer Communities (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008, p. 345)

Crowds

Crowds gather for particular, tractable and well-defined projects, where the activity is spread among many contributors. Total amount of contributions per member is low, and there is no dominant group of authors. After achievement of the objective, a Crowd loses its purpose and disbands. Typical Crowds would be short-term communities formed around brand contests, environmental causes and crowdsourcing projects. In brand context, Crowds work amazingly well for creating buzz, short-term high engagement, or for outsourcing a creative activity.

Examples of Crowd actions are typically contests. There, brands try to attract a large number of users that should submit their own pieces of content. The contributions are one-time and specific to a set goal, and they demonstrate high engagement. After a contest, the users disband, as they no more have a common goal. Benefits remain though, as Crowd content is often more authentic than any branded alternative. On social media, where contests are one of the most effective engagement tools on Facebook, the content is amplified and reaches beyond the limits of the Crowd itself.

Hives

Members of Hives respond to specific challenges. They contribute in small groups where amount of contributions of each member is high. Often, they become centers of excellence, since they are characterized by ambition and the results of work tend to be of high quality. The contributing members become educated in a community that, in an ongoing manner, produces communally desirable outcomes. Active members of a Hive are often individuals with capabilities that they do not get to apply at work or in the circle of friends at their physical location. They take their participation seriously, and the high engagement makes them enjoy

socializing during a project, improving their skills, and conquering challenges. Systematization of processes is common.

As well as Crowds, Hives present an alternative production model for businesses and R&D departments. The alternative is commonly lucrative since instead of salary, the company can offer creative freedom, learning and mastering experience, and first and foremost, status or public recognition for quality contributions. Research shows that members with a gained status are reluctant to give it up and very prone to stay highly engaged (Muniz, O'Guinn, 2001). Examples include expert advice, exhibiting creations, providing downloads.

Very often, Hive actions in brand online communities result in high ROI, particularly so when challenging, goal-oriented, creative work is delegated to consumers in ongoing projects or even processes. A great example of a Hive innovative community is Skibuilders.com, a site dedicated to home-built skis and snowboards. A core of contributors learns from each other and works on making best skis possible. That, apparently, can never really be reached, which gives the site a long life-time. Despite the hobby character of the activity, skis and snowboards built by the contributors are of intricate quality.

Mobs

Mobs too have a relatively small portion of members that create most of the content, but the activity is spurred by communo-ludic lifestyle exchange and communal play. As it is seen on social network pages of brands, Mobs are often based around content of specialists who speak to relatively homogenous affinity of interest groups. In the case of Aspen/Snowmass, that would be the "content crew – a group of about 10 of us, we go out, shoot pictures, video, answer questions on Twitter, Facebook" (Dave Amirault, interactive marketing manager, 2010). When it comes to contributions, collaborations are popular, and include collaborative postings, cross-links, call-outs, and invitations to feedback. In fact, all encouragement to participation is a typical trait of Mobs. As lifestyle or an interest activity is typically the topic, posts tend to be very timely and talk about whatever they find interesting or attractive that particular day.

Because it is up to the small group of content creators to set the tone of the discussion and provide most of the inspiration, orientation of Mobs is individualistic. That may mean individual people, and also individual brands, for "the most successful brands are those that behave like people" (Amirault, 2012a), and that are perceived as people. Yet, they have to adapt the contributions (e.g. content) to desires of their audience. How that gives less active members power is demonstrated in the description of Swarms and Online Word of Mouth.

The character of Mobs not only makes the community naturally more targeted; the lifestyle focus requires authentic voices and real faces to be linked to commercial creations. In brand context, that makes content more believable and engaging (Blanchard, 2012a). In return, the audience engages in a manner that provides ample understanding of the target segment. With careful targeting, all stakeholders enjoy more value – e.g.

the more entertaining and relevant content is for the audience, the more sales lift and hands-on feedback is generated for brand managers.

Swarms

When an expert claims that social networking is communication on steroids (T4G Research, 2011), it is thanks to actions of Swarms. The following is a merited detailed description of this fascinating community Type. Merited also because in the cases of the two analyzed ski resorts, leveraging Swarm actions is a stepping stone of community marketing.

Swarms are accumulated collections of contributions by many members, where each member only contributes a small, sometimes miniscule amount. They form by more natural or free-flowing community building Practices, and contributions can be to a big extent automated. Even though rating, tagging, commenting or adding feedback to an already created work have small value alone, the aggregate value can be very high. The strengths of Swarms then stem from their sheer numbers and the infrastructure set up to capture their collective contributions. When systematically capture and aggregated, Swarm contributions carry a high monetization potential and facility in leveraging the contributions on a very big scale. Regarding creativity, highly adaptive and complex solutions can emerge when large numbers of slightly diverse individuals join forces; or when somebody else such as the ingenious Google sets up an automated system that effectively joins the forces for them.

There are four particular actions typical for Swarms and the first one is hyperlinking. The action gives websites credit and creates value that reaches far beyond people who actually click on the links - through capturing of hyperlinks by search engines, search results globally become better. As social search is being developed, an analogous value creation by customizing search results to an individual's network is about to take place.

The second particular action of Swarms is flocking to common ground the way it is systematized on Craigslist or eBay. Mere assembling of an enormous mass of people, who share as little as the buying or selling interest, creates a network - i.e. a loose community, of incredible value and turnover in millions of dollars.

The third action is rating and ranking. Amazon is often praised for being an e-commerce pioneer, and one of the core innovations has been the very integration of a system that encourages and organizes valuable contributions of Swarms – rating products, retailers, rating other raters. Recommending products that others bought along with a product the user has in the basket is based on Swarm data, too. It is then an example of how internet users sometimes create value without even being aware of it - a person buying a case together with their laptop does not normally ponder over that by doing so, they help influence others and get them to follow suit.

The fourth typically Swarm action is tagging. This grassroots identification allows others with common interests to find content relevant to them, either in general, or in that very moment. Search habits are thus

changed - to better. Seeing more and more companies advertising their hash tags instead of URLs is then not just a demonstration of growing popularity of these tags. It is a demonstration of that the amount of people using them has for some brands reached the critical mass, a moment when aggregated Swarm actions start creating value.

To underline, a common trait of all Swarm actions is that they have small value alone, but possible dramatic value when systematically amassed. Application of this framework on case studies further presented below shows that the value for brands can for instance accrue from content distribution channels based on Swarms. Facebook Edgerank algorithm processes the sum of likes + comments + shares as one out of three criteria of filtering newsfeed content. As the second of the three criteria is affinity and the third recency (Postrocket, 2013), social media actions of Swarms form a major and effective element of online reach. After all, social media technology “is all about the power of scale” (Wildfire, 2013a).

The concept of Swarms is consistent with the one of weak ties, a well-established phenomenon of sociology. A tie between two individuals is defined by its strength, as a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services (Granovetter, 1973). In social media practice, the same terms could be rephrased as time spent per page, depth of engagement, affinity, and interaction, respectively. Further, weak ties connect the user with groups beyond his or her primary one: they are bridges between groups. More weak ties in an online community mean the information can spread further. With interaction between groups of people, a mass of consumers of people can be informed at increasingly faster speed (Holmes, 2012). When reach of every individual is magnified the way it is on social media, consumers have an ability to relay information that leaves them with significantly more power than in the past.

2.5.2 Earned Media

“Your brand is the sum of the conversations that customers are having about you, and today those conversations are happening online” (T4G Research, 2011). A ski resort can choose from a variety of channels through which it can influence these conversations, and this section presents a useful simplification of alternatives. Also, it describes examples of actions of Mobs and Swarms, which puts community marketing into a context. Knowing the context of earned media makes communication strategies more structured.

Business whitepapers and researchers have established three main categories of media, based on where the interaction takes place: Paid, Owned, and Earned media. The concept as introduced herein is presented by Google’s Wildfire (2013c) and T4G Research (2011), and applies to both online and offline communication. In this text, focus is put on the online forms, and the paid and owned alternatives are mentioned first of all to explain the earned.

Paid media is what we think of as traditional promotion or advertising. There, the company pays to an owner of a channel and buys the opportunity to put a message in front of a channel's user. The price is typically based on reach metrics as number of impressions or click-through rate. Methods used in online paid media include real-time optimized ads, (re-)targeting, sponsored stories and sponsored posts; all with the goal to sponsor reach and awareness. Interviewed managers of both Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge testify that paid reach is marginal in their online communities and this paper will therefore relate to the paid alternative very little.

Owned media is what a company directly owns or controls. They include email address lists, websites, social network pages, editorial content, promotions and campaigns. Owned media are often at the origin of engagement, and a source of official information or original material. Fixed cost of acquiring owned media is usually high, but per-impression cost low. In the ski industry, majority of original content and the structure of the owned social profiles are designed by a small group of professionals. As character of the activity is playful, the framework suggests that ski resort communities are governed by Mobs.

Finally, earned media is what users create for the brand. Communication through this channel typically starts by impressions that a brand gains through users sharing a branded message. As brand meaning and perception are subjective terms, delivered messages sometimes differ from the marketer's original formulation. Earned media comprise user-generated content, such as posts or incentivized sharing, word of mouth, public relations, referrals from web and social search, and even viral growth of views (of e.g. videos). This channel is made powerful by the potential multiplier effect, and a brand should strive to influence and celebrate this type of user creations. In ski resort online presence, media is earned through actions of either Swarms or Hives. Swarms when users casually interact with the content, Hives when they engage in goal-oriented activities such as contests.

With social networking, respective roles of the three types of media are changing. The earned alternative is growing to equal or surpass paid advertising in reach and effectiveness (T4G Research, 2011), and for some specific goals such as engagement, innovation, or collecting market insights, the earned is commonly given priority. Social media, when well-managed, become an earned channel to a significant extent; a channel that reflects that communication is about users and being connected to other users, not about big budgets (Hanna et al., 2011). The owned aspect of any branded social profile will remain fundamental, for it provides a systematized space for aggregating and encouraging user actions, but it will not always be what users perceive as influential. The reason is the simple fact that people trust earned media much more than any branded alternative (Melani and SocialChorus 2013, Technorati Media 2013). In combination with the online ease of finding something interesting and passing it on to a large number of peers, earned media is an appealing channel, a channel that is significant in shaping community marketing.

Brand communities are a combination of owned and earned media, but can also leverage paid. The three different types work best together (Lieb, Owyang, 2012), and “well-crafted marketing campaigns that employ all three can resonate with customers and outperform traditional campaigns for a fraction of the price” (T4G Research, 2011). Wildfire’s best-practice recipe for combining POE exemplifies (2013c): “Create an engagement campaign (owned) centered around a call for user-generated-content (earned) - run ads to extend its reach and awareness (paid). Create ad creative and copy that speaks to the purposes of the campaign, not with generic branding— try a ‘call-to-earned-action’, then optimize on the conversion metric of your choice. Reuse and recycle your earned media for new owned and paid assets - circulate user generated earned media in campaigns and content programming.” The quote shows that paid media, a major benefit is that it can yield exponential growth of impressions and make pieces of user-generated content into viral dynamite (Brunborg-Næss, 2012). But returning to the main focus of this study, it is suitable to note that terms such as “call-to-earned-action” and “circulate earned media in (...) content programming” are new in marketing. They are indeed a part of the phenomenon of getting the right message to the right people at the right time, and at a competitive price.

The way ski resorts benefit the concept becomes evident throughout the case study analysis below, but here is a hint: great content and focus on high engagement can make the earned channel so strong that it suppresses the need for paid ones. Related to that, resources are allocated into content production instead of paying for ads (Bast, 2013b). For the goals ski resorts have, the strategy works out amazingly. As the online marketing manager of Breckenridge states, most of their social reach is organic, and they only use social ads to boost specific events (Bast, 2013b). Result? One of the highest scores on reach, sentiment, and influence in the ski industry (see 4.2). The interactive marketing manager of Aspen/Snowmass proudly testifies the same – the resort honored to be a featured blog on Tumblr and has repeatedly relished having their videos hand-picked and curated by the Vimeo staff. Result? “Hundreds of thousands views”. Cost per impression? “Not a single dollar” (Amirault, 2013a).

2.5.3 User-Generated Content

User-generated content (UGC) is a major part of earned media and it is closely monitored by the marketing managers of both Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge (Bast, 2013a, Amirault, 2013). As generating is synonymous to creating, user-generated content is an underlying factor in the framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities. The term will be frequently referred to in the case analysis below, and this section presents its background and implications.

Gregg Blanchard, a North American ski industry expert, predicts: “During 2013, resorts will start to focus more on getting other people – fans, guests, influencers, etc. – to talk more than talking themselves.” (2013b). On

social media platforms, the sheer amount of content related to ski resort experience is already by far more vast than the content created by marketing managers, and Blanchard's prediction will partly be fulfilled by aggregating that content through services such as Pixlee. Marketing surveys indeed show that leveraging user-generated content is a fast-growing marketing method (Moffitt, 2013). Backing the trend is the fact that creation is one of the main motivations for using social media (Hoffman et al., 2010). If provided for, it leads to not just high content authenticity, but also user engagement and ROI.

How did marketing get to this point? Jing Wu (2009) suggests that user-generated content is a result of evolving media literacy. When encouraged by education or specific interests, people have always moved from passive consumers to critical creators of content. At the same time, there has always been a divide between groups of literate population that were only just able to read basic texts, and those that could review works of others and create extensive works of their own. Today, the availability of technology allows masses to both generate content, and to access vast amounts of content by others, which makes online communities into places buzzing with creativity. Combining the availability of technology with the fact that connections are another of main motivations for using social media (Hoffman et al., 2010) brings about an actionable quality of social networking: bringing in a friend through my content creates value for me (consistent with Metcalfe's law). Users bringing in friends can be either individuals, or other brands.

The role of a manager who aims to build a brand community that leverages user-generated content is, first of all, setting up a system where that content can flourish. The exact scope of needed functionality of the system depends on the brand's marketing objectives. Ski resorts can incorporate features that encourage and reward active users, organize posts, instruct on guidelines and constraints, ease interaction, provide information, make the company easy to contact, create routines, and entertain. Among these, interaction on a brand platform is more important than what is obvious; because if a brand is in focus of a relationship between two or more people at some point of time, it will make those people more loyal to the brand (McAlexander, Schouten, 2002). Further, being the system engineer grants the manager control over development of the community, while at the same time, users enjoy creative freedom. As known among designers and other creative professionals, when freedom is in balance with reasonable guidelines and constraints, it boosts creativity. And again, user creativity translates to engagement and ROI.

In more detail, the benefit of systems provided on social networks lies in how they host and encourage interpersonal interactions, triggering new ideas that consumers "thinking alone, could not have generated" (Hargadon, Bechky, 2006). The way such magnification happens is different for every social network, as they are all based on different architectures – sometimes to be ahead of the competition, sometimes to differentiate and capture a different audience. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Foursquare, Pinterest, blogs, discussion forums, rating-ranking system on Amazon, reference systems on eBay and oDesk - all these networks have constantly changing functionalities, and all of them have their niche. Engagement occurs when needs of a niche are addressed in an attractive way.

Ski resort examples on how user-generated content brings desired results are many and they are most apparent in contests. Among the successful ones are Design a Dew Tour Feature organized by Dew Tour and Breckenridge (Bast, 2013b), and Epic Wishes (Benjamin, 2013). In both, companies provide minor visual leads on how entries could be, which is enough to prevent users from coming up with unreasonable suggestions. A brand contest featuring user-generated contest that is a textbook example though is Team Video Challenge by Boreal Terrain Park. Compared to the EpicMix ad contest by Vail Resorts that had a \$10,000 prize but did not attract quality entries (Blanchard, 2011a), the contest with \$2,000 for the winner is a successful event organized yearly. It is a simple yet powerful marketing tool that lets up-and-coming film crews battle for prizes while showcasing the amazing Boreal park at the same time (Blanchard, 2010a). The park's marketing manager Eric Rosenwald never tries to set too many guidelines or constraints that would directly attempt to craft the final product; they are all much more about creating equal conditions for all competing teams. With entries from previous years, participants know the level of quality expected of them. To make sure the teams are competent, Boreal team proactively invites some. Moreover, to make sure the videos (and the snowpark) are viewed by a large and passionate audience, one of the prizes in the contest is given based on number of views the videos get. To boost their chances of winning, participating team members spread the message, trying to get all their friends and friends of friends to watch. The same tactic is used by Breckenridge, where participants are encouraged to boost their chances of winning by sharing their entries on the designated Facebook tab. The motivation stems from the fact that only the ten most liked entries will be finally reviewed by the jury.

Contests have already been mentioned in the description of Types, and the reason is the fact that a brand contest creates a temporary Hive – a small temporary group of highly engaged users who work on a common brand-related goal. The group disperses after the goal is reached, but the participants keep their knowledge of the brand and affinity to it.

Relating the contests back to theory on user-generated content, there is one specific criterion on when such content generates value in a community; namely when they generate exchange value (Humphreys, 2008). That means that whenever a user creates something that has value for others, e.g. exchange value appreciated by the market place, it creates value that has not been there before. As long as a user post only has value for the same user, that is not the case. Marketers should therefore strive to encourage user content that resonates with community expectations, passions, and the most precious values, for it is at that point that the content will create market value and become successful. The contests described above certainly do so.

Value creation in UGC is also a common focus of both frameworks applied in this paper. In brand communities online, the value is created together with users, and the phenomenon is termed as co-creation of value. Viewing users as active agents, not as pure consumers of value dissolves the traditional rigid line between consumers and producers. Relationships thus change from linear to complex and networked. Users, for their part, are empowered by availability of technology (Fuchterman, 2012). There has been an intensive research

conducted on how exactly that happens, and one of the resulting concepts is techno-capitalism, a sociological notion in which technology gives consumers much more of a voice than in the recent past (Suarez-Villa, 2000). Today's social networks are a vivid medium of that new consumer power, a phenomenon with enormous effects on marketing practices and online content.

Continuing, it is a goal of both brands and social network owners to foster engagement through UGC. For brands with active social profiles, engagement means delivered messages and meaningful conversations that create customers of high value. For companies who run social networks, engagement is a key ingredient in generating advertising revenue. As a result, higher engagement is promoted via both content (by brands), and the underlying social technology (by engineers working for social networks). We, users, then often create and consume content at the same time, without even pondering it.

Relating directly to the framework of Types, it is through increasing engagement that internet users start to generate more content. They are motivated by discovery, inspiring views of like-minded people, social status recognition, or new connections. If addressed well, these motivations boost variability on networks. As a result, online communities stay in a "permanent beta" version (Neff, Stark, 2003), where constant change is both desired and inevitable (Werkheiser, 2013).

To conclude, if brands create systems that encourage user-generated content and address user motivations, and if they target users that already are familiar with and fond of the brand, they will generate incremental value in the community; followed by high engagement, and translated into ROI. More than that, they will create some of the most shareable brand experiences and word of mouth, for fans that generate brand-related content are great advocates (Syncapse, 2013). More on brand advocacy, word of mouth, and influencers is presented in the section that follows.

2.5.4 Online Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is a classic earned media channel that accrues from user-generated content. The value created by users together with transformation of brand image is so powerful that "what matters most today is not what you say about your brand — it's what consumers say about it. Successful social brands understand that they must influence this conversation without trying to control it" (Wildfire, 2013b). Intensive encouraging of UGC certainly makes the ski resorts analyzed in this paper into textbook social brands, and what lies behind the effort is elaborated in this section.

In this order, the following paragraphs describe how WOM enters marketing communication, how people trust WOM as an information source and how brands can be trusted thanks to WOM, how it can be a tool or reach beyond initial audience, how to generate WOM, and how it is measurable online. Related to word of mouth

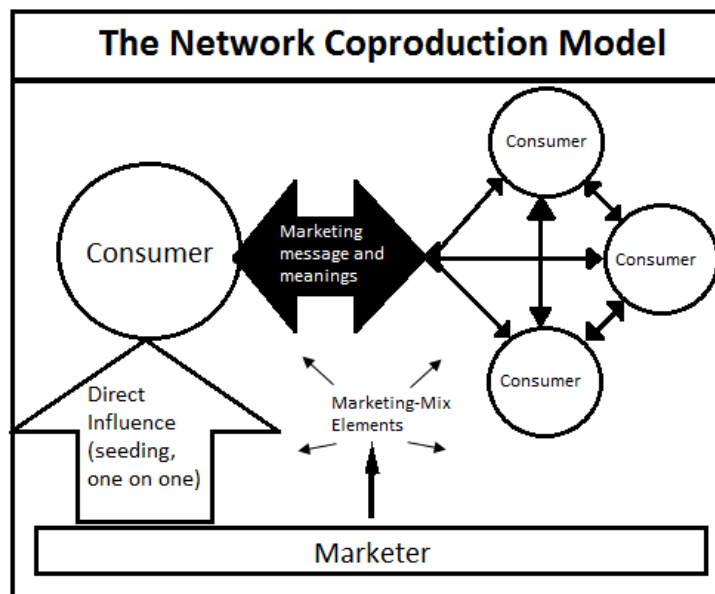


Figure 2 – Network Coproduction Model (Kozinets et al., 2010a, p.72)

marketing is influencer marketing – this narrower term that focuses on the most vocal individuals is addressed next.

Social media has made everyone a content publisher (Blanchard, 2013c), and set word of mouth as an integral part of online brand communities. That has fundamentally changed the marketer-consumer relationship and figure by Kozinets (2010b) illustrates how:

Figure 2 is useful for advancing understanding of online brand communities because it describes how the word spreads in a very visual and representative way. What is most important to notice is the amount of arrows and the variety of their directions. In recent past, marketing concepts would count much more on a unidirectional path of a message, a path that would regard consumers as pure recipients. Here, consumers that receive a message from a marketer transform it, pass it on, and eagerly accept a related message from other consumers, too.

As depicted in the model, consumers today have a big number of information sources, which makes them very aware and critical. This statement is confirmed by triangulation with business reports – Managing Director of US Sales & Service and Chief Evangelist at Google reports that an average buying decision is based on over ten information sources, and the number is growing (Lecinski, 2011). Hence, brands are required to establish trust through long-term relationships.

For establishing trust, WOM is highly suitable. Traditionally, people trust information from their connections more than official brand messages. Digital Influence Report by Technorati (2013) establishes that in online communication, this habit stands strong. With such a market environment, brands choose smart when they

allocate resources to WOM. Indeed, as much as 92% users trust WOM above any other brand communication, with the number growing (Nielsen, 2012); according to McKinsey (2010), WOM is a major factor in most purchase decision.

Related to fostering trust is a finding that WOM marketing creates brand users with more value long-term. This is congruent with the notion that trust drives action, and trust takes time to build. Immediate effects tend to be weaker as it can take longer for the messages to spread, but in the end, WOM causes more carryover effect and shapes stronger attitudes (Trusov et al., 2009). The long-term benefits correspond with strategies that dictate encouraging WOM through building lasting relationships with users. Just like in daily relationships with people around us, lasting relationships with brands make us more likely to spread the word.

Moreover, WOM is a channel that can spread the word beyond the existing audience. As the word is spread among friends who very likely share the same values, there is a high chance the newly reached users too will be keen about the activity represented by the brand.

To get people talking, encouraging engagement can, once again, be the key. Morgan Bast of Breckenridge (2013a) says getting people to spread the word beyond existing community is best done through “content people can stand behind”. By liking, commenting and engaging with users, brands should be open and vocal about praising everyone that spreads the good word. The “social atta-boy goes a long way” (Amirault, 2013a).

A notion that exploits both shared values and amazing content is social currency. For people to talk, it must be “about things that make them look good. Sharp and in-the-know. Smart and funny rather than behind the times” (Berger, 2013). When users share values that the brand personality represents, when they believe in what the brand believes, they will be very likely to talk on behalf of the brand (Sinek, 2009). This very study uncovers that among such values applied in ski resort communities are authenticity and appreciation of nature.

Along with engagement and content, community marketers can also generate WOM by addressing reciprocity. This human instinct stays the same on social web, and users who have experienced the brand in some way are likely to give back by telling others about it (Schaefer and Baer, 2012). Sometimes the word will be spread by actions as small as pushing a Like button, but as explained in the Swarms community type, aggregation of the social long tail will make even the smallest actions count (Blanchard, 2013a). Thanks to the ease of interaction in social networking, WOM effects on content distribution can be exponential.

Online, WOM can be precisely measured and provide valuable market insights for community managers (Trusov et al., 2009). Dave Amirault of Aspen says that his brand uses external software providers to “capture every single thing being said about the resort across all the major platforms”. The result is the ability to track the path of individual brand messages, along with the way they change and the effects they have.

To conclude on WOM in online community marketing, it is appropriate to underline that engagement through amazing content and shared values are key ingredients of creating it. As a result, brands enjoy long-term benefits of reach beyond the initial audience and profound market data. It is justified to say that getting others to talk for you is more valuable than bolstering your own voice (Blanchard, 2013c). Moreover, WOM is crucial for the frameworks used for the analysis herein. It is an important feature brought about by specific online creative community Types, as well as it is clearly encouraged by some of the community building Practices.

2.5.5 Online Influencers

Influencer marketing is a specific feature of online word of mouth, and one that deserves special attention because it explains behavior and potential of Mobs and Hives. The section sets off by defining influencers, relates them to the framework, describes influencer motivations and types, explains method of influencer identification, and gives an example on use of this marketing tool by a focal ski resort.

In community marketing, influencer can be defined as “an opinion leader who has pronounced connections, credibility, passion, and persuasion powers versus an average person” (Moffitt, Dover, p. 29, 2011). For someone to gain online clout, it is required that they are active in social networking, that they enjoy sharing about what they do, and that they are recognized in a specific area. The area can range from something as narrow as technical expertise to something as broad as a lifestyle, but it must remain specific. A term related to ‘influencer’ is ‘brand advocate’ - the substantial difference is that a brand advocate, a person who speaks favorably about our brand, does not necessarily have an audience keen to listen to what they have to say.

In the context of WOM as visualized in Figure 2, influencers are the big circle on the left – users that are worth focusing on because they have the ability to effectively pass on a brand message to a large number of people. According to Jenkins (2006, p.3), these individuals stand out, because “not all participants are created equal”. The author further notes that “some consumers have greater abilities to participate in this emerging [transmedia] culture than others”. Coming back to the framework, groups of individuals with large audiences that are eager to share content are typical members of Hives and Mobs. As these two Types are characterized by high engagement, and engagement emerges as a key goal in community marketing, it is valuable to understand how to involve influencers in creating valuable communities.

Motivations that make influencers active vary, and community marketers should choose to address those that their brand can satisfy best. The following is a list based largely on Wikibrands (Moffitt, Dover, 2011). One, some have a genuine need to help people. Two, they get a thrill from solving problems. Three, involvement in a specialized community makes them better at their jobs. Four, it helps them build their personal brands, sometimes even gain celebrity status. Five, participation gives them a sense of ownership. Six, participation helps them build a network. Concluding, it is important to claim that these motivations are what situates

influencers in the Hives and Mobs, high-concentration of creation, high-engagement end of the x-axis of the framework (Figure 1).

In literature review and community analysis, four distinct types of influencers arise. First are journalists, a group of people who are professional in getting messages across. Building relationships with journalists and having them amplify, for instance, corporate events has long been commonplace. With other types of influencers, journalists share two notable traits. They are experts in a specific area they cover, and through social media, their audience does a major part of the job of content distribution. As for the cases analyzed herein, the mother company of Breckenridge has for instance enjoyed repeated coverage of its EpicMix app (Indvik, of Mashable, 2010, 2011, 2012).

Second are celebrities. Having a known face talk for a brand has long been around, and on social media, the tool is magnified. In an interview with Gregg Blanchard (2013c), Alex Kaufman, a resort marketing strategist and consultant from Vermont, claims that “if a celebrity tweets your brand website once in a year, you could get more traffic from that than a year of tweeting yourself.” Blanchard also mentions the moment when Lance Armstrong tweeted to his 4 million follower base about riding in a bike race at Aspen – the reach of that single post eventually exceeded 12 million users and crashed the resort’s web server. Further, celebrity can either be mainstream, or to a narrow interest group. Examples of the latter include the buzz created for the launch of Mountain Collective pass by Chris Sacca (Blanchard, 2013c), an investor well-known in social business, and content by professional athletes, very authentic and well-supported by both focal resorts.

The third type is power middle (Melani and SocialChorus, 2013) - people who have an engaged follower base, who are heard by relatively many, but who lack celebrity status, and who are known especially through their content. A typical profile of a power middle influencer includes activity on several social networks, blogging, systematic content creation, and again, expertise in a specific area (Technorati Media, 2013). Their audiences are not as large as those of journalists and celebrities, but they are lower-cost and less demanding (Melani and SocialChorus, 2013). Smaller networks often have the advantage of higher engagement, and the same is the case for audience of power middle (Technorati Media, 2013). Examples include travel bloggers, skillful non-professional snowboarders on Instagram, or industry experts on LinkedIn Today. Co-creating with a group of power middle influencers can give a brand high reach while keeping engagement and authenticity high at the same time, a combination very hard to attain with mass audiences of celebrities.

The fourth type of influencers are own employees. They must, naturally, first have a solid online clout, but being an employee at the same time has outstanding advantages for the brand. They are easier to make well-informed, passionate, authentic, and they can provide the audience with content from behind the scenes. In ski resorts, employees that most often participate in content creation are members of ski patrol, snowpark staff, and event staff (Amirault, 2013a, Bast, 2013a). Aspen/Snowmass also organizes series of employee lectures on social media (Amirault, 2013a). For staff to be in the right mindset, companies should make sure

they feel authenticity in actions of the management, pride in how they are a part of the core activity, attachment to a community of shared values and interests, and that they see the working environment to be fun (Huy et al. 2012). Employees can bring high value to the brand community if they express such feelings there.

To be able to identify influential people in a target market is becoming a powerful ability for a brand to possess (Blanchard, 2013c). The first filtering criterion is that influencers should already be familiar with and fond of the brand (Syncapse 2013). Second is extent of reach and engagement ensuing from their brand-related messages, and third the sentiment of those messages (T4G Research, 2011). A marketer can either immerse in the community and identify influencers one by one, or use automated software services. Examples of what has been used are comScore and Nielsen rankings, Simply Measured, and Klout for Business. Simply Measured stands out as it can log and evaluate what is being said about the brand online and conclude on who a brand's influencers are. Klout for Business approaches identification from the opposite end, where it first has users sign up. Then, it creates a playful environment where it measures users' activity across all of their social profiles, including the one on Klout. The result is a score expressing how well and about what topic the user can spread messages.

Klout has been used by Aspen/Snowmass, where 500 people got a free lift ticket and a burger at a local restaurant. To qualify, users had to have a score above 40 (the Klout average), be influential in a skiing-related topic, and come from a listed metropolitan area. This gave people a reason to talk and resulted in "wild data" (Amirault, 2013a) – i.e. more social media exposure than the X-Games organized the same season (Blanchard, 2012c). Along with giving a reason to talk in the form bragging rights, the move was a huge success because it gave people an opportunity to connect. Research shows that most brand fans and followers on social media are already fond of the brand even before they express it online; influencers hence appreciate an invitation to connect very highly (Schaefer and Baer, 2012).

Even though influencer marketing is a method laden with buzzwords and marketing vernacular, it is not just a fad. Growth in use is predicted from all sources relevant for this paper: research (Kozinets et al. 2010b, Trusov et al. 2009), publishing marketing experts (Technorati Media 2013, Moffitt 2013, Schaefer and Baer 2013, Blanchard 2013c), and the interviewed managers of ski resorts (Amirault 2013a, Bast 2013a, Benjamin 2013, Werkheiser 2013). The method is still not perfected, but turnover of companies that specialize in influencer marketing grows, and Klout for Business has seen 80% of their clients return (Schaefer and Baer, 2012). Relating back to Types, the strength of influencer marketing shows how Mobs and Hives play a crucial role in online brand communities.

2.6 The Framework of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building

How Brand Community Practices Create Value (Schau, Muniz and Arnould, 2009) is a study written from a community manager point of view and provides a framework for categorizing community activity in a very detailed and escalating way. The combination with the complementary Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities, a framework that strongly represents the point of view of members, is holistic and synergetic. A common trait of the two works is value creation and while the Types describe how members are organized when creating value, Practices examine steps that a brand can take to develop an online brand community of value.

As much as the study is academic, it is closely tied to practice. The concept of escalating community building presented below is wonderfully congruent with the thoughts shared by ski resort marketers interviewed for this paper, as well as with the Community Development and Community Management chapters of Wikibrands, a book written by two experienced marketing professionals (Moffitt and Dover, 2011). Terms such as content, conversation, authenticity, escalation, milestones, staking, and more, appear across all of these sources.

Schau, Muniz and Arnould list twelve Practices, all with different roles and timing. Own observations during the analysis of this paper convince about that such categorizing has multiple immediate benefits. First, identification of community-building Practices makes the researcher closely familiar with the community. Second, it allows him or her to see which groups of Practices are applied most, and thus to uncover goals of the community. Third, close examination based on the framework helps identify overriding themes in content (Kozinets, 2010a). Fourth, the neat design of the framework allows for coherent and well-organized study of a feature typical for social networks – content that is vast in volume and mind-boggling in variety. Fifth, the systematic categorization allows for straightforward comparison of different communities – a major trait of this paper. The entire description of Practices presented herein is sourced from the named study, unless cited otherwise.

The twelve Practices are organized in four thematic categories as visualized in Figure 3, and as listed below. The design of cogwheels with non-linear progress is deliberate, for Practices overlap, drive one another in synergy, and are used or omitted to an extent specific to each community. The order of their application is never the same and boundaries between them can be very subtle. Following is an explanation of Practices at work.

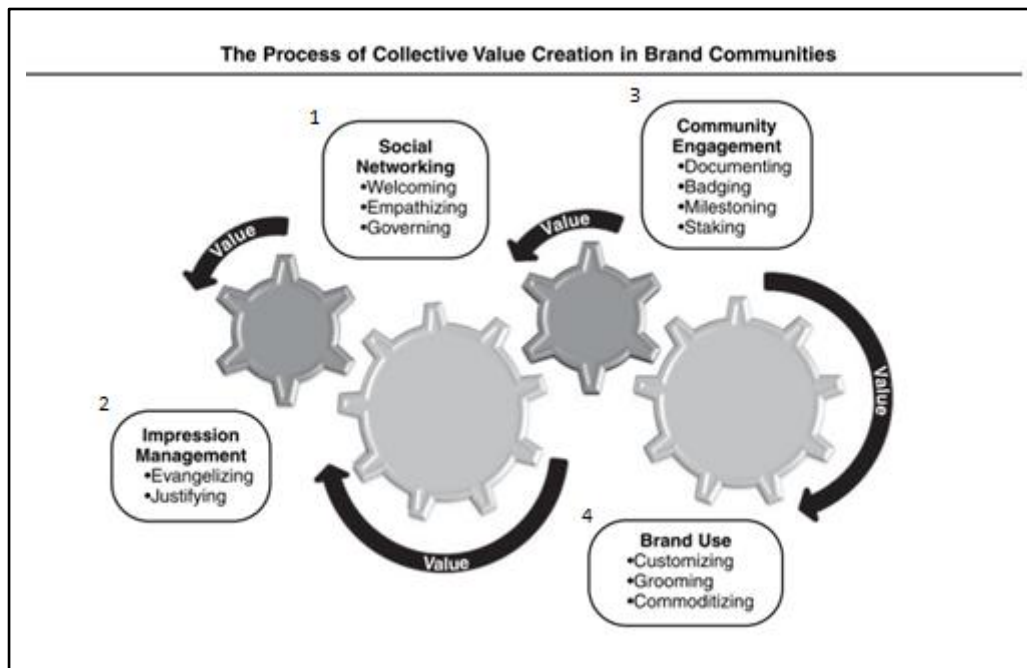


Figure 3 – Collective Value Creation in Brand Communities (Muniz and Arnould, 2009, p. 36)

1 – SOCIAL NETWORKING regroups welcoming, empathizing, and governing. The three Practices are carried out to create, enhance, and sustain social ties in the community. They play on emotions and evolve beyond the existing brand community - to an extent which is a function of the rate of interaction.

1.A Welcoming: greeting, introducing, either to the community or a practice.

1.B Empathizing: lending emotional and or/physical support. Expressing of and showing interest for a broad range of thoughts and feelings of members, sometimes not directly related to the focal activity.

1.C Governing: articulating behavioral expectations.

2 – IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT regroups evangelizing and justifying. These Practices create “favorable impressions of the brand, brand enthusiasts, and brand community in the social universe beyond the brand community” (Muniz and Arnould, 2009). Here is where influencers come to play. Moreover, the fact that the Practices radiate outside the community is significant, for it means that they exploit weak ties and reach out to new, growing audience. Ski resorts exemplify ways to grow audience through evangelizing when online marketing managers identify creation of amazing content as the best tool for reaching and engaging beyond existing community (Bast 2013b, Benjamin 2013).

2.A Evangelizing: spreading the good word. Includes sharing the good news, inspiring others to use, preaching from the mountain top. Extensively in brand-sponsored communities where brand ambassadors spread the good word (Amirault, 2010) and good will about the brand. The practice is much about praise.

2.B Justifying: rationalizing one's devotion where either the devotion itself or its extent is not reasonable. A frequent way to justify resources spent on the focal activity is quoting the temporary nature of the consumption opportunity.

3 – COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT regroups staking, milestoneing, badging, and documenting. The four Practices aim to reinforce and escalate member engagement. According to a number of professionals including Jeff Werkheiser, a former social media manager of Vail Resorts corporate and Keystone Resort, and Morgan Bast, the online marketing manager of Breckenridge, engagement is the most important performance indicator in a brand community (Werkheiser 2013, Bast 2013a). More specifically, these Practices allow for segmentation of the audience: they emphasize heterogeneity, the distinctions among members and subsets of members. By fostering competitive activity, they provide members with social capital; an expectation about an individual's potential to be beneficial to the community based on his or her past social interaction (Putnam, 2001). The more social capital accumulates in a community, the more value there is in being a member.

3.A Staking: delineating of one's specific domain of participation, marking of either distinction or similarity with others in the group. From a user perspective, staking means expressing own preferences. Brands listen to these expressions of market demand, use them in taste modeling (T4G, 2011), and online, they create content specific to separate segments.

3.B Milestoning: noting standout brand experiences. Participation in brand milestones indicates escalating engagement of the user.

3.C Badging: creating symbols in recognition of milestones. The greater the length of membership and level of engagement, the more detailed and intricate the efforts of badging become. Badged milestones express brand identity and imply what appropriate member behaviors are.

3.D Documenting: capturing brand experience and narrating. Community members experience the brand through Practices and documenting is therefore always present in combination with more. In social networks and for ski resorts, documenting is highly visual.

4 – BRAND USE comprises Practices related to enhanced use of the focal brand. Involvement in these Practices is a sign of high engagement.

4.A Grooming: handling the activity or object of interest with affectionate care, in order to preserve it and prolong its use, or to find an optimal use pattern. Carried out through how-to tips or documenting of an activity where the main motivation is affection for the community's object of interest.

4.B Customizing: modifying the object of interest so it better suits the taste of an individual or segment. This practice can even put the modified commodity to use in a way never foreseen by the brand. Analyzing customizing provides valuable market insights.

4.C Commoditizing: approaching or distancing the marketplace. Community members express their opinions on which part of the experience or a community building practice should be monetized and which should not. As examples in the comparison table show, the monetization can be direct or indirect. Direct for instance when an experience inspires manufacture of souvenirs sold in retail, indirect when an aspect of the focal experience is used for brand promotion.

Interaction of Practices

Engagement, i.e. emotional project or purpose, is often what gives community participants goals. To achieve goals, use of multiple Practices is often needed. An example can be easily found in the ski industry: documenting a special day on the slope means milestoneing (seminal brand events and achievements), which allows for badging (symbolic representation or recognition of an individual's participation in milestones, e.g. recognizing the best skier). The documented milestones can then be used for evangelizing the brand experience by showing how amazing the managed mountain is, and for governing, by exemplifying the desired brand use. If the amazing part of experience has the form of fantastic powder conditions, justifying comes to play - giving the audience an excuse to leave everything behind and come up to the mountain RIGHT NOW for it is more than worth it RIGHT NOW. By sharing different pieces of content depending on demographics, or by sharing same pieces of content on different platforms, staking is applied (recognizing different motivations and interests among the audience). In the process, positive WOM is created and the brand reaches to audience beyond the existing community. Among other Practices that can come to play, there is grooming, where skiers would document how they try to preserve the mountain - by recycling or getting around on bikes. It is not by coincidence that this descriptive example strongly reminds of EpicMix by Vail Resorts, "a factory that creates and shares unique, individual, branded skiing content on social networks" (Blanchard, 2012b). Seeing that leading ski resorts apply the same Practices as researchers recommend beautifully tells that something must be right.

The work of applying Practices can be carried out by different members, depending on the brand and their strategy. In successful brand-sponsored communities, the audience creates a high portion of content and there is a mix of activity of both page admins and audience. In the case of EpicMix, administration is only carried-out in form of an automated online platform and on-slope position detection, and all the content is created by the activity of the very audience (snowboarders and skiers). All that much documenting and storytelling about experience then begets spiraling community engagement (excitement about riding) and more experience (days on snow). That is directly tied to sales-lift, the ultimate ROI indicator (Vizu, 2013). The

ski-resort example is not a unique or an isolated one, for multistep user co-creation is common in many other user areas such as fashion, where companies like Threadless and Dynamighty are globally recognized pioneers of community marketing. Similarly, gaming communities experience an extensive Practice interaction in their knowledge sharing and participation in physical-world events.

Effects of Practices

Through analysis of Practices it becomes apparent that they reveal both customer desires and ways to best satisfy them. The revealed can have a high business potential, for frequently it is a high fidelity need (Von Hippel, 2005). In the study that lies in the foundation of this paper (Schau, Muniz and Arnould, 2009), the authors describe effects of Practices in five concrete ways.

First, Practices endow participants with cultural capital. Engagement lends a small bit of the brand's identity and becomes a part of identity of an individual. The more skillful the individual becomes in community Practices (Holt, 1995), the more loyal and prone to talk about their brand experiences they are. A ski industry example can be found in Design a Dew Tour Feature, a yearly Facebook contest run by Breckenridge. There, the campaign climaxes by a video testimonial of the winner snowboarding in the resort and talking about his involvement in Dew Tour (the Facebook app is only up during the contest, see YouTube and pt. 2 of the Morgan Bast interview in appendix). The example underlines how talking about a brand one is knowledgeable and fond of is the most desired form of brand advocacy and WOM (Melani and Social Chorus, 2013). Brand devotees, people with high affinity and knowledge of the brand, are the best advocates (Huy, Shipilov, 2012). How does that relate to community building Practices? Quite simply; it is through Practices that fans become devotees. Moreover, case studies herein show that brand community Practices lead to very organic and cost-effective leveraging of influencers (Williams, 2012).

Second, Practices provide repertoire for insider sharing. They foster insider jargon and modes of representation, where especially customization of brand experience is significant. Jargon also does the work of boundary management and member identification.

Third, Practices generate consumption opportunities. As Practices create synergies, they transform community members into much better customers than people with zero engagement. The grooming practice exemplifies. When a skier cares about the focal mountain by trying to leave little ecological footprint, products and services catering for that goal will grow in value (bike rentals, recyclable cups, etc.). When a gamer wants to preserve a collector-piece disk, they will look for cases that can store the disk better. When a fashion enthusiast aims to preserve the unique design of a piece of clothing, they will buy specialty detergents (and even annoy the member of their household that usually does the washing). An important concluding remark here is that consumption follows from Practices rather than vice versa.

Fourth, Practices evince brand community vitality. As online indicators and metrics such as hits, likes, shares, comments, time spent per page, and sentiment of replies represent the reach of and engagement with the content, KPIs as brand-lift and sales-lift show how that content lead to ROI (Vizu, 2013). The listed are results of online community management. To find the building blocks used to bring the results, one can look at Practices. Their presence, diversity, and number in a community are ready indicators of future success. As a rule, stronger brand communities present a more diverse constellation of Practices, where each individual practice is more complex, and where insider knowledge is ample. Also, connection of online and offline Practices is vital.

Fifth, Practices create value - to all community members, both brand managers and consumers. An attentive reader will by now agree that value creation is the fuel and *raison d'être* of online communities. Each practice serves to enable brand use and deepen engagement, and each practice has specific ways of having the value-creation effect: from leveraging weak-ties (evangelizing), through providing unique but reproducible solutions (customizing), to raising switching costs by providing affection (empathizing). As a result, values of a community are created in a very interactive manner, manner that promotes engagement. Since Practices are structured, they make actions repeatable and reproducible, as well as they help grow the crowd that enjoys the value of a brand. It is reasonable to claim that each sound community has a specific goal as for what value exactly it intends to create. After all, setting a clear goal to begin with is fundamental in management practice. For a gaming community, that can be knowledge sharing; for a fashion community, co-creation; for the online community of a ski resort, customer-service marketing (Amirault, 2010).

In consequence, community building Practices have one more effect, a concrete benefit for customer relationship management. They provide new opportunities for interaction, and as interaction over long term translates to attachment, they strengthen ties with the brand and make members integrated in the brand community (McAlexander, Schouten et al. 2002). Consequently, communication with a guest can focus on developing community aspects even after their stay. That will not yield direct sales short term, but indeed a loyal guest of high lifetime value.

Concluding on Practices

As content in lively communities is vast, application of this research method is time-consuming. Yet, assuming that the researcher's affinity to the focal activity of the community is high, the time spent is time productive; for analyzing content by e.g. browsing through snowboarding videos, pictures, and links is highly enjoyable, and joy has long been known as an ingredient of fruitful work.

Further, the Practices create value beyond that which the firm creates or anticipates. As the authors of the framework of Practices claim, Practices "interact with one another, function like apprenticeships, endow participants with cultural capital, produce a repertoire for insider sharing, generate consumption

opportunities, evince brand community vitality”. With all the listed benefits, it is effective to focus on Practices –community research has long preferred analyzing the behavior or act, instead of the person or the environment (Kozinets, 2002). This study applies the framework of Practices on two in-depth case studies and yields conclusions backed by detailed comparison tables.

2.7 Identifying Value for Brands

This section discusses a straightforward question: How can brand managers evaluate and plan for value created for them in communities?

The question is implied in both frameworks and here it is addressed from a narrow and purely business point of view. It is after all businesses that sponsor brand communities as a part of their activity. Their perspective is presented through ways they can consider value creation when setting their goals and measuring success. Knowledge of both Types and Practices thus becomes easier to apply in an environment with budget constraints, and the resulting conclusions more realistic.

Below, sources of value for brands are pointed out, a simplified brand strategy that acknowledges these sources is presented, and finally, there is a paragraph devoted to an example of how branding value is evaluated in the focal ski resorts.

In their seminal report titled *The Value of a Facebook Fan 2013*, Syncapse presents a method for calculating fan value for individual brands. A fan value is understood in incremental manner, expressing the difference in value of a fan and a non-fan. Six factors that enter the equation: increased product spending; loyalty; propensity for WOM; media value defined as earned reach and frequency; acquisition cost defined as enticing others to participate and drive organic membership; brand affinity defined as a warmer relationship with the brand.

People often become Facebook fans because they enjoy the opportunity to support a brand they already love (Ryan Solutions, 2013), and the six factors are not Facebook-exclusive. Therefore, the six sources of business value apply to social media and online brand communities in general (Werkheiser, 2013). Moreover, they strongly remind of the two frameworks. For instance, acquisition cost is a clear benefit of Mobs and Hives and their opinion leaders, while media value can be attributed to Swarms and their aggregate power of content distribution. As for Practices, brand affinity would be a source of value accruing from evangelizing or justifying.

Knowing the sources of brand value and being familiar with consumer behavior in online communities, a marketer can build an effective community strategy. In short, it includes clear objectives, tools for reaching those objectives and relevant metrics that deliver clear interpretations (Vizu, 2013). Objectives are best when narrow, so they can be well measured and adjusted. Tools should reflect strengths and personality of the

brand (Bast 2013a, Amirault 2013a). Regarding metrics, they should be well chosen, because with how much we can measure online, it is important not to be cluttered with superfluous data. A brand should indeed measure all online interaction, but also have an analytical system able to relate key metrics to goals. A brand cannot be winning on all metrics, and with specific objectives in mind, it is not even required.

Recent online social media marketing is moving from using online communities for direct-response objectives, and starts focusing more on objectives of generating brand lift. Along with that comes quality interaction instead of quantity interaction (Vizu, 2013). These goals take longer time to reach, and the revenue orientation they imply is long-term. Moreover, it is fascinating to see how the notion pronounced by Vizu, a global metrics expert, is congruent with both Practices and Types, where emphasis is put on building lasting relationships.

The way focus on quality of interaction plays out in the focal ski resorts is testified by the interviewed online marketing managers. All key informants interviewed for this paper - i.e. social media managers of Vail Resorts corporate, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, and Aspen/Snowmass – agreed on that their priority when measuring success is engagement and the right kind of growth. Engagement has a long list of positive implications mentioned both above and below. To conclude, it is a great pick because as the Practices describe, more interaction through higher engagement means stronger community and more value, at times even value beyond what the brand initially aimed for.

2.8 Research Questions

Being informed by the theory, this paper aims to answer a set of research questions. The overriding interest in how online brand communities create value for the different members is addressed in two perspectives: the one of consumers, and the one of marketers.

The consumer approach asks: What are patterns of consumer behavior in online brand communities of ski resorts? An important assumption is made about that the patterns are formed depending on perceived value. The same approach continues by asking: How does marketer-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer interaction in online brand communities create value for the members?

The questions are exploratory, and they are answered by a combination of netnographic analysis and interviews. Netnography is used because it offers an in-depth analysis of concrete consumer actions that blend together to create themes, represent values, express demand, and evaluate actions of marketers. Interviews contribute to finding patterns of consumer behavior and the underlying value because the interviewed managers provide insights about how they perceive specific actions of online consumers and about what they find about consumers through measuring online activity.

The marketer approach asks: What makes online communities a viable alternative with advantages over other forms of marketing? Here, too, an assumption is made about that preference is driven by perceived value, and the question is exploratory.

Netnography and interviews are used to address the marketer point of view, but in a different way than above. With its capacity of depicting specific actions as elements of community building, netnography is applied to analyze ways in which marketers encourage desired behaviors. By doing so, marketers give away preferences on what they deem most valuable to their brands. Same is addressed by interview questions, but in a very direct manner.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes methodology that is used for the study, and that is informed by the preceding theory and research questions. Since to an extent, it outlines own experience and reflections, an exception is made and in places I use first person and a personal tone. The content of this chapter will be engaging for those who want to see how the theory selected leads to relevant understanding of online brand communities, for those who want to understand the background of the case comparison and conclusion below, and for those who consider conducting a similar case study of an online brand community.

Methods that proved effective for the study can be divided in data collection and data processing. Data here is understood in a broad sense where it includes academic notions, best practice in the industry, brief and related analyses of marketing moves, interview answers, expert opinions, examples collected by applying research frameworks, and feedback. Collection was carried out by use of three specific methods: literature review, interviews with key informants, and netnographic analysis of case studies. On the other end, data processing consisted mainly of the methods of triangulation and interpretation. While the review, interviews and analysis were mostly carried out one at a time, triangulation and interpretation were applied continuously from day one to conclusion.

Data collection had the objective to assemble both understanding and recent information on community marketing of ski resorts. I aimed to gain relevant broad knowledge as well to learn about how exactly ski resorts have been communicating in the recent months. As a result, I would be an author who neither highlights thoughts that are obvious, nor builds on notions that are outdated. Further, best practice in the online domain changes from day to day, and I needed to find a way to ensure that whatever I conclude will be well grounded. I therefore chose to work with a variety of sources. In this study, the literature review consists of sources ranging from academic research to industry whitepapers, the key informants represent five different brands in the ski industry, the netnographic analysis is based on two different frameworks combined with a list of eleven research principles, and the interpretation was supported by feedback from clever people with dissimilar backgrounds.

The variety yielded compelling benefits, just like it would in all learning. Indeed, this paper documents a process of learning about value created by online communities of ski resorts. Being open-minded, reasonably skeptical, and curious, one can build on variety and choose ideas that make most sense and work best for the very case in question. That is also an approach leading to triangulation, and many times when I found two or three unrelated sources that confirmed the same thought, I became so thrilled I passed an instant highfive to a surprised friend sitting next to me in the library.

3.1 Literature Review

Knowing that I needed to educate myself properly before putting any lines down, I started by literature review where I found sources with different backgrounds and objectives. Among the topics I have read and learned about were consumer creativity, co-creation, online communities, brand communities, weak ties, digital convergence, word-of-mouth, influencer marketing, Facebook, ROI of social media, influencer marketing, buzz, conversational capital, social capital, concept of paid-owned-earned media, social media news, digital advertising, and research methods. For each of the topics, different set of sources worked best, and I used a combination of academics, publishing businesses, and marketing journalists.

Academic papers I have read were first from the list of readings of the Social Media Marketing class at NHH, Bergen. My other prior marketing classes and work experience with e-commerce and Facebook pages made it easier to select the most grounded and inspiring papers. The narrow goal was, first, to acquire solid knowledge about what has been established and researched, and second, to find research frameworks that would be systematic, pragmatic and feasible enough for my own analysis. Lists of references in the articles I read to start with, Sloan Review, and the superb Google Scholar provided for leads to new pertinent articles to review further. In the final stage, I settled on a combination of two frameworks. The first one is Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities by Kozinets, Hemetsberger, and Schau (2008), and the framework of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building by Schau, Muniz, and Arnould (2009). Both are presented in detail in the theory chapter.

Resources by publishing companies provided for solid triangulation with the theory and knowledge about recent trends. Whenever I found a same thought expressed by both an academic and a business professional, I gained confidence about being on the right track. The best seminars, webinars, whitepapers, and best practice case studies I came across were by online marketing industry leaders such as Altimeter, comScore, Convince & Convert by Jay Baer, Facebook, Google, Nielsen, PostRocket, Short Stack, Sid Lee, SocialChorus, Stash by Ryan Solutions, Syncapse, Synlight, Technocrati, T4G Research, Wikibrands, and Wildfire. There are many other quality ones that I left untapped, such as Spredfast or Hootsuite, but I came to a point where I had to narrow down. The common trait of these resources is not only that nearly half of them begin with an "S", it is first of all the invaluable fact that businesses who share them put their name behind them. With that motivation, they provide insights that are grounded in business data, up-to-date, and actionable.

While academic papers were rather broad, business resources were narrower. To focus further and find examples of the most recent individual community marketing moves, I turned to online magazines. There, I first searched for mentions of social media or community marketing in general, then ski resort marketing in general, and in the end, the two focal ski resorts specifically. Social Media Examiner, Mashable, Techcrunch, Marketing Profs, and LinkedIn Today proved to be most insightful. Their audience expectations and short

format of posts guarantee independent and up-to-date information on very specific topics in online marketing. In combination with academic papers and business resources, they fortify the approach of triangulation.

In the final stage of my readings I focused on searching for mentions of specific community marketing actions of my focal resorts. Some of the magazines above covered that area, too, but only for the most outstanding moves – such as EpicMix by Vail Resorts (the mother company of Breckenridge). News reported by the resorts themselves could be used as sources, too, but I omitted them for concerns about objectivity. The resource that worked by far best for finding insights about marketing of my specific resorts was Slopefillers – an expert blog about ski resort marketing. Its author, Gregg Blanchard, is one of the most cited sources of this paper. His brief analyses are hands-on and I have used them to support both my interviews and analysis.

3.2 Interviews with Key Informants

The purpose of using interviews in my study was to further triangulate the knowledge acquired through literature review, and to gain insights that only one-on-one contact with professionals closely tied to the focal resorts could provide. I approached that objective in two ways: reviewing interviews conducted by others, and conducting my own interviews.

This section first describes my reviewing of interviews conducted by others, continues with sampling and design of interviews conducted by myself, and ends by a brief of each interviewee.

Business resources and marketing magazines served as a good source for reviewing interviews conducted by others. In particular, Dave Amirault of Aspen/Snowmass is often given an opportunity to talk, as he enjoys recognition for what his marketing team has done for the resort. Another interview I found valuable was one with Adam Hawes, a former marketer of Northstar, and one Rob Katz, CEO of Vail Resorts. Northstar, just as Breckenridge, is a resort owned by Vail Resorts corporate. I have used such documented conversations to support claims in this paper, and to construct better interviews of my own.

For discovering leads about exemplary or outstanding moves, and for confirming or disproving notions appearing during the readings and case analysis, I conducted six interviews myself. Sampling was straightforward, as I had chosen the focal ski resorts beforehand, and approached representatives who directly manage Breckenridge and Aspen/Snowmass. Moreover, Breckenridge manages its own brand personality, but it belongs to a bigger corporate family of Vail Resorts. I therefore also interviewed marketing managers from the central corporate office of Vail Resorts and from Beaver Creek. In the Vail Resorts family, Beaver Creek has the same position as Breckenridge and talking to the manager of that resort made me better understand the corporation's common branding efforts.

The design of interviews was in-depth and answering required half an hour of time or more, depending on the interviewee. The questions were formulated so that they would collect insights exclusive to insiders. From the point of view of this paper, such insights consist of non-published information on social media activity and personal opinions of the approached managers. In an analysis where interpretation plays an important role, I find both of these types of insights to be crucial. To stay focused, I was asking about topics that I had found most intriguing throughout the literature review, and topics I consider to be decisive based on own marketing work experience.

Regarding approach, I am fortunate enough to be close to a marvelous person working in ski resort marketing, a person that personally introduced me to three ski resort marketers. I explained the objectives of my study, interviewed two of them, and asked for references to their friends at relevant positions in my focal ski resorts (Breckenridge and Aspen/Snowmass). As a result, I gathered interviews with six professionals. A summarized background of each interview is presented in the following boxes. For full versions, please see the appendix.

Gregg Blanchard



Works at:	SlopeFillers; Ryan Solutions
Title:	Author, Director of Communications
Conversation:	In person
Interviewed:	Before the analysis
Focus:	Ski resort marketing trends and measuring

Charles Townsend



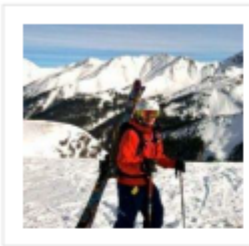
Works at:	Vail Resorts corporate office
Title:	Ecommerce and User Experience Manager
Conversation:	By phone
Interviewed:	Before the analysis
Focus:	Online presence of Vail Resorts

Jeff Werkheiser



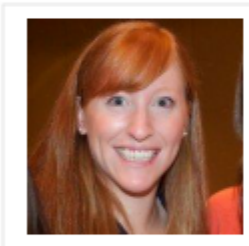
Works at:	Vail Resorts corporate office
Title:	Social Media Manager up to late March 2013
Conversation:	By e-mail
Interviewed:	Before the analysis
Focus:	Social media presence of Vail Resorts corporate and individual resorts in the family

Yann Benjamin



Works at: Beaver Creek
Title: Online Marketing Manager
Conversation: By e-mail
Interviewed: Before the analysis
Focus: Social media presence of Beaver Creek as a part of the Vail Resorts family

Morgan Bast



Works at: Breckenridge
Title: Online Marketing Manager
Conversation: By e-mail and a survey form
Interviewed: Before and after case analysis
Focus: Social media presence of Breckenridge

Dave Amirault



Works at: Aspen/Snowmass
Title: Interactive Marketing Manager
Conversation: By e-mail, Twitter, survey form
Interviewed: After case analysis
Focus: Social media presence of Aspen/Snowmass

3.3 Netnographic Case Analysis

3.3.1 Case Sampling

This section starts by explaining why the two chosen resorts are seen as industry leaders, moves on by elaborating on why North America is a suitable region for study of online brand communities, then justifies the sample of analyzed social media platforms, as well as it lists and justifies platforms that were not included.

To bring conclusions that could be applied for brand communities of ski resorts in general, I was looking to analyze brands that would be representative. In a fast changing environment, industry leaders are often those that are most representative.

Breckenridge is known for the strong community feeling they create, Aspen for their content crew and innovation in online marketing. Adding, both reach and engagement they enjoy among their audiences gives them the status of industry leaders that is very clear. For details on how they compare to competition, see section 4.2 in Case Analysis.

To further back the sampling, I introduce the following subjective notion. Popular North American resorts charge over \$100 for a day pass. Thinking about how even the most expensive resorts in the Alps charge under \$60 per day in peak season, there must be an important reason for the large difference in value for money perceived by guests. Considering the fact that resorts in the Alps win on skiing tradition, sheer size and ruggedness of the ravishing terrain, and popularity of summer activities, there are not that many possible reasons left. One that is logical is better marketing, a domain North America is renowned for. The region yields numbers of online startups, social media trends, and a high penetration of usage of online services. Also, brands from USA and Canada are more prone to be active on many more social networks than those from Europe. Therefore, regional industry leaders, like Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Resort, also represent industry leaders globally.

Another reason for the sample choice was that I had connections in these companies and was fortunate to know I would be able to conduct interviews. Moreover, Morgan Bast of Breckenridge was most keen to share her thoughts of all the representatives I was in touch with. As for the marketing manager of Aspen/Snowmass, the fact that he had already been featured in many interviews by others gave me confidence about having solid data. That was later topped with his detailed answers to my own questions.

The more I studied the two resorts, the more I was convinced about that my sample represented leading and innovative brands with inspiring personalities.

The number of cases was deliberate, too. With only one, any findings would be absolute. With two, I could compare and describe how the respective community building is relative to a competitor. More than two

would make comparison less clear, as well as the study would then be less feasible to carry out by a one-man team.

Both ski resorts are active on a number of social platforms and to keep my analytical focus narrow, I needed to choose a representative sample of platforms, too. Facebook and Twitter were included based on claims in business publications and interviews, which all deem them crucial. So were Instagram, Youtube, and Vimeo – the interviewed managers state that their product is highly visual, and they allocate an important portion of resources to these platforms. Tumblr was then included for Aspen/Snowmass because of the important role in the portfolio, having surpassed 170k followers late May 2013 (Amirault, 2013a). Also, the blog of Breckenridge was included since it is a place that demonstrates a number of community building Practices along with high reach. EpicMix, a platform used by the Vail Resort family including Breckenridge, could not be omitted either. This innovative tool has won ample praise by experts and it intensively exemplifies a number of community building Practices. Finally, websites were added to the sample for both resorts, for they are hubs where community marketing efforts are monetized.

The two resorts are active on a number of other platforms, too, and here are the reasons why not all made the cut. Mostly, they do not seem to be representative of the activity or crucial for the whole. Aspen/Snowmass, for instance, leverages the Klout network, but the activity there is rather sporadic. Pinterest, for its part, only appeals to a limited demographic. Foursquare is popular among restaurants, an important part of holiday resort business models, but activity on the platform is hard to track when not at the physical location. Flickr is visual, but losing popularity. Finally, platforms such as Yelp, TripAdvisor and Google Places are well popular and Breckenridge has been giving them more and more attention (Bast, 2013b). Nonetheless, to keep the extent of study feasible for one person, these were not included. As for the timeframe of studied activity, focus was on winter season 2012-2013.

To conclude, the sample of ski resorts and the platforms they are active on was constructed in order to bring the most representative conclusions possible. A different researcher could construct the sample differently, but I believe results would not be significantly different. After all, the objective is not to conclude on specific details of the activity, but to uncover underlying sources of value creation. The sample is not meant to be exhaustive, it is meant to be representative.

3.3.2 Applying Frameworks

Being informed by literature review and interviews, and having chosen the sample, I moved on to analyze the two ski resorts. First, I applied the framework of Practices, then Types, and then Practices again, followed by a comparison.

The twelve Practices look at value creation in communities in a systematized way. That allows for analyzing social media presence of a brand despite the sheer amount of content. Considering that the ski resorts post daily across all their profiles would normally make it very harder to choose which pieces of content to consider. Looking for examples of the specific community building Practices makes the analysis feasible. Some Practices appear more often, some less, which helps uncover themes and building blocks of the community. Findings about actions representing the different Practices were organized in a table depicting each practice, on each platform, for each resort.

Devoting time to identifying examples of Practices makes one closely familiar with social activity of the brand, which is useful for application of the framework of Types. Knowing specific moves by community managers and reaction to those moves by the audience allows for stating on which Type or Types are represented in the community and why. Such interpretation leads to conclusions on how community members contribute to value creation in the community.

I then went back to the table of examples of Practices and worked on interpretation of findings therein. At this point, I was able to use the table to look for behaviors that would prove or disprove consumer behavior as described for each Type. I found building blocks of the two studied communities, identified their strengths, and found potential for steps that could be taken to build the communities even stronger.

The frameworks are presented in detail in the chapter on theory, their outcomes in the chapter on case analysis.

3.3.3 Research Principles

The following is a list of research principles considered prior to and during the analysis, and closely tied to the two applied frameworks. Their description assumes an informed reader, where explanation of the principles is succinct, and emphasis is put on reflections on the role each of the principles plays in the study. Netnography, or studying communities online, is a young field, and elaborating on its principles is relevant by how it gives research credibility.

The set of principles is adapted from the inspiring Robert Kozinets, the father of netnography, and his book on *Netnography: Doing Netnographic Research Online* (2010). It is important to note that the ten principles are not given the same priority, for some of them “contradict one another” and “signal the unlikeliness or perhaps unworthiness of simple off-the-shelf solutions” (p. 162). Instead, the principles are all applied to a different extent, creating solid guidance tailor-made for the objectives of the paper. With regards to the recommended adaptation, an eleventh principle is added – the principle of joy, formulated subjectively and based on both past experience and experience gained throughout this very research.

Coherence

Coherence is in place when the collected observations and interpretations are reasonably complete and freed from internal contradiction. The only acceptable instability is “the inherent instability of a social phenomenon” (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

As online communities and their forms are subject to constant change characteristic to the dynamic field of social networking, this paper acknowledges that some of the interpretations will show instability in time. Beyond that, coherence is a significant principle, and analysis of community activity does uncover overriding themes and evident stepping stones of the examined cases.

Rigor

Rigor lies in being familiar with the correct methods and the related ability to contribute to a substantial conversation.

The detailed description of the two applied methodological frameworks and their respective backgrounds, along with this very presentation of research guidelines, evinces the high priority the paper cedes to rigor guideline. Often, rigor is fostered by following established academic standards. There is a weakness though – for data collected about cases do not speak about the entire industry, and the time period of data collection does not consider the entire life of the focal communities. That weakness is addressed in two ways. First, the analysis abides carefully by the criterion of groundedness as described below. Second, selecting cases of industry leaders and elaborating on their current state provides a valuable snapshot, a detailed description of a fixed moment in time, one that was attained by years of community building work.

Literacy

The researcher must be literate in the area he or she analyzes, for knowledge is cumulative. Intensive search for relevant literature is expected, and as Kozinets craftily puts it (p. 166, 2010), “such cross-pollinating intellectual voyages are commonplace, and frequently yield consequential insights.”

This paper regards literacy strongly and builds on a number of past research articles. Moreover, the selection of sources was guided by university professors and industry professionals. Literacy is in fact accorded so much importance that it goes beyond the review of past scholarly literature. Among the reviewed are marketing books, the author has reviewed interviews with brand community managers and other industry professionals who speak about ski resort communities, recorded expert panels, webinars, whitepapers, and expert blog posts.

Groundedness

Groundedness is the extent to which any claim or contribution is clear and convincing by virtue of supported in data and theory. Adding, detailed field knowledge of the culture is crucial, providing the reader with the sense of having traveled to the virtual place.

In this paper, the use of the framework of Practices yields detailed and concrete examples of classified actions, examples that can be used to ground conclusions. In addition, every piece of considered theory is inspired by more than one source. As described below in the section on triangulation, information sources were consciously varied in order to collect credible data.

Cultural knowledge also is regarded as important. My place of permanent residence has a ski lift, I have had a joyful amount of snowboarding days in the ravishing mountains of Slovakia, worked as an instructor in Czech Republic and based my bachelors thesis on that experience, lived in two of the best Norwegian ski resorts, built online presence from scratch for a student ski tour operator, spent an Erasmus semester in the French Alps, thrilling weeks in the Italian and Austrian Alps, and more. In winter 2012-2013, I have snowboarded in six different countries, including Colorado and namely Breckenridge - with its incredibly dry snow and awe-inspiring snowparks gleaming with perfection. As both an active snowboarder and a devoted downhill biker, I am familiar with lift and trail operation in summer, too. I know no other more intense daylight delight than gliding down a mountain in a ludic maneuver, and I am fortunate to have personal connections in the ski resorts I examine. Moreover, some of my best friends work in marketing and sports. Consequently, groundedness by means of cultural knowledge is given high importance.

Innovation

Research ought to extend current knowledge and create something unrealized to date. The innovative outcomes should address issue hot topics of the literature and the industry.

The paper applies two separate frameworks, combining them to one detailed methodology, and integrates the method of comparison. The combination is innovative, and proves to work very well for an in-depth analysis of brand communities online. The result is a detailed best practice study that aims to advance the community marketing discussion by providing solid empirical findings, and to inspire industry professionals that look for new analytics and resources.

Resonance

Research about other human beings should keep and possibly further our understanding of each other, while avoiding barren accounts about the stereotypes of cultural 'others'. Compassion, personalized writing style and relying on emotion together with reason apply.

Resonance is not followed by specific steps in this study. But how it incorporates important values of human interaction, it is regarded strongly and followed subconsciously.

Verisimilitude

Verisimilitude is the ability to reproduce, map the 'real' and be authentic. One step to achieve that is letting community members have a say in the outcomes of the research.

This paper shows regard to verisimilitude by interviewing community managers. Information thus obtained is given significant weight, for it is timely, to the point, personal, expert, exclusive, singular, and profoundly insightful. Adding, the managers are at the same time important members of their communities. Regarding authenticity, the analysis uncovers it as an overriding theme in the studied communities. It appears to be an important ingredient of successful brand social presence, one that the author too binds to exercise in sampling and interpretation.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the extent to which the text acknowledges the involvement and bias of the researcher. That requires coming clean by being explicit about the mentioned issues. The text should be open and encourage to constructive criticism.

This research is on online communities and my goal is to publish it online soon after printing the final version. That should make the effort more valuable and fruitful. With interactive format, the published work becomes a community feature itself and attracts benefits of feedback and contributions. As it is presented in the description of the used theoretical frameworks, community contributions embedded in the original product make that product better, and the hope is to see that happen to this published piece of research.

From a different point of view, reflexivity is addressed by bringing contributions that are a part of the ongoing marketing discussion, not closed statements.

Praxis

Praxis is the ability to inspire practical action aimed at social betterment. It can lead to improved understanding, stimulus to action, or empowerment to action.

An underlying point of view of this study is that understanding is a prerequisite to contribution. If understanding resonates with a targeted reader, it stimulates to action. If it also provides useful and actionable insights, it empowers. The goal of the paper is to contribute in this way exactly.

Intermix

One, intermix is the extent to which the researcher considered both online and off-line worlds. Two, it is the extent to which the research is given web presence.

Both these aspects are addressed herein and elaborated in the descriptions of the literacy and reflexivity guidelines.

Joy

The ten principles described above and adapted by Kozinets will be complemented by one found equally important for this study – joy. It can be viewed as the extent of joy the author experiences when conducting a study. The importance of principle is based on my own experience in work, study, travel, personal interaction,

and sports. The approach is also backed by management practice (Ichniovski et al., 1996), psychology, and philosophy (Brandt, 1976): any activity that is inherently fun will lead to higher quality outcomes; it will keep the person focused, positive, and more creative.

In this study, applying the framework of Practices is an example of how the joy principle is constructive. The sample of cases required that I analyze six community platforms of Aspen/Snowmass, and seven platforms of Breckenridge. The method was to find each of the twelve Practices on each platform; $6 \times 12 + 7 \times 12 = 156$. One hundred and fifty-six examples were to be found, listed, interpreted, triangulated, compared, and concluded upon. Had this not been for the outrageous fun fostered by pictures of slashing the dry Colorado powder, updates on early-season park features, videos with steezy cinematics, and excited user posts, I would easily lose focus and fail to provide analytical depth. Moreover, readers can easily feel whether the author is enthusiastic about the topic or not, and whether the author has made effort beyond the expected standard or not. Joy catalyzes both those qualities.

3.4 Triangulation

The method of triangulation is mentioned throughout the entire chapter and the following is a factual summary.

Review of academic literature was triangulated by relating to business resources that present guidelines. Altogether, they were further triangulated by relating to expert magazine articles. The theory, guidelines, and expert opinions were then related to interviews with key informants - ski resort marketers. Finally, the accumulated notions were verified and filtered by relating to the netnographic case analysis.

The variety of sources provided for triangulation in a number of ways. General notions were compared with specific ones. Established knowledge was compared with the most recent thoughts. Guidelines on how community marketing should be carried out were compared with how it really is carried out in practice. Lastly, information from a variety of sources was compared with information generated by own interviews.

3.5 Interpretation

The method of interpretation was used in order to synthesize the collected material into actionable conclusions. A part of applying the method was wording thoughts in a way understandable for others, so that nothing is left unanswered and so that I do not write for myself.

The most productive interpretation was carried out based on the two analytical frameworks. The framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities provides detailed managerial implications on each of the Types, and I used these in order to interpret my findings and conclude. In a similar fashion, I used the

framework of Value-Creating Practices in Community Building. The detailed implications of Practices provided a lens that I could use to interpret the listed examples, and synthesize them into overriding themes and key findings.

Interpretation moreover consisted of a set of subjective factors. With my cultural knowledge as described in the principle of groundedness above, I was able to read between the lines and evaluate messages from the point of view of the target audience. At the same time, I asked community managers of my focal ski resorts about specific clues I had found during analysis. They thus contributed to the interpretation in this paper. In congruence with the principle of verisimilitude, I assign a significant weight to all interpretation fostered by this source.

The last step in interpretation was creating a structure of this study that would clearly communicate the process. For instance, the structure of the chapter on case analysis is important for showing how I interpreted and came to conclusions. The theory part must be well-structured to be clear about where conclusions come from. For this part, I received and incorporated feedback from my thesis supervisor and from an amazing person close to me that also is a sharp marketing professional. I value that feedback greatly and believe it helped to communicate my interpretation in a clear manner.

4. CASE ANALYSIS

The cases chosen for this case study are Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Resort. The two are representative of the industry, which is justified by the fact that they are among leading brands in ski resort community building online, and by the number of platforms they are highly active on.

This chapter first briefly introduces profiles of the two focal ski resorts. It then continues by breaking down key metrics that relate them to other strong players in the industry, support their choice as a study sample, and provide understanding that is a prerequisite for applying research frameworks. Finally, the chapter presents outcomes of online community analysis.

The actual community analysis is divided in two parts. Implications of the framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities are introduced first. Focus is put on examples from the actual social media activity and on notions of value creation, and the structure follows the framework's division in four Types. Implications of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building are presented second. They are organized per practice, with examples and a set of overall implications at the end.

The analysis assumes an informed reader. It builds on all the notions presented heretofore, where especially familiarity with sections 2.5, 2.6 and 3.2 is vital.

4.1 Key Facts on Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Ski Resort

An attentive reader is now aware that the two resorts are phenomenal. Progressive, attractive. Below is a basic fact sheet on their respective backgrounds.





 <p>Aspen/Snowmass @AspenSnowmass The heart of a city. The soul of a mountain town. Tweets by @ozskier and @meredithbrett. Give us a shout, we'll hit you back! Aspen, CO - aspensnowmass.com</p>	 <p>Breckenridge Resort @breckenridgamtn Welcome to Breck Nation! Even if you've never been here, you'll instantly feel like a local in our historic mountain town and on our legendary slopes. Breckenridge, Colorado, USA - breckenridge.com</p>
<p><i>"Defy the Ordinary."</i></p>	<p><i>"Perfect Mountain. Perfect Mountain Town."</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A total of 1.4M days skied a year• High Rockies, Colorado• Run by Aspen Skiing Company• CEO Mike Kaplan• Online marketing by the team of Dave Amirault• In short, Aspen	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A total of 1.6M days skied a year• High Rockies, Colorado• Belongs to the family of Vail Resorts• CEO Rob Katz• Online marketing by the team of Morgan Bast• In short, Breckenridge or Breck
	
<p>source: @aspensnowmass on Instagram, Jan 3, 2013</p>	<p>source: @jjthomas on Instagram, Apr 27, 2013</p>

Figure 4 – Key Facts on Aspen and Breckenridge

4.2 Breakdown of Social Media Presence of Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Ski Resort

Breaking down the metrics and relating to the rest of the industry provides a context that is vital for analysis of online activity. Also, it backs the choice of the study sample by justifying the claim on how the two resorts are industry leaders.

The tables below are static, and capture a moment in time, instead of presenting figures on growth or other change in a period. The latter would certainly be of contribution, too, but it is not in the narrow focus of this paper. Here, the purpose is to provide an in-depth insight on a given snapshot in time, a snapshot that speaks about what has been done to come to achieve the status quo, and what can be done moving forward.

The moment is early May 2013 and it is chosen deliberately. It is a time of the year when the winter season is mostly over, and where one can study both long-term benefits of activity from the past years, and immediate effects of the content from the recent season. Where possible, figures, interviews and netnographic analysis were all effectuated in early May.

The two tables put the focal resorts in their industry context. Table 1 presents figures for platforms relevant for this study, along with similarities and differences of online presence of Aspen and Breckenridge. Table 2 compares the two resorts with top performers in North America, as based on the relevant platforms. The data and implications presented herein provide important background for framework application, comparison, and conclusions further below.

The source of this data, Slopefillers.com, indexes and daily updates data on 428 North American ski resorts. With that amount in mind, relative social media performance is first-class anytime the rank is close to top ten.

Key Social Media Metrics of Aspen/Snowmass and Breckenridge Ski Resort. May 2, 2013, Slopefillers.com

Retrieved May 2, 2013 from Slopefillers.com. Rankings based on an indexed total of 428 North American ski resorts.

	Facebook Reach		Facebook Engagement			Twitter Engagement		Twitter Activity	
	Likes	Rank	Comments	TAP ¹	TAP Rank	Followers	Rank	Tweets	Following
Aspen	53 449	13	3 800	7,11%	17	18 832	8	7 931	2 238
Breckenridge	102 799	7	2 928	2,85%	80	24 523	2	6 557	1 727

	Youtube Reach		Youtube Engagement		Instagram		Tumblr	Blog	Klout	
	Views ²	Rank	Subscribers	Rank	Followers	Rank	Followers ³	Unique Visits ⁴	Score	Rank
Aspen	729 427	11	963	13	36 457	2	150 000	n/a	80,24	6
Breckenridge	898 635	8	1 456	6	11 153	7	n/a	50 000	80,12	7

1: TAP stands for Talking About Percentage. 'People Talking About This' is a Facebook-specific metric that refers to the number of people who engaged with content by an action that can be displayed in news feed. That includes liking a page or a post or a check-in deal, posting on the page wall, commenting, sharing, answering a question, RSVPing to an event, tagging the page, checking in, writing a recommendation, claiming an offer (Darwell, 2012).

2: Aspen also has a very active profile on Vimeo.

3: Rough number from mid-May based on a Facebook post by Dave Amirault.

4: Rough number retrieved in an interview with Morgan Bast late May (2013b). The blog was launched February 2013.

Table 1 – Key Social Media Metrics of Aspen and Breckenridge. Retrieved May 2, 2013 from Slopefillers.com



Facebook

Brands normally use Facebook to speak to a full range of enthusiasts, in contrast with other platforms which appeal to a more specific demographic or taste. The network is used as a tool that accumulates pieces of content from other platforms and links to them. The fact that photos are very popular on Facebook, and the architecture of the system makes them appear higher in the newsfeed (Postrocket, 2013), is suitable for ski resorts and the visual character of their product. Among other attractive features are contests that encourage user-generated content, and the ease of transparent conversation with fans.

Both focal resorts have a significant reach, one of the highest in the industry. Moreover, Morgan Bast of Breckenridge happily confirms that their fans are acquired organically and the 'Unlike' rate is very low (2013b). The same can be assumed about Aspen, and Dave Amirault is very clear about his preference of organic growth (2013a): "We don't want to simply throw 20k at Facebook for crappy fan acquisition, we want the right fans". Consequently, both resorts found a town-full of people who want their updates newsfeeds.

Aspen's Facebook town is half the size of the one of Breckenridge, but the engagement figures show how that evens out. TAP is the most suitable metric for measuring engagement, as it stands for the percentage of fans that 'talk about' the brand - i.e. engage with it.

For the size of its community, Breckenridge engages its fans very well. The general tendency is that in bigger community, people are more prone to be passive recipients of messages and engagement, on average, becomes low (Technorati 2013, Melani and SocialChorus 2013). This phenomenon is clear in the ski industry, too, where Table 2 shows that the top ten resorts on TAP are mostly smaller brands. With that in mind, being ranked #80 out of 428 for engagement is already good. In fact, it is higher than other brands in the Vail Resorts family.

As for Aspen though, it breaks off the industry standards and beats most other major North American resorts on TAP. Its number of comments is considerably higher than the one of Breckenridge despite having only half the fan count. The Facebook audience value is thus at least as big for Aspen as it is for Breckenridge. Content of Aspen can travel very far in the network thanks to the collective action of the fans, which is of great value. Dave Amirault states that this is thanks to their investment in the photo program which amplifies natural beauty and engagement via sharing (2013a).

Platform Top 10 by Resort - North America, May 2, 2013

Retrieved May 2, 2013 from Slopefillers.com. Rankings based on an indexed total of 428 North American ski resorts.

Rank	Facebook Reach		Facebook Engagement		Twitter	
	Likes	Resort	TAP*	Resort	Followers	Resort
1	152 928	Mammoth	24,12%	Loveland	47 143	Whistler
2	141 292	Whistler	21,36%	Val-d'Ire	25 544	Breckenridge
3	137 447	Vail	21,18%	Snow King	20 673	Lake Louise
4	136 350	Heavenly	17,60%	Watson Lake	20 192	Vail
5	112 656	Jackson Hole	15,25%	Arapahoe Basin	20 158	Mammoth
6	110 567	Northstar	14,44%	Manning Park	19 932	Keystone
7	102 832	Breckenridge	12,22%	Mont Du Lac	18 976	Snowbird
8	85 183	Squaw	10,66%	Lake Louise	18 867	Aspen/Snowmass
9	81 780	Snowshoe	10,25%	Whitecap	17 948	Killington
10	78 817	Keystone	9,22%	Hardwood	16 082	Jackson Hole

Rank	YouTube Reach ¹		YouTube Engagement		Instagram ²	
	Views	Resort	Subscribers	Resort	Followers	Resort
1	2 069 230	Whistler	7 317	Bear	46 900	Mammoth
2	1 766 031	Jackson Hole	4 989	Whistler	36 450	Aspen/Snowmass
3	1 663 639	Liberty Mtn	1 919	Jackson Hole	20 618	Sun Valley
4	1 504 273	Bear	1 768	Park City	17 176	Squaw Valley
5	1 394 154	Canyons	1 502	Mountain Creek	14 751	Bear Mountain
6	1 325 796	Sunday	1 457	Breckenridge	12 955	Whistler
7	1 273 814	Mountain Creek	1 334	Vail	11 224	Breckenridge
8	898 942	Breckenridge	1 104	Mammoth	10 364	Jackson Hole
9	863 395	Vail	1 070	Heavenly	8 731	Vail
10	846 140	Heavenly	1 055	Snowbird	8 699	Keystone

Rank	Klout	
	Score	Resort
1	83,26	Keystone
2	82,85	Whistler
3	81,63	Jackson Hole
4	80,41	Vail
5	80,22	Lake Louise
6	80,19	Aspen/Snowmass
7	80,07	Breckenridge
8	78,64	Sun Valley
9	74,56	Sugarloaf
10	73,56	Sunshine Village

1: Aspen/Snowmass ranks #11

2: Instagram figures retrieved May 12, 2013

Table 2 – Platform Top 10 by Resort. Retrieved May 2, 2013 from Slopefillers.com

Twitter

Twitter is a platform used for most timely information. Due to the design of the network, voices of followers gain more visibility and hence more influence than on other platforms. Hashtag integration is an important feature that allows brands to leverage user-generated content.

The high rank of both resorts is more than respectful and in the same way as the amount of their Facebook fans, it confirms the role of industry leaders. Especially so for Breckenridge, where only Whistler Blackcomb scores higher, and the brand leaves all other resorts in Colorado behind. Ample following gives the resorts opportunity to send out messages that will be seen by a large and proactive audience.

When it comes to Twitter activity, figures of Aspen exemplify one trait that is common across all of its social presence – high frequency of content. This is probably an expression of the structure of their marketing team, where the hyperactive manager is backed by an engaged group of marketing professionals with different backgrounds that make content creation a priority.

Youtube

Youtube is important for all brands with a visual product. Facebook and Twitter accounts often link to Youtube, and the platform has a high viral potential. Being thoroughly indexed by Google, it is strong in SEO.

As most metrics in Table 1, YouTube views and subscribers show both Aspen and Breckenridge have some of the biggest audiences in the industry. As for Breckenridge, the number of subscriptions is, once again, highest among all competitors in Colorado.

It is important to note that all resorts which score high on Youtube, in both views and subscriptions, have invested considerable resources into great videos. Indeed, skiing experience is a very visual product (Werkheiser, 2013). For Bear and some of the other resorts that rank as high as Aspen or Breckenridge, Youtube is marketing channel number one (Table 2).

For the two focal ski resorts, professionalism, originality and playfulness are vivid. They both have many videos, many different channels, covering many events, reporting many days of great conditions.

Vimeo

Vimeo is a video platform with small but important differences compared to Youtube. It offers less publishing options free of charge, but paid accounts get more design freedom and ad-free videos. It also is a platform where creativity is encouraged by a community feeling, and where lower quantity of videos is substituted by higher quality. Based on these values, the staff hand picks featured videos. Views are not a public metrics on Vimeo and it is therefore not included in the table.

Aspen is very active on Vimeo. They appreciate the custom design options and ad-free playback (Amirault, 2013a). That makes solid sense, since Youtube's advertising makes a viewer of a ski resort video increasingly

likely to see an ad by either a competitor ski resort, or a brand that is a competitor of the resort's sponsors. What confirms the industry leader position of Aspen on Vimeo is the platform's staff has repeatedly handpicked the resort's videos and promoted them on the front page free of charge. Vimeo editorial is a professional selection of the best on the network from the point of view of production quality, and having a creation hand-picked is a big honor.

Breckenridge does not use the platform much as they prioritize the SEO quality of Youtube (Bast, 2013b).

Instagram

Instagram is a picture simple platform that serves pictures but pictures only to users who love them. Photos from Instagram are often fed to other platforms. Users appreciate beauty, colors, and style –in the case of ski resorts, that most often applies by posting photos featuring ravishing natural beauty. Hashtag integration is an important feature that allows brands to leverage user-generated content, and many brands use services such as Pixlee to collect all pictures that mention them. Regramming (reposting on Instagram) is now common, a feature not originally supported by Instagram.

The fact that both resorts are in the top ten reconfirms their roles of industry leaders. Aspen/Snowmass in particular invests ample time and energy into this channel, and is one of the most active resorts on Instagram overall. Table 2 shows an impressive fact: the brand not only ranks second, it also leaves the third most followed resort behind with a large margin.

Tumblr

Tumblr is a platform that targets creative people and makes blogging more visual and social. Changes in the revenue model are likely after the platform was acquired by Yahoo in late May, but so far all advertising on the site is very unobtrusive. The goal regarding brands is to allow for telling their stories in compelling ways (Karp, 2012). Tone of communication on Tumblr is therefore very personal and information often targets the most engaged segments. In general, Tumblr blogs get a high amount of traffic through posts pushed to Facebook and Twitter. With projected growth and frequent media attention, the platform is a branding tool with high potential.

Only a few ski resorts are present on Tumblr so far. Aspen not only is one of them, it also is a featured blog with terrific growth. Like on Vimeo, being featured, i. e. hand-picked, wins Aspen "a lot of traffic" without spending "a single dollar" (Amirault, 2013a). Moreover, the blog invites anyone to post their own content through a designated tab. Clearly, Aspen is an innovative brand with high engagement and quality content that provides great material for this study.

Number of Tumblr followers as quoted in Table1 is not a publicly displayed number. However, the interactive marketing manager of Aspen/Snowmass is very proud of their growth on Tumblr, and he regularly posts public updates and follower count on his personal profiles. As retrieved in the interview for this paper at the end of

May, the number had surpassed 170k. For the record, the blog was started November 2010, reached 60K followers in January 2013, 100K in March, 150K mid-May, 175K mid-June. For the win.

Breckenridge is not present on Tumblr. Regarding Vail Resorts in general, they do not ignore the platform, but as the former manager of social media says, they “need to make sure [they] can tell the best story possible in that format before completely diving” (Werkheiser, 2013). The statement implies that Vail Resorts is a family of brands that are well aware of the market environment, and a good sample for a study of value creation in brand communities online.

Blog

Bloggging is traditionally a good way to reach out to the most curious users and provide them with backstage insights.

Online presence of Breckenridge creates a strong community feeling and the blog contributes to that. Blog posts are written by a designated team as well as a number of different employees, where also “ANYONE” keen to write is welcome to send in a post (Bast, 2013b). Being built by different sources makes the blog a very authentic channel that values contributions of all that create the Breckenridge experience. From the launch in February 2013 and up to late May, it scored as much as over 50k unique visits. For this paper, the blog is highly suitable because it offers some of the most explicit examples of value-creating community Practices.

EpicMix

EpicMix is a proprietary platform and a mobile app used by the Vail Resorts family, including Breckenridge. Exact numbers on use are protected by the public company status (Bast, 2013b), hence the platform is not included in the tables. That, on the other hand, does not mean it is not worth close attention.

The platform combines a mobile app with complex desktop functionality, where the only thing needed to participate is a lift ticket. It effortlessly digitalizes the physical skiing experience and as a factory, it converts it to content. Easy to share, game-like content that deepens relationships with guests and rewards skiers for skiing. The platform is inspiring and likely to get a clone very soon. More detail, and the best analysis of EpicMix that the CEO of Vail Resorts (Katz, 2012) has read, are on Slopefillers.com (Blanchard 2012b and 2012d).

The platform was launched in season 2010/2011 and has been very innovative since. Every season, it gets an extension, and detailed coverage by Mashable (Indvik 2010, 2011 and 2012). According to the magazine, around 400,000 accounts were activated on EpicMix during the first two years, which is much more than the number of guests the biggest North American resorts get a season. Mashable further notes that over 2 million photos were shared through the platform in winter 2011/2012.

For all stated above, EpicMix only underlines the status of industry leader that belongs to Breckenridge. Analysis by the framework of Practices shows a number of examples on how it is a powerful community-building tool.

Klout

Klout is a platform that measures influence, which can be understood as the ability to spread messages across networks.

Ranks of #6 for Aspen and #7 for Breckenridge further confirm their titles of industry leaders. As listed in Table 2, differences in scores between rank #4, #5, #6 and #7 are minor. They all represent different community building strategies and score high on different metrics, which supports an important implication – there is no universal recipe for brand communication. Indeed, a variety of different approaches can and do work, where the choice of tools depends first of all on specific goals of each brand.

The fact that Keystone is number one confirms that size of community is not the ultimate goal. Whistler, on the other hand, is likely number two because it wins either gold or silver in four other metrics presented in the table.

Platforms Summarized

The status of industry leaders is very clear for both Aspen and Breckenridge. Their brand communities are characterized by amplitude in reach, engagement, perceived value, and innovation. The purpose of this section was to break down the social media performance and inform about it, not to choose an overall winner, and it would even be wrong to do so. The brands have different strengths and use different tools as a reflection of their different goals and personalities. As Morgan Bast of Breckenridge puts it (2013a), a brand has to choose the right goals, use the right tools for reaching those goals, and measure the right growth. As the tables show, Aspen stands out in reaching goals through strong presence on Tumblr and Instagram, Breckenridge through Twitter and blogging. The aggregated effort represented by Klout scores show very even competition.

When it comes to content, it is important to treat each platform differently, because the audience is different (Amirault, 2012a). But to generalize, visual features will definitely remain a stepping stone of community building, along with user-generated content.

Strong status of industry leaders, even competition and creative marketing moves make analysis and comparison of the two cases exciting.

4.3 Implications of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities

The following section uses methodology (chapter 3) to build on knowledge about both focal resorts (sections 4.1 and 4.2), and apply the framework of Types along with its implications (section 2.5). For a very brief recap, the framework examines motivation and concentration of participation. It then categorizes on two axes: from goal-oriented to playful; from many members contributing actively to a small portion of members creating most of the content.

4.3.1 Classification by Types

The two resorts have very similar communities. They can be classified as Mobs regarding content creation and Swarms regarding content distribution, with traits of Hives during specific marketing initiatives. Why and what does it mean?

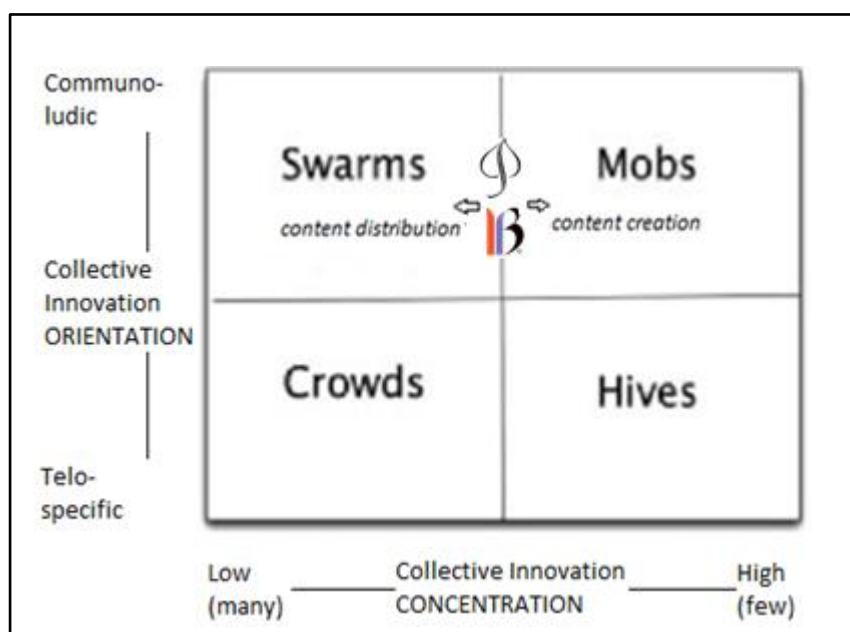


Figure 5, Aspen and Breckenridge as Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities

On the y-axis, communities of the two resorts have a playful (ludic) orientation, as people follow and interact primarily for pleasure and entertainment. The reason they are not all the way up in the ludic end is that users sometimes participate in order to satisfy a specific need or reach a goal. They submit entries in contests, or they visit social profiles with concrete goals to look up information about snow conditions, deals, events. But as those are individualistic goals for which users do not need to learn, cooperate, or work systematically, the character stays playful, revolving around various aspects of mountain sports and lifestyle.

Breckenridge is closer to the telo-specific, i.e. goal-oriented end of the axis due to higher frequency of contests that leverage user-generated content. Among examples are the yearly Design a Dew Tour Feature or Epic Wishes. In all of these, users invest a fair amount of time in creating submissions, being inspired by each other, and interacting with the brand very closely. Such initiatives create temporary groups of highly engaged users that are typical Crowds, a Type very effective in reaching certain goals in community building. But since the

total of their contributions is minor relative to the overall activity of both Breckenridge and Aspen, the ski resorts remain in the upper part of the y-axis.

On the x-axis, the concentration of contributions in communities of both resorts is in the middle, and it accrues from a combination of two points of view. One, it is high in content creation, as the most visible content is posted by the marketing staff. The word 'visible' is important, because otherwise, the sheer amount of user-generated content related to the brands is mind-boggling. On Tumblr, the public in fact puts up more #aspensnowmass posts than the company itself. Content from affiliated brands and broad public is thus high in amount, but due to the architecture of owned social profiles, users who the brands speak to mostly see content created by a small group of marketing staff. Consequently, the ski resort communities have traits of the Mobs type.

Two, from the point of view of content distribution, there is a high aggregate value of contributions by the less active members. Together, they stand behind a major part of community experience across all social profiles of both Aspen and Breckenridge. Posting about a brand or interacting with branded content decides about how far that content will reach. Ergo, the ski resort communities have traits of Swarms.

Being represented by two different types stirs up thoughts about creating a new type that is more comprehensive, but words such as Sworbs and Mwarms sound rather odd and make one prefer adhering to established terms. Indeed, it is not necessary to consider community as one Type only. Boundaries of Types are not just fine, they overlap. The framework allows for viewing the individual brands through two separate categories of content creation and distribution, and based on the respective Types, a number of implications is at hand.

Conclusion: online communities of Aspen and Breckenridge are of the Mobs type on the side of content creation, and Swarms type on the side of content distribution. By initiatives that build on elaborate user-generated content, they can create temporary Hives.

4.3.2 Implications of Types

Mobs

The playful focus of communities of Aspen and Breckenridge implies that user motivations are rather individualistic and content-oriented, which is confirmed by both Dave Amirault (2010) and Morgan Bast (2013a). Users participate for their own individual good, and they interact with whatever they find interesting that particular day. The value of their individual contributions then smoothly shades into an overall community feeling.

Users can easily identify the Mob that creates the most visible content, which gives user-to-marketer interactions high value. Getting an instant answer from an expert, or getting informed through e.g. a recent snowpark picture from a credible staff member, easily fosters positive sentiment. Is it then no wonder that responding is given a high priority by both resorts (Amirault 2010, Bast 2013a). In combination with encouraging to participation, the Mob community becomes a very lively online place.

Along with marketing teams, affiliated professionals that post under their own names are an important part of the Mob. Examples from Aspen include athletes, photographers, film makers, event organizers, park builders, and the ski patrol. To name just a few: Torin YaterWallace, Gretchen Bleiler, Chase Jarvis, the Vital Films, or Snow Park Technologies. Breckenridge has Shaun White, the Breck pro team, the Dew Tour crew, or Breck Parks.

An invaluable trait of a Mob community is that it implies a natural place for influencers. The Mob pattern of content creation makes users expectant of frequent sharing by affiliated people. Ski resorts already make more and more effort to get people to talk for them (Blanchard, 2013b), which Aspen exemplifies by giving away 500 free tickets and a treat in Ajax tavern to people with an online clout in 2012 (Amirault, 2013a). The campaign worked startlingly well and gained more social media reach than the X-Games (Blanchard, 2013d). The very mention of the campaign in this paragraph is just another example of how a good reason to talk results in WOM with long carryover effect. That certainly gives a boost to a number of goals, and content from influencers is even more authentic than that of affiliated professionals.

Yet, to get the most out of influencer marketing, the relationship needs to be a lasting one (Melani and SocialChorus, 2013). The difference is major and brings long-term benefits. Moreover, someone who loves to share online, and whose opinions are respected by a chosen segment, can have a vocation unrelated to mountains and still attract guests. For many people, skiing is a matter of one or two weeks only. Following suit of other businesses, the ski resort could recruit permanent brand ambassadors with different backgrounds – the recruitment event alone would stir up buzz. To stay authentic, there would be no monetary pay, only on-mountain benefits, and the ambassadors would be encouraged, not obligated, to spread the good word. The encouragement would be based on giving influential people reasons to talk as described in sections on WOM and Influencers (2.5.4 and 2.5.5). The analysis herein leads to a belief that such people would enlarge the company's Mob and contribute to growing reach and engagement overall.

In a community that focuses on lifestyle and play, Mobs, as the most active members, will attract like-minded masses. The result is organic segmentation which is further encouraged by incorporating feedback from Swarms, the less active users.

Swarms

In communities of Aspen and Breckenridge, highly engaged Mobs co-exist with plentiful Swarms that contribute in less work-intensive ways. Saying what they do is less “work-intensive” may not even be appropriate, because Swarms interact for the fun of it and rarely think about how their actions create value for the community. Yet, when aggregated by architecture of social media and by tools used by brands, the value of their actions is tremendous.

Marketing staff and other highly active members (Mobs) create content which is public and for everyone to see. That content is in competition with the rest of the content of the same resort, content of other resorts, that of connections of fans and followers, of companies in other industries, and across a number of platforms. To unconsciously sort out the best, a mass of mountain enthusiasts (Swarms) engages in easy ranking, commenting, linking, and sharing. In such a network, contributions of Mobs “are extremely valuable and a relatively scarce resource. Without them, the contributions of the second, much larger group, would be impossible” (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008). Without great content, there would be no fans.

On the other hand, without Swarms, the great content would not be seen by anyone. It is the mass of less-active users that decides which pieces of content will be rated high in the system and pushed to feeds of a large audience. Hence, it makes very good sense that “the social/content investment of Aspen/Snowmass [...], and the work done by Dave Amirault in particular, is cutting edge for the industry” (Hawes, 2012). The higher the quality of content, the further it spreads across the audience. Attaining high reach in such a way is not only efficient, it is also democratic and authentic (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008).

Also, it makes very good sense that Vail Resorts have invested heavily in EpicMix. Among other things, the mass of skiers that has easily activated an account on the platform, and the vast amount of photos they have shared, is an example of how smooth aggregation of Swarm contributions can be. The main ingredient is an efficient system. In community marketing, ceding control to the audience and focusing on providing an environment that highlights collective action should even be a priority (Kozinets, Hemetsberger and Schau, 2008). Aspen and Breckenridge exemplify that by how they intensively encourage user-generated content, and by how they only moderate the most inappropriate content.

What is the role social networks play in content distribution through communities? From one point of view, they are automated systems for aggregating Swarm actions. The systems transform the collective action into value, and where there is value, there is monetization.

An example can be found in Facebook itself, as Mark Zuckerberg states that the social network was not started to be a company. “It was built to accomplish a social mission — to make the world more open and connected.” When the network reached a critical mass of Swarms, monetization potential came to light, and goals have changed. Facebook may be continuing to strive for global openness, but it is now a company one year after its

initial public offering and a popular advertising channel. The mission was given an extension: "We hope to improve how people connect to businesses and the economy" (Zuckenberg, 2012).

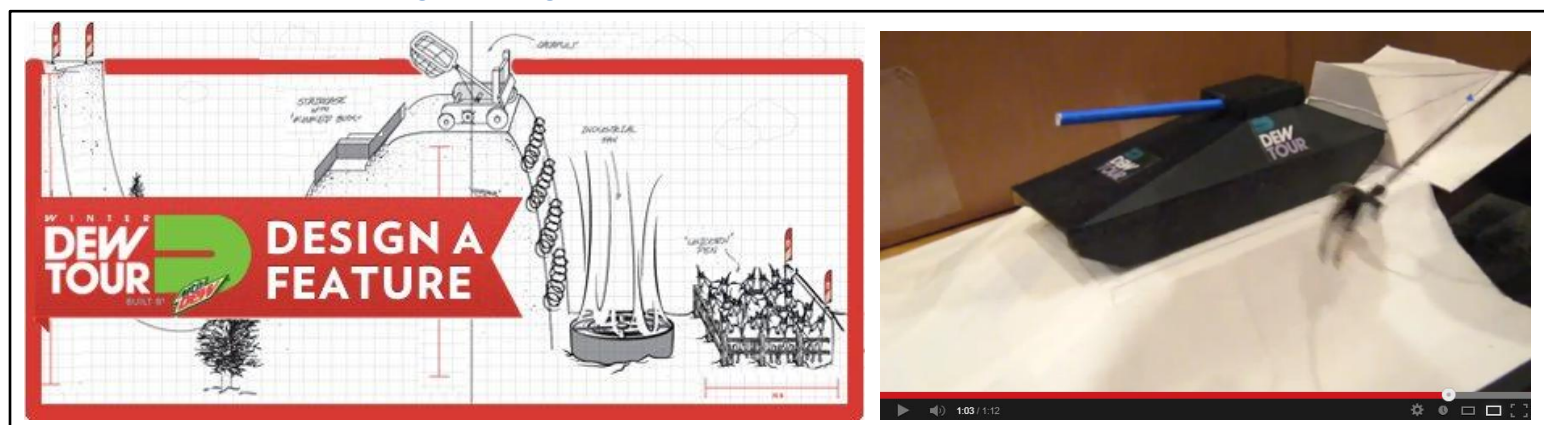
In branding, there is an analogy. Initially, social media channels would be used more for direct communication, later for direct response marketing, and by today, they are increasingly used for generating brand lift (Vizu, 2013). It is not a coincidence that the shift towards brand lift has not occurred earlier; social media first need to go mainstream for the aggregate activity of Swarms to be of value. That brings back to distribution – through Swarms, brand managers of Aspen and Breckenridge acquire a powerful channel of content distribution, a channel that is low-cost, targeted, and socially relevant to community members.

A related implication of Swarms that ski resorts benefit from is that the Type creates value by flocking to common ground (section 2.5.1). Bringing a vast number of interested users to one (virtual) place makes it feasible for brands to spend considerable amounts of resources on making online communities more attractive and valuable for users. One can therefore expect that social reach will remain among the main goals of community marketing despite the trend to focus on engagement. It is without question that a reached audience has little marketing value unless it is engaged, but that does not mean that reach can be forgotten. While focus on engagement develops further, reach will remain vital.

Crowds

As stated, Aspen and Breckenridge are both primarily a combination of Mobs and Swarms, with Crowd traits during specific community initiatives. Through the lens of the framework, the following describes an example of how Crowds create value for ski resorts, and how they interact with actions of Mobs and Swarms. The process is explained on a contest run by Breckenridge: Design a Dew Tour Feature (Figure 5). The contest is a textbook example of Crowd contributions, and it runs yearly from June to October. In an appealing way, Facebook fans are asked to submit entries with designs of their own creative features. Originality is encouraged, as well as spreading the word among friends – only the ten most liked features will be reviewed by the jury. The contest is given detailed and visual coverage. The climax is in October when the feature is made, installed in the Dew Tour slopestyle course, and the lucky winner enjoys the prize, a trip to Breckenridge. The following analyzes the contest based on content from 2012.

Figure 5 – Design a Dew Tour Feature. Summer 2012, Facebook and Youtube.



The open call for entries was announced by the marketing staff across owned social media profiles (Mob content creation). Instructions were visual, and as they also were original and funny, they scored a fair bit of likes and shares, which allowed a significant amount of users to see the call (Swarm content distribution). Spreading the open call across branded social networks ensured that entries came from users that were already fond of the resort, which is an important ingredient of effective WOM. Creativity was highly emphasized, fostering engagement and making more users keen to make brand-related effort (a trait of Crowds). To make sure the entries would be realistic, the resort provided visuals on previous entries and on roughly how a Crowd designer should think about feasibility of his or her feature. The visuals served as subtle constraints that only just encouraged creativity. The judges (Mobs) would only review the ten most popular entries, creating a rule that directly encouraged all participants to spread the word and get as many friends as possible to give their entries some love (Swarms). The contest was hosted on a designated Facebook tab, which was taken down after the goal was reached and the Crowd could disband.

Breckenridge ceded creative control to users and limited itself to providing creative environment, encouragement, instructions, and documenting. Content was processed by the brand, but created to a large extent by the Crowd, and the resulting authenticity was very high. The contest received 82 entries. The number is small compared to reach of the resort's messages that normally measure in thousands and tens of thousands, but creating 82 highly engaged advocates is definitely a success. The Crowd also brought inspiration for the local park and the reputed Dew Tour event. Moreover, showing that the resort cares about what guests have to say undoubtedly stirred up community feeling of belonging and feeling of ownership, two antecedents of customer loyalty. Win-win-win, value, value, value.

The example is so thrilling that one feels sorry for how the Crowd had to disband after the contest was over. The creativity, engagement, and reputation are indeed precious. One way to keep the benefits coming is to make the event regular and create a new engaged Crowd every year. Another way is to create a Hive.

Hives

Unlike Mobs, Swarms and Crowds, Hives are not represented in the online communities of Aspen or Breckenridge. The following is no longer a description, it a recommendation.

For a succinct recap of section 2.5.1, Hives are highly engaged groups that work towards a challenging goal and create a high amount of contributions per member. Compared to Crowds, they work less on a short project and more on a process. A process does not have a point at which a simple goal could be met and cause the community to disband. Compared to Mobs, they are less about a lifestyle and more about working towards goals. By how Hives take their work seriously, they often become highly engaged centers of excellence.

Aspen and Breckenridge could consciously work on creating a lasting Hive and leveraging the benefits. With their community building experience, strong online presence, and a highly engaging product, they have the capacity. The example below is based on how Whistler has become a global bike mecca thanks to the “community effort, with everyone embracing that culture” (Blanchard, 2013a). It is likely that the resorts have done something similar already, and here is a perspective of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities.

Either resort could back a community effort that would contribute to the local mountain experience and respective brand personality. The process would have a rich presence online. Examples of community efforts that would suit well include building biking trails, raising avalanche safety awareness, or collecting and incorporating feedback on snowparks. The following elaborates on the biking example.

Building biking trails as a community effort would be backed by an online platform. It would be an integral part of the effort and cater for information exchange, planning, and thrilling coverage. Focus on biking would be coherent with how resorts look for ways to get people to come up in summer months. Marketers would focus on guidance, bringing people together, amplifying the effort online, and providing a likeable framework of interaction. To stir up buzz and have temporary Crowds create content that would be spread by Swarms, the process could run contests where users submit ideas for trail features, much like for the Dew Tour. Other such contests could be: creating logos, putting up art along the trail and picturing it online, showing ways to keep environment in mind, most ‘Liked’ bike trick during testing of a new trail, and much, much more. The process would be an intensive content factory, where most would be created by members, willing to share, learn, socialize, or cooperate. With time, interaction of highly engaged contributors would create strong community ties based on shared passion, experience and knowledge. Moreover, the effort would leave participants with high affinity and knowledge, and such a group of already-reached enthusiasts is marketing gold.

Value for the brands would be in the form of content creation, reach, brand lift, and uncovered desires of a targeted segment. For the participants, value would stem from feeling of ownership, learning and mastering, socializing, healthy physical activity, and more.

4.3.3 Types Summarized

A common theme across the four Types is that ceding creative control to users fosters engagement. With the huge rate of interaction, there are valuable opportunities for capturing market insight. In Gregg Blanchard’s interview, Adam Hawes, the former social media manager of Northstar Resort who now works for HTC, states that social media teams are a “direct, home-hitting contact between visitor, guest, potential vacationer and resort. They alone are the direct portal to millions of dollars in revenue stream (2012)”. Thinking of how brand communities are not only a source of information for marketers, but also for consumers, there is a fascinating win-win case of value creation.

Another common trait of all Types is that a brand's main responsibility lies in creating an environment where user creativity can flourish. The environment should be based on a system that aggregates user contributions and encourages engagement. Today, creating amazing content by brands themselves is one of the building blocks of such environment. The overall goal is to build a large and lively community where actions of users themselves decide about who will be reached by marketing messages. Brands that attain the goal experience benefits that are highly praised in marketing – accurate targeting, high response, and brand lift. Users, on the other hand, experience benefits appreciated in all relationships – authenticity, fun, ease of asking, appreciation of contribution, and a welcoming (virtual) place for the friends they bring.

Today, creating amazing content is priority number one, which is more than reasonable for brands such as Aspen and Breckenridge. Also, in communities where users come for play and the vast majority of them only contributes a little (Mobs combined with Swarms), staff focus on content is expected. Yet, in the following years, with authenticity in mind, it will be inspiring to follow how the focus can shift from creating amazing content for users, to aggregating amazing content by users.

4.4 Implications of Value-Creating Practices in Brand Community Building

The framework of Types examines online brand communities from the point of view of members, and the framework of Practices fittingly complements by adding the point of view of a proactive community manager. It describes community building in an escalating manner, where each value creates value as a different piece of the puzzle. Finding examples of application of Practices allows for depicting how exactly value was created in the online community, and what the implications are.

Where possible, implications are self-contained, but they all build on knowledge presented heretofore. Special attention should be paid to the detailed description of Practices in section 2.6, the background of Aspen and Breckenridge presented in 4.1 and 4.2., and the implications on Types made in the previous section, 4.3.

Examples of the twelve practices were identified on all networks where the two resorts have a major presence. The sample of relevant platforms was verified with the interviewed managers (section 3.2 and appendix), and resulted in identifying the twelve Practices on six platforms for Aspen, and seven for Breckenridge. That makes a total of one hundred and fifty-six examples. They are organized in two tables, one per resort, and since each of them takes 3 pages, they are only included in the appendix.

All implications on Practices are based off of findings recorded in the large tables, but to funnel and communicate the most vivid thoughts, Table 3 below presents a shortened, summarizing snapshot – a comparison table containing prevailing findings about value creation in community building of the two resorts.

Borderlines of Practices are fluid, for they interact, work together in synergy, and do not require application in a fixed order. The following text presents findings that aim to be representative, and highlights those that are outstanding or novel. It is thus neither exhaustive, nor completely free of bias. The text is indeed a product of interpretation. As much as these limitations are important to point out, they are addressed by pervasive triangulation and conscious adhering to research principles as noted in the methodology (section 3.3).

The section starts by implications on value creation by each of the Practices. The resorts share many traits, but where there are differences, they are pointed out and exemplified. Following, two vivid and representative examples of practice interaction are described, and overall notions presented to conclude.

	Social Networking			Impression Management	
	Welcoming	Empathizing	Governing	Evangelizing	Justifying
Aspen	Across all the channels the resort is consistent about an implicit but clear first impression: the mood of a great mountain where you more than need to be. Also encouraging to interaction by showing that Aspen/Snowmass is listening. Consistent with the ubiquitous and appealing calling to social action. Backed strongly by evangelizing.	Encouraging, praising, thanking, agreeing and "showing that we're listening" catalyzes creation of user content that A/S prefers and makes that content readily more visible. Borrowing viral themes then shows that the company is on the same page with the audience. High overlap with other practices.	Direct or indirect expressing of expectations for people to share and engage - how exactly this is done depends on the type of audience of platform in question. As for moderation, there is none or little - the resort runs an open-wall policy.	A strategic and strongest practice of A/S together with documenting. The two practices are simultaneous. This practice comes across in a very authentic manner, as compared to, e.g. the Vail mountain. What exactly the resort brags about and how they do that depends on expectations and unspoken standards typical for each platform.	Naming irresistible reasons to come and leave everything behind. Creating a sense of urge or resentment if the reached member of audience does not "get their butt up. Now."
Breck	Introducing in headers and about sections. Often for welcoming to new activities and contests, and explicitly to Breck Nation. Supported by evangelizing the experience and showing that Breck is listening.	In company content by posting about topics and values in and beyond skiing, and by showing empathy to all worries that riders have when not riding. In UG content by listening - liking, reposting, responding, thanking, encouraging. High overlap with other practices.	Encouraging creation of user content through responding, reposting, and interactive posts, in a tone and format adapted to each platform. Automatic and manual filtering of inappropriate.	A ubiquitous and vivid practice applied through most posts. Almost all other Practices are always doubled by evangelizing. Clear and confident messages about how Breck is better than anywhere else are frequent in both staff and user posts.	Most common arguments are great snow conditions, events, new park features, limited deals. Sense of urge fosters high engagement, a metric that is highest during powder times.
	Community Engagement				
	Staking	Milestoning	Badging	Documenting	
Aspen	Indirectly by use of a great variety of platforms in order to speak to different audiences, directly by segmenting, and by the audience via posting about their favorite ways to enjoy the mountain.	Of company achievements, memorable moments, events. Also of achievements of a broader group of people affiliated with the resort, such as employees and athletes. Adding, milestoning of achievements of the social media marketing encourages users by letting them know they contributed to success.	Rewarding skiing itself in a proactive manner. By the admins to partners for their events and (common) achievements, to athletes for "sending it", to employees, event participants and public for skiing tons and contributing with content.	Strongly supports evangelizing and intensive across all platforms. Creates synergy with other Practices as well as it is one of the dominant ones. Growing focus on user-generated content.	
Breck	By company through segmenting and recognizing different tastes through targeted pieces of content. By users thorough expressing which aspects of the experience they enjoy most.	Very strong. Gives a feeling of a lasting process of development of Breck. History is highlighted to show how Breck became what it is, and it is emphasized that everything is thanks to a community effort. Also, events and success of pro athletes are recognized.	Rewrdng skiing itself. Recognition to those who ski a lot or ski well. To the local pro team for winning, other pros for showing up, volunteers for contributing, to pass holders in particular through EpicMix.	Fundamental. Supports all other Practices. Growing focus on user-generated content. Mountain experience is a visual product to market, and social media a visual channel (even Twitter now supports pics). Focus is on snow conditions, history, mountain beauty, mood, events, etc..	
	Brand Use				
	Grooming	Customizing	Commoditizing		
Aspen	By the company through environmental engagement, partnering, caring for the audience. By the audience by showing appreciation for that and taking part in polls. All that to preserve the mountain experience at it's best.	The product is experience, and in essence, every experience is different (customized). The resort encourages customizing by encouraging user-generated content.	The community already revolves around a commercial activity, but as the audience sees beyond the monetary value of mountainsports, they actively express opinions on which aspects of the experience the company should or should not be involved in. Also, A/S makes user-generated content into market commodity by using it in own promotion.		
Breck	Caring by admiring, education, focus on environment. Exercised in this way by both users and staff. Optimal use pattern is more riding.	Strong for user-generated content and authenticity. The resort encourages creative ways of enjoying riding and calls out for user contributions, both on daily bases and in online contests. Users welcome that.	Valuable source of market insights - users express what they miss or want more of. Extending the experience to more terrain, features and activities. Also, interacting with users and having them post indirectly commoditizes their content as a word-of-mouth tool.		

Table 3 – Comparison of Value-Creating Practices in Aspen and Breckenridge

SOCIAL NETWORKING

The three following Practices help brands reach beyond the existing community and grow its numbers.

Welcoming

The two resorts welcome either to the community or to a practice, while sometimes they introduce specific features.

Online presence of Breckenridge carries a strong community feeling. At a second thought, it can be accredited to a large extent to the explicit welcoming carried out across the brand's social profiles. Welcoming gives a feeling of safety and encourages engagement. The brand explicitly applies the practice by making the "Welcome to Breck Nation" stand forward. The company also welcomes user creations by vehement praise, and it makes users feel at home by using their unofficial hash-tags. The practice is further applied by publishing about physical welcoming at the resort, where examples include freshly baked cookies handed out at the base, or a welcome tour to all new guests by a local volunteer.

Welcoming of Aspen is less visible and the brand could benefit from making it more explicit. What the company does, though, is implicit welcoming to interaction. It encourages engagement intensively and effectively - the brand's Facebook page features an engagement rate higher than for most other resorts of the same size. Browsing through the content of Aspen, one quickly notices that the number of interactive posts is very high.

Direct or indirect, welcoming attracts new members and makes old ones feel at home, especially so when in combination with evangelizing or empathizing.

Empathizing

This practice lies in lending emotional support. Resorts apply it by showing their brand personalities and making users feel better understood and more affiliated. It is often applied in interactive posts where users are asked about their thoughts on a broad range of topics, some of which are topics unrelated to snow sports.

Aspen community managers empathize by borrowing themes popular in user content across the internet. Those can be mother's day, Santa costumes, Harlem shake or cat memes. Sometimes the pieces of content are as ridiculous as they are hilarious, other times they pay homage to widely accepted values. But always, the message is clear: we are like you, and it's not just about skiing, it's much more.

Breckenridge, on a different note, lends ample emotional support by giving without asking back. Free cookies, free refreshments, free guided tours, free Epic Wishes, free much more. Giving, without a doubt, lends ample emotional support. It is a generous community building approach as seen by a philanthropist, and a profitable move as seen by a cunning marketer. Mark Schaefer points out that the reciprocity instinct fostered by being helped is so strong that it almost always translates into action. Online, it can be something as small as giving a

Like, or as big as talking on the brand's behalf (Schaefer and Baer, 2012). Thus, the community practice of empathizing, when carried out by giving, fosters engagement and creates value for all involved.

Governing

Governing lies in articulating desired behaviors. Aspen and Breckenridge do so in two ways.

First, they do very little moderation. Users enjoy ample posting freedom and open-wall policies. All negative comments stay unless highly inappropriate, and responding is diligent. That not only creates feeling of authenticity, it also encourages participation.

Second, desired behaviors are promoted by praising to hand-selected pieces of content. Thanking, liking, commenting, and reposting thus encourage engagement.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

The two following Practices are applied for building brand image.

Evangelizing

Evangelizing, in other words advocating or praising the experience, comes across as very authentic for both resorts. The practice is frequently used in synergy with other ones. Everything that is documented serves to praise: welcoming builds excitement with the help of evangelizing, milestone is given emphasis by evangelizing, grooming is justified by qualities of the mountain, and so on.

Aspen evangelizes in a very authentic way in all their visual content. The reason is that photos and videos of great conditions, park features, or parties are normally taken at places and in times available to all guests. Also, guests take up the role of advocates and praise the experience in Aspen's name without being directly asked to do so. In a similar fashion, affiliated athletes create amazing pieces of content that travel very far across the crowd of mountain enthusiasts.

Praise that comes across as authentic seems to be a matter of course, but it is not always so. Vail, a major competitor of Aspen, usually reports powder days by shots of super neat skiers slashing down a pristine Alpine meadow with elegance and ease. All who ride actively know that even when conditions are great, one rarely scores an out-of-this-world shot like that. Even if there was a chance, the rider would either need to always ride with a film crew, or be flaky enough to think of stopping to film. The strategy of Vail has its justification, but the contrast makes authenticity in evangelizing by Aspen stand out.

Breckenridge, for their part, is no small player in evangelizing. Statements about how Breck is best, better than anything, amazing, and easy to fall in love with, are commonplace. The best about them though is that they are usually indirect and relatively modest when uttered by the brand itself. The most intense and explicit

praise comes from users themselves, and it does so in flooding amounts. Emotional, warm and thrilled expressions of love for #Breck spread the good word with vigor.

Praising yourself works, and in branding, it is expected. When done by proofs not words, namely by visual content, it is even very well received by the audience. Even though this strategy stands strong, the alternative of giving people a reason to talk and having them advocate the brand is growing.

Justifying

Justifying provides people with reasons to come up and ride no matter what the hindrances are.

Both focal ski resorts apply justifying frequently. To show the audience that they should “get their butt up” (a frequent quote on Aspen’s Facebook page) with no hesitation, they first of all tease by ephemeral powder conditions. The tactic works great, and powder days are those when Breckenridge enjoys highest Facebook engagement (Bast, 2013a). Among other reasons used to justify the skiing priority are events, new park features, or deals.

EpicMix, too, is a vivid example of justifying. It gives reasons to come by offering the opportunity to score points. By rewarding skiers for skiing, by motivating them into winning badges, and by comparing scores of guests to their friends, passholders are given new strong reasons to come.

The practice creates marketing value in how it creates engagement. Sense of urge on a powder day makes users interact with the content of the ski resort instead of that of other people and businesses in their social network. In consequence, the community is lively and users can see the many others who share the same passion. For users, feeling of being with like-minded people and spending more days on the hill is certainly of value, too.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The following four Practices reinforce members’ escalating engagement. They all highlight and reward achievements related to skiing.

Staking

In user-generated content across all social profiles of Aspen and Breckenridge, people frequently post about how they like their mountain experience best. Some are blogging mums with kids, some tweet about how they want to ride park and park only, others come for dining and post on Instagram about it. On a different note, some enjoy contests, others prefer information on deals.

By listening and measuring, resort marketers gain invaluable insights and the ability to adjust the community experience. As Breckenridge exemplifies, audience can be segmented in close cooperation with the CRM team,

and content served differently for each standardized “persona” (Bast, 2013a). People are thus served content they are passionate about, which makes them likely to sound off in a very natural way and spread WOM.

Along with better content and targeting, staking also leads to better community architecture. Aspen exemplifies that by how they are highly active on Tumblr, a platform that has been small in user numbers just a year or two ago, or Instagram, a platform with a very narrow focus. By doing so, Aspen acknowledges preferences of users and serves the content just the way they like it best.

Staking thus gives ample market insights, especially when community managers create ways for it to show. On EpicMix, for example, there are so many different ways to gain points that everyone will find their preferred path to being rewarded.

Milestoning

Noting standout moments in online communities of Aspen and Breckenridge is applied mostly by community managers.

Aspen marketing team often posts about achievements of the marketing itself. Surpassing 100k followers on Tumblr, creating a celebratory post containing the 10 most liked Instagram pictures, cheering to a great season - those are all instances of thanking users for results of work that started in the marketing office. It is human nature to love hearing one has helped to a success, and it is very likely that giving users credit for good marketing makes them more receptive of that same marketing in future. Moreover, on social media, where masses of users play a key role in content distribution (Swarms), the credit is more than deserved.

Breckenridge acknowledges marketing achievements in a similar manner, and it also has one other distinct way of milestoning. Namely, marking and reminding about events from the resort’s history. Youtube channel titled Breck Classic Moments shows moments that helped the resort become what it is today. The fact that achievements were often a result of community effort is highlighted. In this way, milestoning joins welcoming in building a strong and pleasant community feeling.

Badging

Badging gives semiotic recognition to milestones. It highlights the importance of select achievements and implicitly communicates that the community is well-grounded in its values.

In the social media environment, where posts are seen by thousands of enthusiasts, a badge can be something as simple as a public mention of an individual achievement. Both Aspen and Breckenridge give recognition in this way to pro athletes, employees, users who contribute with great content, volunteers who contribute, or partners that put up events. All of these are actions characterized by high engagement, and badging, typically in combination with milestoning and documenting, encourages that engagement. In more general terms, badging explicitly encourages a varied scope of desired behaviors, as well as it expresses brand identity.

EpicMix is a tool frequently quoted herein; the reason being is its high community building potential and clarity in which it applies the different Practices. Badging by pins is one of its prominent features. By giving people digital, public, and shareable recognition for skiing, they encourage more of the desired behavior – skiing. In an intricate, fun, easy to use, and engaging manner.

Documenting

Members experience the brand through Practices, therefore documenting is never a standalone one. Online, it strongly supports the other Practices and especially evangelizing, where visual proofs are more effective and authentic than words.

Skiing experience is a very visual product and that is exactly how documenting is done by both Aspen and Breckenridge. Both brands allocate significant resources in their photo and video programs. At the same time, they focus more and more on aggregating user-generated content. Authenticity and WOM potential of such content are very high.

Considering that creating great content is a priority of both resorts, documenting is a dominant practice in their community building.

BRAND USE

The following three Practices are an expression of high-fidelity relationships with guests.

Grooming

Grooming lies in handling the focal object with affectionate care, and in finding an optimal use pattern. Because it is about emotion in relationships, it contributes to community feeling. Aspen and Breckenridge differ very little in their respective applications of grooming. They care for guests, and they care for the mountain.

The resorts care for guests for instance by posting about safety procedures and how-tos. Breckenridge writes elaborate blog posts about the lives of avalanche dogs, and about how the dogs and patrollers ensure safety on the mountain. Aspen, for their part, frequently post on Facebook about their involvement in environmental issues.

Grooming can be vivid, but not necessarily. An example of how subtle grooming can be very effective is in a hidden call-to-action by Aspen from April 29. That day, Dave Amirault posted a picture with a cup of champagne on the background of beautiful mountains, where he thanked everyone for an awesome season. Besides scoring 1789 Likes and 21 Comments on Instagram, or 631 Likes and 57 shares on Facebook, the post made some people think. Why would a manager of a classy resort drink from a plastic cup while on the patio of a reputed restaurant? When a user pointed out the plastic cup, Aspen replied by relating the cup to their

respect for the environment. The cup can be recycled. The reply scored 7 likes alone, a very high number for a comment. This subtle expression of caring for the mountain environment was ingenious in how it was, in the end, very strongly and positively perceived. Moreover, the subtle character of the message avoided bugging people who normally give environmental concerns negative comments because they consider them to be overly hippie.



Figure 6 – Grooming Example, Aspen, April 29, 2013, Facebook

Customizing

For ski resorts, the product is experience, and in essence, experience is different every time. When the ‘different’ is largely dependent on unique needs and preferences, it can be termed as customized. The two focal resorts encourage user creations, both in online content and on the slopes. Customizing is different from staking in that it takes delineation of preferences to applying them.

If a resort listens, it can identify the staked preferences, and encourage more customizing. If users are given the opportunity to customize their products, they will. Not all of them, but an important amount of the highly-engaged ones will. Along with amplifying content of the most engaged and enthusiastic users, customizing can lead to use patterns unforeseen by the brand.

An example can be explained by snowboarder posts that picture riding creative features in the woods. It can be bike jumps used in winter, fallen trees used for grinds, bonks, taps, and gaps, or something that neither the reader or the author of this paragraph have seen yet. Listening to this active expression of preferences can

inspire the resort to build a jib line in the forest, or to build a forest-like line in the park. Events such as Red Bull Supernatural or contests such as Design a Dew Tour feature show that similar initiatives are successful. The main point is that at the origin of the initiative, there is user customization. Commonly, customization is applied by high-fidelity users.

By listening to conversations and measuring user activity, resorts can and do adjust content. What they also adjust is architecture of their communities. User creativity can flourish most if it can benefit from an inspiring environment (section 2.5.3).

Commoditizing

Through commoditizing, parts of the mountain experience gain market value that they did not originally possess. By definition, brand communities revolve around the marketplace, but commoditizing can create incremental value by shaping product extensions and changing brand personality. The two focal ski resorts share two general ways in which commoditizing within their communities occurs.

The most apparent commoditizing takes place through extension of offering. Recently, Breckenridge has extended the resort to a new peak. It also invites event participants to buy T-shirts that would remind them of a great event at Breck. Aspen extends offering for instance by involvement in the Mountain Collective Pass. In turn, users express how they feel about each of the extensions.

A more subtle but vital way in which commoditizing occurs is leveraging user-generated content. Pieces of content created for personal needs of users become promotional and branding tools that bring direct benefits to the company. Unlike in other forms of marketing, users show appreciation for being involved, which leads to high engagement and authenticity.

In both forms of commoditizing present in online brand communities of Aspen and Breckenridge, listening and two-way conversations are vital.

4.4.1 Examples of Practice Interaction

The above are Practices as identified in the activity of Aspen and Breckenridge. As theory states (section 2.6), Practices act together in synergy and escalate engagement. To underline the two qualities and provide a sneak peak on how effects of Practices play out in every day online community marketing, this section highlights two examples. Both should be read with effects of individual Practices in mind, as described in the analysis above.

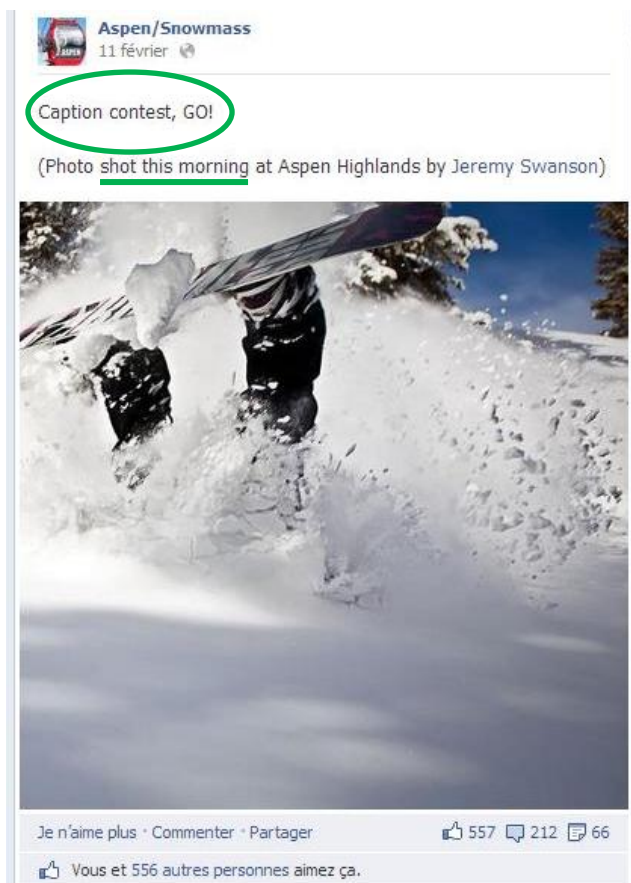


Figure 7 – Welcoming and Interaction of Practices. Welcome to Breck Nation, Youtube.

Figure 8 – Interaction of Practices, Aspen. Facebook post, Feb 11, 2013

The first one is Welcome to Breck Nation (Figure 7), a Youtube video promoted across the brand's social profiles. The main message, welcoming, is displayed in six languages. By referring to values beyond snow, the resort empathizes with a broad public. Through beauty in every shot, it evangelizes. By explaining love to the place, as well as by displaying the admired and enchanting champagne powder, it justifies devotion. By displaying both quiet spots, powder, park, and families, it encourages staking. By implying that Breck feeling is an achievement, the resort milestones. And finally, everything is craftily documented. With this many Practices applied in such an explicit manner, it is no wonder that the video builds a strong feeling of community that one is eager to take part in.

The second example is a hilarious photo posted by Aspen on February 11 (Figure 8). The photo pictures a snowboarder in the middle of a fall, with his body piercing the fluffy snow head first, and only his feet and board sticking out. The shot is high-definition, dynamic, and simply hilarious. It empathizes with users by how it shows that even members of the resort's content crew fall and fall badly. It governs by a Facebook caption

calling out “Caption contest, GO!” It justifies by creating a sense of urgency when it informs that the great powder is from the morning of the same day. It stakes by listening to users’ comments and by publishing the photo on three different social platforms, every time with a different seasoning. It documents snowboarding experience. And finally, it commoditizes user comments by having them spread the branded message in their personal networks. The result is a respectful engagement rate that creates value for the brand. At the same time, the message creates value for users by entertaining and informing them.

4.4.2 Practices Summarized

Understanding how Practices create value in online communities is useful in that it justifies success of concrete pieces of content. At the same time, familiarity with Practices that are either dominant or best-received uncovers underlying brand strategies.

Aspen and Breckenridge most likely do not consciously apply the same framework as this section did, but it is inspiring to see how their activity is congruent with academic claims. In that respect, Aspen’s high frequency of posting on all its social profiles can be translated as high frequency of applying Practices. In an escalating manner, each practice brings value, and the brand’s approach brings fruit.

Because of different personalities, each brand is free to find their own effective combination of Practices. Interaction of the different ones is high, but community managers can choose those that fit their strategy best and seed them. Both Aspen and Breckenridge do so by selective encouraging of user-generated content. It is often users that promote the most suitable Practices, and in such an environment, the role of the brand is to listen carefully. Market insights acquired in this way can lead to creation of high incremental value within brand communities, especially so if brands build effective systems for catalyzing user participation.

5. CONCLUSION

Takeaways of this study that are most concrete, easiest to apply in practice, and tied to the two focal ski resorts are to be found in Implications (4.3 and 4.4). The conclusion below generalizes findings of the paper and highlights some of the most vivid ones. The way online brand communities create value for both consumers and marketers can be contained by the following keywords:

co-creation, engagement, authenticity, designing environment of interaction, listening, experimenting.

Each brand has a unique online community with specific needs, but all of the keywords must be included in order to create value.

Co-creation is vivid in patterns of behavior in online brand communities. The framework of Types of Online Creative Consumer Communities highlights interaction of different Types of community members as a primary factor that creates the final form of marketing messages. In the playful online environments administered by Aspen and Breckenridge, a small group of highly engaged members creates most of the content. They can be the marketing staff, other employees, or affiliated professionals. The content needs to be amazing for masses to embrace it, and when they do, they engage in enjoyable actions that are low on work intensity. As they like, comment, share, tag, invite, or hyperlink, the content is altered and spread further. The final reach of individual pieces of content and the attitudes they shape thus depends on those easy actions of masses.

Sometimes, the brand breaks the pattern and encourages a target audience into brand-related activity that requires intensive work, e.g. through contests. The content will then not just be altered by users, it will originate from them. Groups that are willing to work hard for a brand are always smaller, but the reach and positive attitudes they foster can be immense.

In such a system of online communication, users have a major say in how messages are spread and perceived. As a result, messages travel furthest if they are the way broad public wants them. Effectiveness of marketing in such an environment depends primarily on shared interests and values, not on advertising budgets. There is no room for boring or annoying promotion, because it would quickly sink in the sea of more appealing content.

It is no wonder then that engagement is given the highest priority by all the marketers interviewed for this paper. Engagement is escalated by community building Practices, boosted by ceding control to users, and at the end, engagement is a demonstration of co-creation. In online brand communities, the co-created product is marketing itself. The more target segment is involved in creation of marketing, the better that marketing becomes. As a consequence, online communities are extremely strong in targeting, collecting market insights, and authenticity. The reason being is that for people to spread a branded message by putting their name behind it, the message must appeal to their personalities, values, interests, and interests of their friends. Online, putting a name behind something includes actions as easy as likes. With such organic user contributions, marketing becomes so good people enjoy it. Joy is a direct form of value for users, and in

exchange, brands win reach and engagement in an audience that is genuinely interested in what the brands have to say.

In these personal brand-to-consumer relationships, authenticity is extremely important. Brands are, for good of all involved, pushed into acting as people. Examples of community building Practices for both Aspen and Breckenridge confirmed that authenticity is a pillar to their online activity. So did interviews with managers of both brands, and it is to no surprise. In fact, out of the six interviewees, the four that manage social media profiles of ski resorts all named authenticity as a vital guideline at one point or another (Amirault 2013a, Bast 2013a, Benjamin 2013, Werkheiser 2013). Marketing scholars also highlight authenticity (Kozinets et al., 2010a), along with marketing books (Ries and Trout, 2009), community marketing books (Moffitt and Dover, 2011), reports on marketing trends (Moffitt, 2013), ancient Yamas, mythology, advice of all gentle grandmothers, and common sense.

The reason this was not always applied in marketing practice is that consumers as viewed in the Mad Men era were mere passive recipients of messages, and they usually possessed less information than brands. Today, they are not only super informed, they participate in production so much that it is hard to define who a consumer actually is. With the average of over ten information sources per buying decision in USA (Lecinski, 2011), and with Twitter being a more trusted information source than broadcast TV (Howard, 2013), marketing has a unique opportunity to gain a whole new reputation. It is indeed a shame that marketing itself, a body of knowledge about creating positive associations, stereotypically suffers from negative associations among broad public. If brands adapt embrace the new dynamic environment, they can change the negative image marketing has gained through, indeed, lack of authenticity. Aspen and Breckenridge certainly do so, and it allows them to enjoy immense organic reach, high engagement, and ample market insights.

Authenticity is not a new concept, but the fact that messages and personalities are amplified on social media, and that branded content on social media competes with that of friends of target audience, makes the quality vital. Brands must absolutely behave like authentic people in order to win attention from other people. Does that mean that a brand should be careful and avoid self-praise? Not at all, especially not if it is a ski resort of the caliber of Aspen or Breckenridge. Evangelizing is in fact a community building practice that gives users a reason to talk and spread the good word beyond the existing audience. By being authentic about own bragging rights, and by listening to how users respond, the brand will likely stir up positive WOM. And one of the benefits WOM leads to is, in an escalating way, more authenticity.

Implications of both Types and Practices show that to reap benefits of co-creation, authentic brand-to-consumer relationships, and WOM, brand managers should focus on building a welcoming environment that will aggregate value created by individuals. Consumers that are encouraged to creation are more likely to become fond of the brand, as well as they are likely to participate in creations that will be appreciated by other consumers. Interviewed managers confirm that focus on creating great branded content stands strong,

but implications herein forecast that in coming years, the industry will witness a shift - towards focus on creating environments that aggregate great content created by users themselves. The shift will be driven by search for authenticity, WOM, and organic reach.

To enjoy the full value of online brand communities and user creations that occur within, brands listen and adjust activity based on the feedback. Either by manual reading of messages or by automated measuring of aggregate behavior, brands that pay close attention to evaluating feedback can fully experience value created in their communities. By doing so, they adjust their marketing activity, which can also be seen as letting users decide what marketing to deploy. Measuring is a hot topic and the emphasis it deserves is caused by the fact that never before in history was data on marketing performance as detailed and real-time as today. The consequence is, again, better marketing as a result of co-creation in online brand communities.

Proof of success of these communities is demonstrated in a number of ways. The existing global social networks grow rapidly, and new ones that successfully find their niches keep appearing. Also, while a couple years ago, only Facebook and Twitter were considered profitable for brands, many brands today are thrilled by their statistics on Youtube, Instagram, textual blogs, Tumblr, and a few more depending the product. Connecting with companies becomes a more and more common reason to use social media, and people who manage online communities are now better integrated in their companies.

Much of what is applied today is in a trial and error phase of experimenting. In a domain where everything can be measured and creativity is appreciated, this is neither a bad thing, nor is it going to change anytime soon. Still, there are some indicators of maturing, for instance the growing tendency of using marketing for branding (Moffit, 2013), as opposed to direct response.

At the same time, there is lack of standardization in community marketing, a state that can be regarded as a sign of immaturity. That is not a case, however, and low standardization can also be termed as thriving variety. As analysis of Aspen and Breckenridge shows, variety in community building by different brands is an expression of different goals, brand personalities, and audiences. Implications on what works for the two studied resorts are thence not meant to be universally applicable recipes. Instead, they aim to provide a range of examples that brand managers can adapt to their own needs.

As the eighty-two pages above show, online brand communities are boldly on their way towards the holy grail of getting the right message, to the right people, at the right time.

APPENDIX

A1: Complete Analysis of Aspen/Snowmass by Framework of Practices

		Social Networking			Impression Management	
		Welcoming	Empathizing	Governing	Evangelizing	Justifying
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	greeting, introducing, either into the community or a practice	lending emotional and or/physical support	articulating behavioral expectations	Sharing the good news, inspiring others to use, preaching from the mountain top	rationalizing one's devotion where either the devotion itself or its extent is not reasonable
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	Across all the channels the resort is consistent about an implicit but clear first impression: the mood of a great mountain where you more than need to be. Also encouraging to interaction by showing that Aspen/Snowmass is listening. Consistent with the ubiquitous and appealing calling to social action. Backed strongly by evangelizing.	Encouraging, praising, thanking, agreeing and "showing that we're listening" catalyzes creation of user content that A/S prefers and makes that content readily more visible. Borrowing viral themes then shows that the company is on the same page with the audience. High overlap with other practices.	Direct or indirect expressing of expectations for people to share and engage - how exactly this is done depends on the type of audience of platform in question. As for moderation, there is none or little - the resort runs an open-wall policy.	A strategic and strongest practice of A/S together with documenting. The two practices are simultaneous. This practice comes across in a very authentic manner, as compared to, e.g. the Vail mountain. What exactly the resort brags about and how they do that depends on expectations and unspoken standards typical for each platform.	Naming irresistible reasons to come and leave everything behind. Creating a sense of urge or resentment if the reached member of audience does not "get their butt up. Now."
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Not explicitly, but there is ample focus on call-to-action and great first impression.	The partner section emphasizes extensively with efforts and objectives of the partners, some of which are only related to mountain sports indirectly.	Call-to-action - "Plan a trip", "Book", "Stay", otherwise little space for user contributions	As much as functional and informative, the website communicates every message in a very enticing way.	Homepage: "MOUNTAIN BIKING: Come ride the NEW freeride trails at Snowmass this summer."
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	About: "I'll tell you where. Someplace warm. A place where the beer flows like wine. Where beautiful women instinctively flock like the salmon of Capistrano. I'm talking about a little place called Aspen." - Lloyd Christmas	Expressing itself on issues not related to skiing: "We recently signed a Climate Declaration (...) Watch this video featuring our very own (...) Then take action by signing (...)". The resort then leaves fans to discuss openly. Also, giving recognition to employees. Also, when praising and thanking to posts that follow call-to-action: "Big ups to you, Marc. (after a FB fan commented on that he had bought The Mountain Collective Pass already)."	No moderation of content unless inappropriate, even to very negative and impolite comments. Also, ubiquitous encouraging to share and interact.	Grumpy Cat is bummed that he has to ski Highlands, Ajax, and Snowmass." - a meme after a part of the mountain closed at the end of the season. About part of the FB page: "Anyplace else this would be four separate vacations. Snowmass, Aspen Mountain, Aspen Highlands and Buttermilk - with over 5,300 acres of terrain and boundless dining and nightlife, there are more than enough reasons to visit the most exciting winter escape in the world."	"14" in the last 24 hours! Get up here, now." "Have you ever skied all of our mountains in one day? Now's the time, as Buttermilk closes for the season in just two days. Take a trip..."
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	About: "The heart of a city. The soul of a mountain town. Tweets by @ozskier and @meredithbrett."	Selective RTing and following others based on values they express.	Give us a shout, we'll hit you back!" Also, by retweeting only the desired Tweets, content is hand-selected and moderated in a very subtle fashion. All negative comments stay. Encouraging also by tweets as: "who's got pictures from powder yesterday? Tweet or Insta them with #aspensnowmass, we'll RT them!"	This platform is an intensive example of evangelizing by the audience: "Love seeing the Silver Queen gondola cars coming down @AspenSnowmass covered in snow", "@VitalFilms : Thx for the epic 2012/13 season @AspenSnowmass!" - both retweeted and favored by A/S.	Wait, wait, wait... so you're telling me that the Ajax gondola is running until 6p AND there is free champagne at the base?! @AspenSnowmass" - RTed and favored by the company.
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	Short intro on Vimeo: "Here are all of the videos that Aspen/Snowmass has uploaded to Vimeo. Appearances are videos that Aspen/Snowmass has been credited in by others."	Borrowing popular and viral themes such as Harlem Shake, Cupid, girlpower, mountain safety, wishes of happy holidays. In some of the videos, like the Harlem Shake, borrowing of details (personas) from other videos on the channel.	Little.	Praising in captions, just like on other platforms, plus powerful visual. Amazing conditions and great skiing opportunities are carefully announced by professional shots. The fun is portrayed in a very authentic manner, as filming takes place on terrain available to every visitor and conditions are reported by riders that are not pro.	A number of videos documenting ephemeral powder conditions entice the viewers to come without hesitation.
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	About: "A place where the beer flows like wine. Where beautiful women instinctively flock like the salmon of Capistrano."	Liking and commenting #aspensnowmass-related pictures posted by others, e.g. during events like #fwclass.	Encouraging everybody that posts by thanking and positive comments was very important for fostering initial following on Instagram.	The mood, passion, and beauty of the mountains radiates from all pictures, and the most liked ones do not show human faces.	Beautiful and timely pictures display amazing conditions - indirect pressure to come.
personal, enticing to share, viral, new, insider	TUMBLR	About: "Want to know what's going on at A/S? Look no further, our Tumblr blog is updated every day with fresh pictures, new videos, and other assorted awesomeness collected from the heart of the mountains here at Aspen/Snowmass." "Introducing the Aspen/Snowmass #ContentCrew, these dudes and dudettes are out there every day, making sure that the snow is good, the lifts are fast and you're in the know..."	"aspensnowmass replied to your post: A freshman invited me back to the dorms last... He would have probably had a better shot if he asked you to come back and watch a snowboard movie. Aspen nails it again. #aspen #snowmass #hahahaha"	Further, open and direct inviting to post: "Our Tumblr page isn't just for us, it's for everyone! We want to hear, see and read about all the good times you've had here at Aspen/Snowmass. So, don't be a stranger."	Enticing pictures, praising comments, positive vibes. User-generated posts with #aspensnowmass outnumber the company posts.	A user caption: "Mountain meeting. My meditation."

		Community Engagement			
		Staking	Milestoning	Badging	Documenting
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	delineation of one's specific domain of participation	marking standout brand experiences	creating symbols in recognition of milestones	capturing brand experience and narrating
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	Indirectly by use of a great variety of platforms in order to speak to different audiences, directly by segmenting, and by the audience via posting about their favorite ways to enjoy the mountain.	Of company achievements, memorable moments, events. Also of achievements of a broader group of people affiliated with the resort, such as employees and athletes. Adding, milestoning of achievements of the social media marketing encourages users by letting them know they contributed to success.	Rewarding skiing itself in a proactive manner. By the admins to partners for their events and (common) achievements, to athletes for "sending it", to employees, event participants and public for skiing tons and contributing with content.	Strongly supports evangelizing and intensive across all platforms. Creates synergy with other Practices as well as it is one of the dominant ones. Growing focus on user-generated content.
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Segmenting the offer by groups, families, season passes, dining, plane connections, ...	Listing milestones of the company's history in the about section. Detailed description of environmental achievements (Our Environmental Commitment)	Resort partners are active partners in creating buzz across all social media platforms, and on the website they have a section which gives them recognition for it.	The section "Mountain > Photos" features #breck user-generated photos from Instagram and Twitter.
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	Pieces of content for many different interests in mountain sports: families, park riders, powder dogs, downhill bikers, event spectators, people with dayjobs, etc. : "...open until 6PM today for skiing and riding! Come on out for some post work turns."	Milestones of Aspen's history in the About section. In more specific and timely cases, posts such as: "We Love Our Planet Aspen/Snowmass is celebrating seven years as a third party ISO 14001 certified resort..."	Badging the audience: "Who is the best skier on the mountain? It was settled once and for all during the annual Helly Hansen Battle in the Bowls this week at Aspen Highlands. Just press play on this video to find out! vimeo.com/63280483." Badging employees and professional athletes: "Congratulations to Torin Yater-Wallace for winning the Olympic test event in Sochi!"	Omnipresent - the product is visual, the experience has to be easy to imagine and relate to, visual content is more engaging even where the information announced is in the caption.
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	"The last couple days have been great for sun tanning & skinning" - a fol tweet from March 8 communicating about a narrow area of interest.	"Thanks dog. About to cross 150,000 followers, figured it needed some new shiny." - a comment by Dave Amirault from May 9 on the new look of the company Tumblr blog.	When our snowboard pros aren't instructing, they're SENDING IT! Here's Seth at @HighlandBowl this morning..." (Instagram link follows)	Company photographer capturing a sunny spring day: "Hiked for some powder turns @aspensnowmass today. Had a blast, but my dog had even more fun". Retweeted and favorited by many, including A/S. The post was then used on Tumblr, too.
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	A hilarious HD video presents a freeride legend and a young freestyle star committing the first descent/ascent of a newly open superpipe: http://goo.gl/VVq7M	The Mountain Collective - Athlete Hangout - April 2, a group of pro athletes discusses the extended pass, a partnership achievement.	'Awesome! Sharing this one on our social networks IMMEDIATELY." - a comment to uploading the Failure to Launch video shot in Aspen.	Coverage of splendid conditions and events in high definition and detail.
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	Showing how he is different from beginners, a user pictures a sign that promotes proper behavior on the mountain. Entertainingly: "This area is opened and closed to preserve a powder-crud experience. No in-the-boot ski pant beyond this point." Feb 2	Nostalgic remembering of the wrapped-up season by posting about the top 10 pictures in a Tumblr post	Less than on other platforms as shots of mood and scenery create more engagement on IG than those of people.	Documenting by content crew. Liking and commenting content of users that tag pics with @aspensnowmass, the town, or an event. During #fwclassic, A/S "started noticing the incoming volume of photos," Dave said. "We couldn't ignore it — we had to encourage it. People were extending our brand to their networks."
personal, enticing to share, viral, new, insider	TUMBLR	Company promoting summer activities: "This video from the Aspen Chamber Resort Association WILL get you stoked for summer. "	Post with picturing a bottle of champagne from March 2013: "When we hit 100,000 followers I'm going to saber open this bottle of bubbly. 99,883 followers, 117 to go! You guys rock. -Dave"	#5 - Goodnight, Snowmass 2,512 Likes. Another banger by Jeremy. This time he was rambling around Snowmass at sunset. " - crediting an outstanding content contributor.	Enticing pictures, praising comments, positive vibes. User-generated posts with #aspensnowmass outnumber the company posts.

		Brand Use		
		Grooming	Customizing	Commoditizing
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	handling the activity or object of interest with affectionate care; in order to preserve it, prolong its use, find the optimal use pattern	modifying the object of interest so it better suits the taste of an individual or segment	approaching or distancing the marketplace, giving market value to bits and pieces of the experience
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	By the company through environmental engagement, partnering, caring for the audience. By the audience by showing appreciation for that and taking part in polls. All that to preserve the mountain experience at it's best.	The product is experience, and in essence, every experience is different (customized). The resort encourages customizing by encouraging user-generated content.	The community already revolves around a commercial activity, but as the audience sees beyond the monetary value of mountainsports, they actively express opinions on which aspects of the experience the company should or should not be involved in. Also, A/S makes user-generated content into market commodity by using it in own promotion.
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Clif Bars served daily at A/S guest services centers offer the opportunity to fuel up and enjoy a great day out on the hill. Amplified online.	The functional features of the site invite to making a tailor-made experience (holiday).	None (no user-generated content on the site)
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	The idea of behaving on the mountain so it stays clean is vividly promoted by the content crew, and highly appreciated by the audience: "Champagne in a plastic cup. Pack it in, pack it out, and then recycle the cup." - an admin commenting on his own picture, raking in 7 likes - a lot for a simple comment.	'Unfortunately there should be a staircase in this picture.. Loved the park but it didnt measure up to last year or the year before" - April 19, a comment on an engaging post picturing the park.	would be nice if you included VAIL !" - a fan comment from March 12 reacting to announcement of The Mountain Collective Pass, a pass valid at several top American ski resorts. Demonstrates how (desired) commoditizing uncovers consumer demand. An opposite example: negative fan comment on Aspen's it's involvement in politics for its promotion: "Hey Aspen, stay out of politics. Run your resort." - April 19.
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	Grooming the marketing itself: "We just gave our Tumblr blog a completely new look. What do you think? aspensnowmass.tumblr.com" - a post about redesigning when the blog hit 150k fols.	'when is the pond skimming going to be at Highlands?" - a fol comment from Apr 19, expressing a desire for a specific experience.	Encouraging user-generated: @AspenSnowmass Feb 9: "Who's got powder pics from today? Tweet at us or use the Instagram hashtag #AspenSnowmass, we'll RT them!" The audience commoditizes content when it shows appreciation for new offerings, such as the Mountain Collective.
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	Optimal using pattern suggested by displaying fun and intense moments: "...sunshine, Bud Light and lots of carnage." - season closing vid.	By uploading amateur video on Youtube and professional parts on Vimeo, skiers and snowboarders display their very own ways to experience A/S.	The Mountain Collective - Athlete Hangout, takes up commoditizing, too, as it advocates the recent extension of offering.
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	A user pictures a sign that promotes the proper use of a mountain that will preserve it's great spirit. Entertainingly: "This area is opened and closed to preserve a powder-crud experience. No in the-boot ski pant beyond this point." Feb 2	Both the company and users post about their favorite ways of enjoying the mountain - freeride, freestyle, slope, restaurants, and even an activity bizarre on a mountain - shopping.	The experience of a blubird powder day commoditized by picturing the Highland Bowl on the back of the lift ticket. Depicted on IG by a regular visitor, earlier also by the photo author himself.
personal, enticing to share, viral, new, insider	TUMBLR	"If you like what you see, please take the time and vote for Buttermilk and Snowmass Terrain Parks in the Transworld Snowboarding Resort Poll. (Link follows)" - a post by a pro photographer @qfotonz that frequently posts about A/S.	In line with the other platforms, user posts about how they like their mountain experience best.	In an informal tone ("Check your cable listings, bla, bla, bla."), Dave promotes a new Nat Geo series about SnowPark Technologies - a series that turns the building activity into a media commodity. 80 notes result.

A2: Complete Analysis of Breckenridge Ski Resort by Framework of Practices

		Social Networking			Impression Management	
		Welcoming	Empathizing	Governing	Evangelizing	Justifying
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	greeting, introducing, either into the community or a practice	lending emotional and or/physical support	articulating behavioral expectations	Sharing the good news, inspiring others to use, preaching from the mountain top	rationalizing one's devotion where either the devotion itself or its extent may be beyond the reasonable
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	Introducing in headers and about sections. Often for welcoming to new activities and contests, and explicitly to Breck Nation. Supported by evangelizing the experience and showing that Breck is listening.	In company content by posting about topics and values in and beyond skiing, and by showing empathy to all worries that riders have when not riding. In UG content by listening - liking, reposting, responding, thanking, encouraging. High overlap with other practices.	Encouraging creation of user content through responding, reposting, and interactive posts, in a tone and format adapted to each platform. Automatic and manual filtering of inappropriate.	A ubiquitous and vivid practice applied through most posts. Almost all other Practices are always doubled by evangelizing. Clear and confident messages about how Breck is better than anywhere else are frequent in both staff and user posts.	Most common arguments are great snow conditions, events, new park features, limited deals. Sense of urge fosters high engagement, a metric that is highest during powder times.
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Through descriptions of the town and mountain and through inviting to activity.	"Escape the daily grind" - in the section for family holidays.	Call-to-action - "Plan a trip", "Book", "Stay".	"The perfect mountain town" - About section.	"Last chance for spring benefits" - urging call-to-actions encouraging sales of season passes.
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	Welcoming to events and activities.	Apr 13, pic of palatable cookies: "They're handing [cookies] out to anyone with a sweet tooth all day today ..." Apr 3: "The Easter bunny is here! 10,000 eggs are hidden with ski passes and lodging certificates inside!"	Frequent interactive posts encourage users to post: "Been up to Lake Chutes lately? How are the conditions?" As for user-generated content, no moderation unless highly inappropriate.	Post Apr 13: "Coachella doesn't have powder days or Matisyahu. We have both. Happy Closing Day !" About section: "the highest chairlift in North America, unparalleled grooming".	A comment on a powder pic posted May 22: "Think you'll want to do some of this next year? An EpicPass is probably your best bet. Get yours before May 27 to save !".
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	Header: "Welcome to Breck Nation! Even if you've never been here, you'll instantly feel like a local in our historic mountain town and on our legendary slopes."	RT of a pic of a 6-year old about to ski a double diamond from Apr 20 shows shared family values.	RT and favoriting encourages creation of posts that promote shared values like park, family, powder. Also, tweeting at #Breck, a tag not directly tied to the brand.	#Breck May 21: "You know you love where you live when you're just cheesing the whole drive home from the airport."	Fan tweet Apr 19: "46 inches this week? Don't need to ask me twice..."
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	Welcome to Breck Nation from Nov 2, praises and introduces the mountain and the community around it.	Countless videos with Ullr, the Norwegian god of snow, show that Breck feels with all who crave winter already.	Very little as comments and likes seem to carry little weight and the resort does not get involved in Breck videos by others.	Ubiquitous implicit and explicit messages: We have pow, our park is world-class, our corduroy likewise, our town picturesque, etc. Steezy graphics.	Pow videos. Caption of a Feb 3 video announcing opening of a high altitude chair: "Don't miss out on some of the best lines you'll have this season!".
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	A one sentence introduction in the header: "Breck is made up of four huge peaks, an incredible historic town, and so many events that you'll come for the skiing and stay for the nightlife".	Paying homage to #NurseAppreciationDay. Responding to a startled user comment: "we didn't buy them- they are just on the pass".	Jan 23, responding to a question: "@[user] you had to be here to win!"	Regram of a user pic with bird's view of the mountain range became the 3rd most liked post this season. Also, a common caption by users: "#Breck is so much better than anywhere else."	Most clearly when conditions are great: "We got another 8" in the past 24 hours and its nice out there..." March 12.
textual, insider, backstage, detailed, stories, guidelines, explanations	BLOG	Welcoming to new activities: "Breck introduces plans for Epic Discovery".	About a Breck rescue dog, May 18: "after getting a new lease on life six years ago [...], Tali is happy to sacrifice a few extra months or years of leisure to help others get a similar reprieve."	Little.	Ubiquitous here, too: "Another beautiful morning at Breck Mar. 28, 2013". In a pro skier post May 6: "As always, Breckenridge built an absolutely amazing course."	Breckenridge From a Mom's Perspective justifies devotion to the resort by elaborating on 8 specific reasons.
factory of user-generated content, vivid community building, documenting, gamification, ease of use	EPICMIX	An explicit homepage "welcome" to those who haven't activated an account yet.	Users can opt to connect with friends and family.	"How It works" and FAQ sections. Also, the tag line: "Capture. Connect. Share."	By saying 'Epic', the most popular and overused word in Vail Resorts ever, the name itself praises vehemently.	The motivation of earning a pin for riding more makes you go up more. Especially when you compare yourself to friends.

		Community Engagement			
		Staking	Milestoning	Badging	Documenting
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	delineation of one's specific domain of participation	marking standout brand experiences	creating symbols in recognition of milestones	capturing brand experience and narrating
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	By company through segmenting and recognizing different tastes through targeted pieces of content. By users through expressing which aspects of the experience they enjoy most.	Very strong. Gives a feeling of a lasting process of development of Breck. History is highlighted to show how Breck became what it is, and it is emphasized that everything is thanks to a community effort. Also, events and success of pro athletes are recognized.	Rewrding skiing itself. Recognition to those who ski a lot or ski well. To the local pro team for winning, other pros for showing up, volunteers for contributing, to pass holders in particular through EpicMix.	Fundamental. Supports all other Practices. Growing focus on user-generated content. Mountain experience is a visual product to market, and social media a visual channel (even Twitter now supports pics). Focus is on snow conditions, history, mountain beauty, mood, events, etc..
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Addressing the specific needs of families, kids, groups, internationals, park riders.	Very strong. Highlighting history and events, success of Breck community members such as pro riders, and company achievements.	"Announcing the Breck pro team", instructing others on how to "request appearance".	A slideshow of HD pictures from Aspen is a main design feature of the site.
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	Adjusting content to different segments on the side of the resort. On the side of the audience by posting about the way they like their mountain experience best.	Announcing acquisition of Alberg by Vail Resorts, confirming of expansion to new terrain on Peak 7 in Breck, recapping the season highlights.	"We'll be giving away ski passes for those that kill it in our rail jam," March 29	Ample, ample, ample visual representation of mountain experience.
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	Very rare on this platform. Likely because the short format and expectations on content to be informative leave little space for segmenting.	Apr 21 "Thx #Breck Nation for (another!) great end to #ski season!".	Reposting videos of Shaun White, Seb Toots and others "slaying Breck".	"See the best moments of the Breck #Springfever so far: [link]" Apr 8.
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	Different playlists target different tastes.	Breck Classic Moments - an outstanding set of videos showing development of the sport that took place in Breck. Also, a playlist on the 50th anniversary of Breck.	Riding the Freeway Park, learning new rotations, winning contests, scoring powder days.	User-generated videos outnumber the company generated ones by far.
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	User posts picturing pow/park/dining imply their specific preference within riding.	A post from May 7 announces an achievement - adding a sweet resort in Austrian Alps to the corporation.	Very little as pictures with faces are less represented on Instagram.	Focus on moods, nature, beauty of snow. Staff engages not only with user-generated photos that tag Breck, but also with those that have Breck in the caption or comment.
textual, insider, backstage, detailed, stories, guidelines, explanations	BLOG	The justifying example targets mums, a group with specific needs and interests.	Posts: "Best of the '12/'13 season in photos", "The best of the '12/'13 winter in Video", and other posts about history, online marketing, and events.	"Take on Lindsey Vonn with EpicMix Racing".	In a journal manner, lists different Top 10's, Top 5s, The Best Of's, How to's.
factory of user-generated content, vivid community building, documenting, gamification, ease of use	EPICMIX	Giving people an opportunity to score good in 8 different areas (vertical ft., mix points, pins, check-ins, racing, days, photos, medals) recognizes many different interests in riding.	The elaborate system of pins recognizes quantified riding achievements.	Pins for the milestone achievements give clear recognition, foster gamification, and allow for comparison with friends.	Quantifying skiing, photos.

		Brand Use		
		Grooming	Customizing	Commoditizing
Differentiating Traits of each Platform	Definition	handling the activity or object of interest with affectionate care, in order to preserve it and prolong its use, or to find the optimal use pattern	modifying the experience so it better suits the taste of an individual or segment, sometimes focusing on the one most important aspect of experience.	approaching or distancing the marketplace, giving market value to bits and pieces of the experience
visual, authentic, timely, informative, enticing, audience-specific, open, viral themes, entertaining, sharing experiences	General	Caring by admiring, education, focus on environment. Exercised in this way by both users and staff. Optimal use pattern is more riding.	Strong for user-generated content and authenticity. The resort encourages creative ways of enjoying riding and calls out for user contributions, both on daily bases and in online contests. Users welcome that.	Valuable source of market insights - users express what they miss or want more of. Extending the experience to more terrain, features and activities. Also, interacting with users and having them post indirectly commoditizes their content as a word-of-mouth tool.
interactive (relative to website standards), functional, first-impression	WEBSITE	Detailed pages about environmental efforts. Also the Epic Discovery offering.	Encouraged by options in e-commerce features.	Announcing the expansion of skiable terrain to Peak 6.
mass-oriented, strikingly engaging	FACEBOOK	Introducing Epic Discovery, an educational summer program.	Design a Dew Tour Feature, a contest promoted by posts and hosted on a tab, from June to October.	Frequent posts by fans asking for more weekends of open lifts.
timely, informative, equal	TWITTER	Reply to a tweet March 14: "...Keep a safe distance, and ski within your abilities! #SkiChat".	"That's a Damn good plan!" - a reply Feb 20 by an excited skier who got advice on how to organize his day by his specific needs.	Frequent encouragement of sharing when users tweet they made pictures or edited a video shot in Breck: "Send it our way!" For promotion purposes .
rich / expert	YOUTUBE / VIMEO	Content on Breck's 50th anniversary pays homage to the community.	The Snow Skate Phenom vid shows that Breck is open to crowd creations.	Very visible branded gear.
timely, artsy, personal, emotion, moments, nature, indirect, visual	INSTAGRAM	A popular theme, patrol dogs, signal how the resort cares about keeping the experience safe.	Apr 10, a #breckenridge pic by _frutch shows a creative park-like feature in the forest on Peak 9.	Caption Apr 12: "(...) #SpringFever ? Bring something home to remember it by. At the concerts this weekend, t-shirts and other goods are for sale at 20% off!"
textual, insider, backstage, detailed, stories, guidelines, explanations	BLOG	Posts: "Tali the patrol dog tells all", "Breck's focus on the environment". May 20: "From carpooling incentives to digging in the dirt in the summer to cut down on winter water use".	Emilia Wint, Apr 17, on how she narrowed down her interest: "I really enjoyed hitting jumps, so I joined Hawks Freeride so I could get better."	Promotion of many different businesses in Breck. Also, featuring posts makes guest experiences into marketing commodity.
factory of user-generated content, vivid community building, documenting, gamification, ease of use	EPICMIX	The gamification rewards more riding, an optimal use pattern.	Users have a number of options for setting up their account. Hence customization of both the platform itself and the riding experience which it influences.	Automated social sharing of photos and pins for promotion and charging for HD photos makes those moments into commodities.

A3: Interview with Gregg Blanchard

Head of Communications at Ryan Solutions, CO, and author of Slopefillers.com, a ski resort marketing blog

Feb 25, 2013, personal interview

We don't know how much influence exactly social media have, but can you think of a feasible way to measure conversion reliably?

Do measure as well as you can, to know where your money ends up. It pays off to invest in measuring so you don't have to shoot in the dark.

How would you determine the portion of budget of working hours that a ski resort should spend on online marketing (relative to offline)?

That depends on goals and target markets and the demographic. Who do you want to reach and when you look at your options, when is web the best method?

The classic goal logic on the web is: increase website traffic > conversion through website orders > order size.

For social media, there is no data to back up popular beliefs about how it works.

Are there gaps in knowledge on ski resort marketing?

MEASURING. Stuff works, but it's created by developers not marketers.

Big money is spent on e.g. websites but small and very effective things left behind, like SEO..

There are too few that use ROI Revolution, for tagging links in posts that will tell you what exactly worked for conversions. Maybe resorts track ROI better offline. Tools exist for some transactions and miss for other, and may always miss – we don't know how channels behave in combinations, and when people go offline it is super hard to estimate.

At the end, good measuring still gives you a better ROI, since you are not shooting in the dark.

A4: Interview with Charles Townsend

Marketing Manager, E-commerce & User Experience, Vail Resorts corporate office

Feb 26, 2013, phone interview

What exactly are you responsible for?

Lot different – manage a team of 2 other people, focus on the website platform being functioning as desired, rolling out major projects and enhancements. Between resort marketing teams and central IT team. E.g. when new branding comes in, we make that work. E.g. selling more summer products, figuring out how it should be, what's needed for it, what should the functionality be, finally what the user experience should be, how to update the content, how to keep interests of all the stakeholder groups in harmony, how to use the limited amount of development resources and prioritize.

How much freedom and decision power do your individual resorts have?

They do have a good deal of it. Our team is very technical and good at recognizing what will work. It tries to empower the resorts in understanding what to think about when adding new features and making changes, prioritizing user experience. Resorts deal with photo shoots and video shoots. So whereas our team can be more focused on the web, resorts won't have that all the time. Everybody has to have equal say at the table, eventually, doing the most popular things first.

How is snow.com managed and what are the goals? How is the online marketing work shared by snow.com and the individual resorts?

The site is a way to display all resorts in one area, and as a comparison. If they don't know where to go, they get the explanations there. It is managed by the corporate team that collaborates hand-in-hand with each of the resorts to get information. The site also tries to move the traffic to the websites of individual resorts. It has been live for about 15 years and redesigned about 4 to 5 years, when it became a more up to date, full-on ski website. Not just a VR-website.

You have worked with sales and marketing in VR since 2007, which channels of online marketing have been proving most effective for VR?

Tough question, there's no good answer. It's a combined effort. Whatever channel the user takes, the website must be functioning and providing a good experience where it is easy to convert. The website must be very stream-lined and user friendly, allowing to lock in the customers up front.

Are there some things that VR has tried in the past but dropped because of low returns?

Improved or replaced the lift ticket pages. Based on analysis, user research, asking what the good experience is when people search for lift tickets. We involved focus groups, agencies, testing, design work. The design was changed from a slightly overwhelming grid to a more simplified question on when they plan to ski. Displaying all the different prices was not necessarily a good idea, as guests wanted all to be relevant to their search first.

Are there some new ideas that VR is going to start using in future? Which of the current efforts will be more important in the future?

Various product pages on the site – ski school can have an improved flow, equipment rental, child care. Can't just change something and expect it to work forever – the pages mentioned have only been up for a couple years, so what might work right now in terms of booking, might not make sense in ten years. Even the lift ticket redesign might need to be refreshed in a couple years.

How do you measure performance of online marketing? What are your priorities or indicators of success?

Revenue is the big thing. Conversion rates are important. Order size – suggesting recommendations during the check-out, and based on personal information gained through the check-out, like that a person buying ski-school lessons for kids will probably be a parent. That's the industry leader out there setting a trend. There is a ton of other tools, but those are the big ones.

Do you try to foster a brand community?

Yeah, yeah, that's another function hopefully of snow.com and epicpass.com with its season pass program. There's definitely an opportunity around there. But not everyone knows that VR own all the 7 mountains.

The community character of EpicMix, with rewards for achievements on the mountain, is specific to VR mountains only. Photos are uploaded to your account automatically, which is cutting edge, and unique to travel and leisure. It is a way to track the mountain experience and vacation and share it, using the social media functionality. Focusing on that could definitely set your study apart.

Each of the individual brands has a pretty significant fan base (community), too.

What are the international plans of VR?

Strategic plans are kept very secret. The biggest thing in M&As is that we focus on mountains with big metropolitan customer bases nearby.

A5: Interview with Jeff Werkheiser

Social Media manager at Vail Resorts corporate office up to end of April 2013, earlier social media manager at Keystone.

April 29, 2013, e-mail interview

Do responsibilities of your team and the team of Charles Townsend (User Experience manager at the Broomfield central office) overlap? Or which goals do you work together on and which do you not?

The responsibilities do not overlap, but the overall goals of the business are aligned. The User Experience team and social media teams work hand in hand on many initiatives. It's an online world as we know it today, so the flow from social to the web environment and back has to be integrated and working together.

How much freedom and responsibility do individual resorts have in relation to the central team of VR?

The individual brands (mountains/resorts) own and control their own unique social content strategy, working within the overall larger Vail Resorts social presence. Each brand has their own unique community, and the content strategy, voice, and messaging needs to reflect that.

Do employees from other than marketing departments help out on social networks?

Our PR teams have a level of involvement with resort social media when applicable. Outside of marketing and PR, no other departments *directly* help out with our social networks from a branded perspective. However, many other departments do help with content (like ski patrol helping with photos on the mountain in the early AM, for example), providing insight on certain areas of expertise, answering questions from guests, etc. And, many employees participate in our social media presence from their own personal accounts to add to the conversation in a meaningful way. (*note* PR does handle the corporate news/events on the official Vail Resorts social accounts).

What external/outsourced digital marketing technology or services do VR use? Software, templates, agencies..

Over the years or in different times throughout the year we've used many different kinds of social media tools, agencies, etc. Most recently we use Spredfast for our analytics and measurement against our goals, KPIs and daily engagement metrics. We also work with Edelman Digital on a consulting basis. We also use Wildfire/Google across our social media presence, most notably Facebook for apps. There are many other tools we've worked with as well on shorter timelines or one-off basis.

What works best for growing social media audience?

Depends on what your goal is. If it's strictly to reach a certain number just for a number's sake without much strategy or constraints against it, then fan acquisition through Facebook Ads is the easiest and quickest way.

If you want to grow a specific demographic or target that “likes” your page based on some actual content that is relevant to them, then promoted posts and/or sponsored stories through Facebook Ads can be very efficient. If you want to do it organically without a spend it can take a great deal longer, but if you produce good content and capture some influencers within the community that can help spread the word then you’re in good shape. From an organic perspective it all comes down to content and how you are messaging, and who you are interacting with. Your community is how you will grow. Twitter would be a similar approach, too.

In just a few words, what works best for making social media audience engaged?

Listening and understanding your audience. So, it’ll differ for each brand/each company.

Snow.com and epicmix.com are sites that already accumulate a good deal of information and even consumer generated content. What kind of online community, and with what specific goals, do VR try to foster?

The websites would be a question for Charles and the UX team – I could only address social media. From a social perspective we strive to have a community of people that are passionate about what we do, our brands, the ski industry, adventure, fun, vacations, etc, etc. We want people engaged and participating in the conversation. The more active the community is, the better it is.

Are there social media activities that VR has tried in the past but dropped because of low returns?

Absolutely. In social media you have to fail. If you haven’t failed on something in social media, you aren’t really trying...or you’re being way too safe. We’re always trying new things, adjusting, optimizing, and moving on to something new if it didn’t reach our hopeful expectations.

Are there social media activities that VR has tried in the past, and that are now used much more than planned because of how successful they were?

We are always adapting and trying to improve. If something did not work in the past we more than likely wouldn’t just bring the same thing back to life in the same form. That being said, we are always open to any ideas that might spark something. So, if something didn’t work in the past we might be doing something similar now, but in a way that fits our communities in 2013. We never completely close the book on something that we’ve tried, but we would look to it as a learning experience to do something even better the next time around.

Are there new untapped ideas that VR is going to start using in future? Which of the current efforts will be more important in the future?

Our product is extremely visual. So, look to platforms that cater to this to become even greater priorities for us socially as we move forward. We’ve grown Instagram significantly this year across all of our brands.

Pinterest is an opportunity in front of us, but it needs the right content for that very different audience than we are normally talking with. Vine is a big up and comer as well with a short-format video element that is very intriguing for our guest stories. We are not ignoring Tumblr, but need to make sure we can tell the best story possible in that format before completely diving. If we are going to try something, we really want to go for it.

What VR's attitude towards and experience with fostering brand advocacy, and having influencers talk for VR online?

Influencers are a big part of what we do socially and will continue to be a big priority. Allowing our guests to tell the stories of our resorts holds a lot of weight in the community and we absolutely welcome this and will continue this strategy. People want to see the real story from real customers.

How would you identify an influencer?

Someone that has an important voice on a specific topic, a certain area of expertise, discipline or subject matter. This doesn't necessarily mean just a lot of followers. A person could have 150 followers but get every one of their tweets retweeted 20 times because the quality is just that good. We look for quality over just quantity, but both have to be considered when looking at a potential influencer. In the simplest terms, ask yourself, "Does this person influence others with content they put out there?" If the answer is yes, then you have an influencer.

What are the most important indicators in analytics of VR's social media presence?

Engagement. How are people interacting with our content? Shares hold the most weight. We are looking for that virality within our community and expansion beyond. If someone shares our content they are giving their approval and vouching for the quality for their friends and followers to see it. We strive for community participation in the conversation.

How do you put monetary value on social media performance?

The most straightforward way is using analytics tools and tagging links to your ecommerce sites, to actually get a revenue number from conversions straight from social posts. Another method is assigning monetary values to different elements of your community.

Could just link to the "Facebook fan is worth \$174" article?

Which social media channels pay off most and which could a ski resort omit?

Facebook is non-negotiable as it sits today. There are just too many people on there and too much of our industry's customers to neglect it. That might be different in two years but we shall see.

Twitter is a must have for quicker information, snow totals, news, updates and quick engagement with users.

Instagram has become bigger as well.

For video, you have to have YouTube if you are going to be creating video content. (and for resorts- it absolutely makes sense to produce video / visual content).

Foursquare is handy if you are going to be providing on-locations specials and want to capture and interact with your guests' experiences onsite. This is very good with tips, lists, and suggestions for users exploring their time at our resorts.

Given the current landscape of the ski industry and our users, Google+ and Pinterest could be on the backburner. Typical snow and skiing/snowboarding content hasn't done well on these platforms compared to others. So, it goes back to determining who is one there that we will be talking to and aligning content for them. Big opportunities for both but need to plan it out first with a strategy.

There are obviously many others but these would be the biggies right now for us.

Which indicators or motivations are decisive in how the marketing budget gets adjusted over time?

Having well defined KPIs for your social efforts is key to being able to demonstrate the effective and therefore getting funding/budget \$'s.

And integrating your social efforts into your overall marketing campaign / plan is critical. Social shouldn't be an afterthought – it should be baked into your plan.

A6: Interview with Morgan Bast

Online Marketing Manager at Breckenridge Ski Resort

May 15, online survey interview

Part 1

TEAM

What is the structure of the online marketing team at Breck?

I'm the online marketing manager, but have a part-time contractor to help me 2 days a week as well. I am currently trying to get him hired on full time as to have only one person manage it is a lot. As with the other Vail Resorts, we have a team of specialists at corporate that help us with social media, eblasts, the website, analytics, SEO, CRM, advertising, and some creative.

Can you give one or two examples on how Breck employees from outside the online marketing team contribute to the social media presence?

We work with a variety of employees (including ski patrollers and safety team members) to help us blog for blog.breckenridge.com. This content is a valuable piece of our social media strategy. Outside of that, most employees are asked to direct all social media questions or requests to post through me.

What external/outsourced online marketing technology or services do you use?

Besides the corporate marketing team, we've hired agencies for banner ad creative, search and display, and smaller initiatives. A few other companies we are working with include Pixlee (an UGC photo hashtag platform), Wildfire (a social app for Facebook), OpenSnow (a third party snow reporting widget), Crowd Favorite (a wordpress developer), Omniture (analytics), Sitecore (CMS), UStudio (video) and I'm sure a few more that I can't think of right now.

ROI

What KPIs of social media are your executives most interested in? What KPIs determine how social media budget is adjusted from term to term?

At first most of the KPIs were related to likes, follows, etc. As we continue to develop our KPIs, we're more focused on engagement and ROI. For Breck specifically (as we let our executives know which KPIs to focus on) that includes TAT (Talking about This) on Facebook, reach, impressions, and how revenue is generated from these networks.

In terms of budget, it's more of what works for our brand message. Does Facebook advertising work for gaining likes for Breck? Probably not. But we do want to advertise our concert series. We also look at allocating budget based on how many birds we can kill with one stone -- how many emails, how many likes, and how much revenue can we generate from one initiative.

If different than the answer of the previous question, which social media metrics do you yourself consider most important?

I kind of answered that previously, but I really look at engagement and sentiment. That and generally, how our networks are growing (as I feel that's a fairly good judge of how good of a content we're producing is).

USER GENERATED

What is the policy for responding to user-generated content?

For posts on Facebook, Tweets, or comments on Instagram, we respond to all questions, most of the negative comments, and like a lot of the positive comments.

For Pixlee, we approve appropriate photos within a few days of being posted.

What is the policy for moderating user-generated content?

All comments with cuss words in the post on Facebook are automatically deleted with the filters, and any hateful comments get deleted. Everything else stays.

How do you identify online influencers?

Pixlee helps us call it out to an extent, but we also have a very passionate community where they identify themselves pretty well -- we know who loves us and who hates us.

How do you get broad audience to advocate your brand?

Content content content -- the more content that people can stand behind the better. We work very closely with our CRM team who has targeted a few different personas that we target differently so each piece of content we develop is aimed at a different customer, based on what they are passionate about. This helps our customers naturally sound off for us.

FINAL

Are there new untapped ideas that A/S is going to start using in future? Which of the current efforts will be more important in the future?

Breck's whole strategy moving forward is putting the right message in front of the right person at the right time. We have very detailed data on what motivates our customers, when they are looking to purchase different products, and where they are coming from. All of our online marketing efforts will center around this targeted strategy moving forward. That and how do we bring more international guests to our resort. And as we have such a passionate market, this will just be more and more fun to do.

May 28, 2013

Part 2

WARM UP

How long have you lived in Breck?

2 years, but I went to high school here years ago

Days skied this season?

63

Hot chocolate or hot wine?

gluvein!

Bestest place on Earth to ski?

I have to say Breck, right?

TEAM

Who runs the social of Breck Terrain Parks and how does your office work with them?

Diane Damra, our marketing coordinator, and Darren Riethmiller (formerly of the marketing team in Diane's position but now is a terrain parks supervisor) manage it jointly. I'll chime in with some messages here and there.

Who did the graphic design of epicdiscovery.com/breckenridge ?

Sapient Nitro -- an agency

CROSS-PLATFORM ROI

Do you use software for automated sentiment evaluation of user posts and comments? And does it work well?

Not particularly... we use Hootsuite for Twitter, a bit of Wildfire for other social analytics and Facebook analytics for Facebook. It works well to a point, but not hugely so.

How does Breck's environmental involvement affect brand lift?

Our environmental efforts aren't a huge piece of our brand platform, but more of an underlying pillar we stand on. We have a few pages on our website dedicated to that message and explaining to the public what we do for the environment regularly. As the nature of the ski business isn't exactly super eco-friendly, we do get a lot of questions and negative feedback regularly so we try to come prepared with documents and citations from third-party organizations to show transparency.

EPICMIX

Who is involved in development of EpicMix?

EpicMix was created out of our corporate marketing teams with help from a few third party agencies.

Do you have numbers for how many and what percentage of your visitors have an activated EpicMix account?

This specific number is actually protected by our public company status... so I'm really sorry but I don't think I can tell you that specifically. (Plus I'm not really sure the actual percentage).

FACEBOOK

How many submissions did you get for Design a Dew Tour Feature?

I think we got 82 submissions.

What can you do to make people share?

The app worked as a photo sharing contest where you could submit your photo or description and then we said "Boost your chances of winning -- share your entry here." The top 10 most popular entries were then entered in to be reviewed by the judges.

How much of your reach on Facebook is through paid ads and sponsored stories?

Very little. We only run ads for 3 weeks of the year specifically for our concert series.

What is the difference between engagement of people that you reach through paid ads and sponsored stories, and those you reach in an organic or viral way?

As 99% of our engagement is through organic reach, our fans are very passionate and we see a very small drop off of people "unliking" us unlike those that pay for the majority of their fans. We typically have a very high

"talking about this" metric (especially around big snow times) and work very diligently to respond to the many comments we get.

BLOG

What is the main traffic source of the Breck blog?

Direct then breckenridge.com

How many unique visitors did the blog score in the last 12 months?

We launched in February and have received over 50,000 uniques since then.

Who writes or can write Breck's blog posts?

We have a team of writers and work with other employees as well to write content. I'd love ANYONE who wants to write a blog to send it to me and we'd love to publish it however.

How do you personally evaluate performance of the blog?

I'm a trained journalist and worked in magazines for a long time, so prior to publishing I judge a blog but the quality of the writing, and how well the content will speak to our audience.

After publishing, I judge a blog's success through of course revenue, traffic, and engagement via comments.

YOUTUBE/VIMEO

What is the goal for YouTube?

Simply to share our resort's message through video. We don't have specific subscription or view goals besides just to keep growing.

What qualities of Vimeo can be attractive for Breck?

The high quality of video available there is nice but we look at SEO [YouTube's strength] as a more important factor.

Which social media channels pay off most and which could a ski resort omit?

Facebook, Instagram, the blog, and Twitter are our most popular social networks although we are spending more and more attention to TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google places. A ski resort could definitely do without Pinterest and Foursquare, however we have presence there as well.

A7: Interview with Yann Benjamin

Online Marketing Manager at Beaver Creek

May 29, 2013, e-mail interview

What is the relationship of your team and the team working with online marketing of VR on the whole (teams of Jeff Werkheiser or Charles Townsend)? Which goals do you work together on and which goals does Beaver Creek do by itself?

Beaver Creek like most of the other resorts, act independently to fulfill their resort goals across various mediums but gain support from the various corporate teams to achieve the most success. There are a few exceptions to this relationship, and from the digital side, it has to do with the CRM/Email team. This corporate group identifies revenue goals and engagement metrics for each mountain, and so I work with them on achieving those goals by publishing the content I believe will reach those expectations – plus its more appropriate for me as a resort manager to develop content around the brand I'm an expert in, versus allowing corporate team to construct content without any context of brand background.

Most cases there are shared goals between corporate and the resort teams, primarily focused around revenue or skier visits, but there are other goals that the corporate teams uphold to – such as click through rates and open rates for CRM, conversion metrics and time spent on site for the User Experience team, buying efficiencies and ROI for the media team, and product sales volume for the product development team. What I'm not mentioning is the EpicMix and EpicPass teams because in most cases they work independently from the resorts and simply use the mountains as activation points rather than sales channels.

For the most part VRI acts like a large funnel with the over-arching goal to please shareholders in the form of revenue, but all the efforts implemented by the resort via corporate support, or even corporate efforts without the resort's help; everything contributes to the quarterly and annual performance of the company.

What is your relationship with online marketing teams of other individual resorts belonging to VR? Which goals do you work together on and which goals do individual resorts typically take care of by themselves?

The majority of resort marketing teams work independently on a day to day basis, but I would say the online managers such as myself are closely connected to exchange learning's, best practices, and support certain corporate goals. From a shared goal perspective, there isn't much overlap since we are each managing our strategic plans, brand voice, and unique offerings that distinguishes us from the other resorts. Some of the corporate teams will aggregate the resort performance to establish a collective metric and assess how its matched against the annual goal; yet between resorts we don't work together as much as we should to achieve some common goals.

With all that said, there are certain instances where resorts work together to achieve a common goal; for example the 2015 World Championships is something being hosted at Vail and Beaver Creek, so I am working closely with the online marketing manager there to execute certain sales and promotional platforms that will drive pass sales and hotel bookings. We don't have a set goal between the two resorts, but our support will drive business for both brands. I imagine Breck and Keystone may have similar efforts or even Northstar and Heavenly to some degree.

How many people work with online marketing of Beaver Creek and what are their job titles?

Beaver Creek is the smallest of resort marketing teams (I don't know why) so it may be best to share the entire hierarchy of support since we have several overlapping layers but with distinct titles:

Director

Online Marketing Manager

Upsell/Event Marketing Manager

Videographer

Marketing Specialist

Total of 5 on the BC Marketing team.

Do employees from other marketing departments help out on social networks?

Each resort has an exception to this, but for the most part the marketing team is the only one managing the social efforts. Here at Beaver Creek, certain business units have independently launched social efforts (Golf Club, Ski Patrol, and Dining Locations) so we let them promote what they want, and occasionally collaborate when larger promotions or events are being hosted by them. Aside from that, corporate has access to our social pages and will occasionally upload Facebook apps or certain enhanced elements paid by their team. Rarely do they access our content and "override" our postings, but they are capable and will help out as needed.

What external/outsourced digital marketing technology or services do VR use? Software, templates, agencies..

The collection of resorts and the corporate team utilizes a variety of services; either as an overarching support item, or specific for the use of a campaign or tactic. Generally speaking each resort has a paid or free service for content management, here at BC we use Hootsuite and the native Facebook admin panel. As a group of resorts we also utilize Wildfire for app development and quick execution of basic templates for promos and events. I also know at corporate, they use Spreadfast as a reporting tool for FB and Twitter which is relatively new to them and slowly being deployed to each resort. All in all, we all do our own thing and don't have much consistently unfortunately which is a big priority of ours in the next fiscal; to have standardized reporting, KPIs and Metric goals established as a group and per resort. More to come!

In just a few words, what works best for growing online media audience of a ski resort?

Believe it or not, Beaver Creek and I would think any other resort, the best way to grow an audience is by frequency of postings with snow/powder photos and video, as well as applicable subject matter. In the heart of the season, BC will promote snow conditions with pro video and photos, which satisfies the audience's appetite for the sport. With the creative or independently, we also include content that is relevant at that time – such as trail openings, events, dining offerings, ski patrol updates and so on.

Most anybody can find what they want via a Google search, so on social we try to present items exclusive to the channel; and that is typically formed by timely news, one of a kind photos never seen, custom videos, and in the end some fan appreciation and promos that is unique to that environment.

In just a few words, what works best for making social media audience of a ski resort engaged?

Engagement follows similarly to the audience acquisition, but we clearly see photos more appealing to our audience than any other post. More often than not, we get hundreds of likes and dozens of comments with photo posts and a much smaller return with video assets. While the video plays add up, it's a subset of our overall engagement performance.

Aside from the posting efforts, we launched Epic Wishes this season which allows Facebook users to submit a wish of their choice and if we can fulfill it, we will. This started slow but with some .com promotion and posts, there were dozens of submissions and we granted around 10 wishes with those guests promoting their amazing experience. It was a good start and we hope to get more traction next season.

Snow.com and epicmix.com are sites that already accumulate a good deal of information and even consumer generated content. What kind of online community, and with what specific goals, do VR and/or Beaver Creek try to foster?

These divisions lie separate from Beaver Creek, so I don't have the inner details; but I do know for snow.com engagement and time spent on site is big for them. This season they focused more attention on the quality of content published and promoted through social, bringing more folks back to the website to consume more content and keep them on site. As for EpicMix, the platform is very automatic so depending on the user's settings; their activity is pushed through the social channels based on resort checkin and same goes with the photos. I know photo sharing and posts were a goal for EpicMix, but a lot of that isn't as much as UGC but rather guest settings allowing the postings to drive the volume goal the EpicMix team had.

The community for both these domains is pretty small and limited, and I would say more so with EpicMix. Next year we are looking to see what can be done to create an element of engagement with the variety of pins, photos, stats and checkins – but we still haven't cracked the code for that. The EM app is a vehicle to entertain and engage in a more viral aspect offline, and a more passive approach online since there's minimal dialogue between skiers/boarders on their accomplishments with the app.

What online marketing efforts has BC tried in the past but dropped because of low returns?

When it comes to social, the one thing we backed off on was promos and sweepstakes. For several events in the past we had used Facebook and Twitter as the only vehicles to capture data or participants in exchange for something in return; but realistically with only 52K fans/13K followers, our reach is minimal and only a handful convert. I believe we can succeed at this, but not without a larger fan base. Time to time we still execute these types of programs, usually at the mercy of our strategic alliance team who needs us to promote on behalf of other brands (GoPro, Maui Jim, Nature Valley, etc..)

Aside from that, the other online component we backed away from this year was paid display and search to the Mexican market. For some reason our messaging and ads resulted in the other mountains gaining most of

the revenue, even with a clear Beaver Creek message. This learning suggested we either don't have the right audience in Mexico for BC, or rather our messaging and landing pages were limiting; for example we had Spanish ads, but redirected to an English page. We aren't giving up just yet, but looking to enhance the existing content in the Spanish language and trying to better target consumers in that country.

Are there online marketing efforts that BC has tried in the past, and that are now used much more than planned because of how successful they were?

In my two years with BC, there hasn't been anything surprising that drove much success – a lot of what I inherited came from prior years and worked well. Our messaging strategy dependant on seasonal timing and events is a key success point, also advertising the right lodging packages and offers to the right people, and even the sharing of new snow assets is huge. However, mid-season this year I had the idea to promote our snow accumulation in real-time through paid advertisements which pulled our snow/weather RSS feed. This simple tactic to deliver a lodging offer (30% off for example) and then end with a skier behind falling snow and a date-stamped inch total of snow was a big success. The example is below, which was intended to drive consideration and confidence that Beaver Creek had great ski conditions (especially after a bad season last year) which surprisingly drove more revenue than any other digital ad in the history of BC. This data is a reason why I said earlier snow conditions in social with pics is a huge success and big topic for us here at BC and all resorts.

Are there new untapped ideas that BC is going to start using in future? Which of the current efforts will be more important in the future?

There's nothing major were looking to use in the future, perhaps the introduction of an Instagram account which we will use Pixlee for – helping us aggregate user photos in real time. Vail is doing this at the moment. We're also looking to create a Pinterest account for our wedding business so brides to be can share ideas, experiences, and so we can showcase the summer beauty of the resort.

Other than those two items in the pipeline, the biggest thing I want to consider next season is the quality of our output. I think the increased frequency of posts and messaging this season did well for us to attract new fans and keep people engaged, but I want to enhance the video production, content quality, and document stories so theres more than liking our recent photo. Whistler does an amazing job with their video production and we are looking to get there by involving heli-cams, guest production teams, and even get behind the scenes employee access. As for content, im exploring the possibility of starting a Beaver Creek blog but theres a support team needed which we don't have.

Like anything, budget is tight and we need to work within the limited dollars to achieve hard ROI goals while also trying to enhance our branch channels which don't easily convert into ROI (or in reality, don't have sufficient tracking to measure any success).

What is BC's attitude towards and experience with fostering brand advocacy, and having influencers talk for BC online?

We're big proponents of having loyal brand advocates, and understand the inherent value of these folks. We don't have consistent advocates that we work with, aside from EpicMoms which is a blogging group that

writes articles on behalf of the resorts and BC (paid by us). The best effort we put forth to get these advocates is via the media - and our PR team establishes these relationships by hosting events, giving VIP access, inviting to special functions and so on. These media writers then typically write stories that are published by larger outlets, only enhancing our reach and tapping a new audience we don't have via our CRM, social, web, and EpicPass contacts.

One direction we have explored and still trying to flush out technologically, is to develop a FB app where guests can share their experiences at Beaver Creek – especially since almost 60% of all guests each season are repeat families. So you know, BC has the most loyal guest base of any mountain in the VRI portfolio. Most are older and heads of family, so their engagement online is limited, but we feel there's an importance to provide this digital "forum" for people to share; not only to allow people to express happiness, but to also let new and other guests read unbiased beliefs.

We're a very guest centric resort, with that attribute being ranked highest of many brand attributes; so we're looking to harness that, and elevate what we know both in resort operations and digitally as well.

How would you identify an influencer?

Generally speaking, I would define them as a negative or positive "voice" of the brand who has a documented social web with some depth. Realistically someone ranting on our FB wall about grooming doesn't affect us that much, but when that same sentiment is published in a local paper, or someone with several thousand fans/followers we begin to react. And same goes with anything in a positive light that we want to piggy-back on and RT or Share.

What are the most important indicators in analytics of BC's social media presence? What about website analytics?

Each mountain has their own set of priorities, but at BC I believe we still need to focus on fan acquisition to build a foundation of scale. Heavenly and Vail both have over 100K fans on FB and were at 52K, so their engagement and dialogue is rich and has a longer "shelf life" whereas BC posts peak quick and die quick due to limited traction amongst our followers. We have yet to execute a paid fan acquisition campaign, but we will likely allocate some funds to this effort this winter to enhance our messaging to an audience that doesn't naturally see our content. From there and into the future, we'll be shifting gears to rich content so we start building strong engagement instead of fan count.

On the web there's a slightly different tune where my goal is all about ROI and CVR, regardless of my PVs or Unique Visitors. I'm not concerned about reach since our loyal guest base is transacting on items online like they do each year, so I focus on upselling new products and experiences since they're low in the conversion funnel and confirmed BC as their destination. Simply, I think social and anything outside our website to almost be the "wishing and dreaming" channels of information; showing powder vids, fresh snow pics, great events, etc... to entice new or existing guests to get excited for BC; and when they get to the website or go direct, they're in "info gathering and transacting" mode ready to lock in their trip.

How do you put monetary value on social media performance?

This has always been a tough one and even the largest brands are struggling to quantify this. For BC and all the resorts, we use Omniture as our site-side analytics package which allows us to attach tracking strings on URLs to attribute any metric to the primary source. It's not a complete looking picture, but it helps justify if a sales post for EpicPasses on Facebook or Twitter turned into a conversion and the revenue behind it. We all know it's rare someone sees a message and takes action right after; so we are blind to the branding, consideration and decision making insights that occur before the purchase is made. With this being noted, I actually never include revenue numbers in anything social. I'll look at the tracking codes to see the revenue, and occasionally mention it anecdotally; but never do I construct a report with the metric in the context of social – it's both very little, and grossly undervalued.

Which social media channels pay off most and which could a ski resort omit?

I think this question is unique to the resort and brand goals. For BC, I would say FB pays off most due to the larger reach compared to Twitter to promote a message, and even see engagement; but Vail might see the Pixlee execution with their Instagram account the most valuable since it drives tons of engagement and they don't need to depend on social to be a revenue driving channel. It all varies, but if I had to clearly give an answer; I would say cut Pinterest and the small FB pages (ski school, day camp, and dining locations) and value Facebook at this time, with Twitter closely behind.

Which indicators or motivations are decisive in how the marketing budget gets adjusted over time?

Being a publicly traded company and the resorts making up the largest of the VRI portfolio, revenue and ROI are the key motivators for anything; budget, priorities, staffing, etc.. Over the past few years the media mix has shifted towards digital simply because I can better measure my conversion over traditional print, magazine, TV and so on. We all agree these traditional forms of media have a place in the mix, but without solid justification we are shifting away slowly. I don't think it will ever disappear, but we will chip away at it to something like a 30/70 split of the overall media budget (my guess).

While this is great for my industry and expertise, you can see why social channels are struggling to win the media budgets without a definitive way of measuring conversion through the social experience/graph.

What would make an online marketing thesis truly beneficial for ski resorts? Anything that comes up in your mind first..

Selfishly, I would say the consumer decision making process and the factors they weight to determine a ski destination is profound to us. We know we attract a high-net worth guest, but we don't know what makes them tic – is it the high prices and allure of the amenities, is the exclusivity, is it the ability for everyone in the family to enjoy something, is it the snow and terrain quality, is it the number of awards, is it cost and value...and so on. I think every mountain knows who their audience is by sampling their guests, and what they can distinguish themselves as amongst the rest (building on their strongest assets), but the next big leap is gaining more market share and you cant do that without knowing what thmede people you don't have want... For example, Deer Valley is very similar to BC so why can't we steal market share from them? Maybe the guest is fixated on the closeness to SLC airport, maybe it's because property is cheap and they have a second home there, maybe because the amenities are better...but we really don't know here at BC, so if we knew that it

would allow us and anyone for that matter to develop a unique communication and marketing plan to gain market share from others.

A8: Interview with Dave Amirault

Senior Interactive Marketing Manager at Aspen Skiing Company

May 31, online survey interview

WARM-UP

How many skiing days have you had this winter?

78, I think.

Park/pow/slope?

All of the above!

Baggy pants or skinny pants?

Right in the middle!

THE TEAM

What is the structure of the marketing team at Aspen/Snowmass, especially the interactive marketing part?

We have a Vice President, Senior Marketing Manager (myself), a couple of managers, and a couple of coordinators. Your typical employment pyramid, you know, a chief and then some Indians. Interactive Marketing is handed by myself and another Marketing Manager. Mike (our Online Services Manager) handles the day to day operation of AspenSnowmass.com, and I handle mobile, social, and content creation.

Can you give one or two examples on how Aspen employees from outside the online marketing team contribute to the social media presence?

We take input from MANY departments within the Aspen Skiing Company. The way we've done this is with a weekly open door content meeting that occurs every Monday afternoon. Anyone from the company is welcome to come to the meeting, share an idea, or ask for some love via our social channels. Regular attendees are from food and beverage, mountain operations, environmental, public relations, events, and human resources. As far as training goes, I actually put on a series of lectures through the season that range from social media 101, to the real nitty gritty stuff like social media and food service where we go into the details of Yelp, Foursquare, and the importance of reviews, etc.

What external/outsourced interactive marketing technology or services do you use?

We use a ton of SAAS (software as a service) providers. Here's a brief list... - Hootsuite - Simply Measured - Vimeo - Chartbeat - VidIQ - Flurry - Exact Target - Dovetail – Pixlee

THE PLATFORMS

What is the strategy behind having just one social media profile for the four individual mountains?

We market Aspen/Snowmass as one destination brand, not the individual mountains. So it was more natural for us to have one unified voice instead of four smaller ones. To be honest, it makes MUCH more sense from a management and maintenance perspective. Imagine having to come up with compelling content for each of the four mountains every single day across four unique brand voices. That would be impossible with the resources available.

What is the motivation behind being present on that many social networks?

We're on a bunch of networks, but not THAT many. We keep it to the big ones - Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram are the ones that we obsessively update and monitor. You've got to be on the networks where your customers are, and be on ones that are appropriate for the content that you create. I've built our social brand around stunning photography, so we obsess over networks where that's a pillar. This is one of the most beautiful places on the planet, and we'd be doing it a major injustice by not sharing its beauty with the fine people of the internet.

What gets people to engage with your Facebook posts so much?

Photos. Hands down. Photos are digital crack to our audience. As I mentioned before, we've invested a lot of time and energy into our photo program. We've got a deep roster of local shooters, and they're all out there getting amazing shots. That natural beauty, combined with Facebook's ability to amplify your engagement via sharing makes us so popular.

What in the world would I need to do for you to show me any non-public analytics on engagement of users on the FB page?

Buy me a beer, and make sure the data doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

Before starting accounts on newer or more niche platforms like Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest, how do you prepare?

I don't have a crystal ball, so I never really know how popular a network is going to be before we dive in - but I do a hefty amount of research beforehand, usually by personally joining the network and following some big brands, athletes, personalities and friends. I like to mix it up and see how differently people are using networks and then devise a brand strategy. Here's an example - I followed General Electric on Instagram. Why in the world would I follow a boring brand like that? Easy, do you know how fucking hard it would be to make a

dinosaur like GE look cool? Well, those guys have 130,000+ followers and are doing shit right. So there are lessons to learn from those big dinosaurs. They're not talking about microwaves, dishwashers and boring shit like that? It's the things they're doing to change the world, advances in technology, and how they're working to make the planet a better place. Big ideas, told with visual storytelling. Give them a follow, it's actually pretty sweet. So, if a brand like GE can kill it on Instagram it should be easy as hell for us. We've got the most beautiful terrain on the planet in our backyard - and we don't have a stigma attached to us that we make dishwashers. Ha.

What gives your Tumblr all the turbo boost? (?????surpassing 60k in Jan, 100k in March, 150k in May?????)

Fake followers! No, just kidding. We're actually a featured blog on Tumblr. So when you're browsing your feed you will occasionally see Aspen/Snowmass pop up in the right side as a suggested follow. Also, when you sign up for a Tumblr account they suggest that you follow us. It is an amazing honor to be featured from those guys, and it gets us A LOT of traffic. Just to be clear, we haven't spent a single dollar with Tumblr. They feature us because they think our content kicks ass. We're going to hit 170,000 tonight, for the record.

What is your goal on Vimeo?

The goal on Vimeo is to skirt the sometimes heinous YouTube player. Ha. When I started here three years ago YouTube wasn't what it is today, and the player was a little wonky. I don't like ads appearing on my videos, and they didn't have the capability to default to HD and let me upload a specific video title image. We spend a lot of time making sure our videos look sweet, and to play them in a garbage player didn't really gel with me. Also, the homepage of AspenSnowmass.com has the Vimeo API integrated into it - so the background of the site can be one of our kickass videos if you press the play button. Also, it never hurts to have your video on a service that has a curation team! We have had our videos marked as a Staff Pick by Vimeo, and they've seen hundreds of thousands of views because of this. The chances of that happening on YouTube is like winning Powerball.

What was it about Foursquare that made you move away from the platform?

Homie, we haven't moved away from Foursquare - we just use it differently than you expect. We have dozens of venues on Foursquare and we usually have about a dozen check-in specials running at any given moment. We've got free beers at the Ajax Tavern, happy hour specials, secret menu items, and more. We're not gettin' all up in your feed, we're actually providing real world value with their merchant platform!

ROI

What KPIs of social media are Aspen Skiing Company executives most interested in? What KPIs determine how social media budget is adjusted from term to term?

Oddly enough, they don't really obsess about KPI's - that's my job. They want growth, but the right kind. Thankfully I've had the ability to custom craft the whole program here around the RIGHT kind of social media growth. We don't want to simply throw 20k at Facebook for crappy fan acquisition, we want the right fans, the right followers, the right engagement. Having the biggest numbers sometimes isn't the best thing for your

brand. We'd rather have half the numbers of the bigger resorts, but more engagement per follower. Those are your brand ambassadors, the ones that are sharing your photos, commenting, and actively hitting you up day after day.

If different than the answer of the previous question, which social media metrics do you yourself consider most important?

Engagement, number of posts per day (you don't want to miss days), and the right kind of growth on each platform.

USER-GENERATED

What is the policy with regards to responding to user generated content?

No official policy, you don't need something in writing so you can tell people that they took a great photo, shared an awesome video, or said something about your brand. We are big fans of what I call the "social attaboy" where we are constantly liking, commenting and engaging with people that are sharing their experiences from Aspen/Snowmass.

What is the policy with regards to moderating user generated content?

Once again, no policy. We use some services like Pixlee to aggregate social posts and then share them back out to our audiences. Those tools have approve/deny features, but for the most part we don't have to moderate anything.

How do you identify online influencers?

We use Klout for Business, it's awesome and is in private beta. It lets you discover your influences not just by their score, but frequency, location, and platform. Really cool service. Also, we capture every single thing being said about the resort across all the major platforms. Services like Simply Measured actually have reports that tell you who your major influencers are, which comes in handy. Other than that, by being engaged with the platforms you personally develop a sixth sense of who your big brand influencers are.

Can you name a case or two where you leveraged individuals with online clout?

Sure. Did you see the Klout Perk that we did last year? We gave away 500, yes 500, lift tickets to people based on their Klout score and what topics they were influential in. I can show you the data, it is wild.

How do you get broad audience to advocate your brand?

Photos and a casual tone on social media. Nobody wants a brand barking at them, that's why we're a more casual brand and don't talk down to our audiences. We see social as a two-way street, the last thing we want to be is authoritative.

FINAL

Together with the strong authenticity of content evident in the online activity of A/S, what are other pillars of successful online presence?

You've GOT to have your website dialed, earlier this season we had some uptime issues and our users let us have it. We actually ended up sending an email out to our guests apologizing for the site - it was the right thing to do. Also, LOG EVERYTHING. Every mention. Every retweet. Every post. Data is your friend, and these services are spitting it out in droves. You just have to understand how to leverage it. But that's a whole other can of worms right there. Gotta have your email game on lock too. Email isn't dead. It works. And works better when you have a REALLY smart database of consumers and their behavior. Want to email people that are arriving at your resort this weekend for a vacation who have never been here before that also have kids between the ages of 1-18? With a good database you can get those people and reach out to them. See what I mean?

Are there new untapped ideas that A/S is going to start using in future? Which of the current efforts will be more important in the future?

Of course! We always have something up our sleeve. I'm not going to tip my hat to what, but let's just say it involves much sweeter video. I don't know what networks are going to be big, but I do know that they will more than likely be focused around photos and video - and since that is the pillar to our whole program, we're going to kick ass.

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