Brand-based Bloggers' Communities.

Drawing the Boundaries of the Customers Satisfaction in the Blogosphere

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the results from a larger study on corporate Blogs as new and effective tools of management of the relationships with customers. The use of a software tool of Social Network Analysis, formerly developed at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence, offered interesting insights about the dynamics of Customers Virtual Community that are built around a brand. These communities provide companies with an additional communication channel, help them establish linkages to the more devoted users, monitor brand appreciation and reach new customers and potential markets.

In this preliminary stage, we mapped the diffusion of a well recognized software-house brand inside the Blogosphere and we demonstrated how the boundaries of the bloggers' community - discussing about topics related to the corporate brand - are larger than the boundaries of the official blog's network.

We visually represented the complexity of links through the use of network maps, by plotting the interactions of this brand-based community of bloggers. In doing this, we recognized how this community shaping the boundaries of the official blog's pages can include also spontaneous, unofficial, actors playing a role of boycotters. The event monitored was the offer of a new machine with a pre-installed open-source system. We focused our attention on monitoring the dynamics of some of the brand-based bloggers' communities, looking at the popularity trends of some specific key words related to a firm's recent and innovative commercial initiative. Through this study we demonstrated the richness of connections and hyperlinks that bloggers generated while they were populating several blogs' pages, providing positive and negative feedback evaluating different features of the proposed solutions.

This evidence has offered also an interesting interpretation of the echo effect that characterizes the world of Blogs. We focused our results' interpretation on the great potential of a customers relationship strategy based on the adoption of an official blog. The emerging larger dimensions of the bloggers' community built around a firm's brand are still not a fully recognized source of competitive advantage.

In this preliminary stage, we propose a social network approach that allows to develop a continuous strategic monitoring of the Blogosphere by which firms can register feedbacks and suggestions from acquired or potential customers as well as the degree of satisfaction, commitment and trust developed by the market.

Introduction

Blogs are one of the most typical and actual phenomenon of our times. Encompassing the personal uses made by individuals, their most recent and interesting adoption by the firms has radically changed the traditional way by which firms manage their relationships with customers as well as their own brand, offering several interesting insights for researchers and scholars as well.

But, if their contribution in terms of more successful, human and intimate relationship with customers has just been largely discussed, the social effects of their adoption are still unknown.

Using the potentiality of the web, through Blogs, firms can reach an incredible large community of virtual consumers, a community that is a consequence of what several authors have defined echo chamber phenomenon (Scoble, et al., 2006) presents not well-defined lines.

Adopting Condor, a powerful social network tool formerly known as TeCFlow and developed at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence and the Dartmouth Tuck Center for Digital Strategies (Gloor, et al., 2006), in this preliminary stage of research, we aim to demonstrate which are the real dimensions of a brand customers virtual community in the Blogosphere as well as how a new hybrid category of customers community, different from that ones just debated in literature, is emerging.

For this reason, the paper is structured as follows. Highlighting the actuality of the issue, after a brief review of the most recent literature about the emerging phenomenon of Blogs and their recent adoption by the firms, we describe the phenomenon of Customers Virtual Communities in the Blogosphere and their Brand based dimension. In the sections that follow, we proceed with the methodological discussion about the social network perspective and the tool adopted. By using this tool we will present the study conducted on the social dynamics and dimensions observed inside the Dell bloggers community. In conclusion, we present the obtained results, the most significant evidences and the future lines of our research.

Research Background

Blogs' Phenomenon

Blogs is surely the most worldwide actual phenomenon. The number of Blogs has increased enormously, just in the March 2005 Technorati, one of the well know blog search site, counted about 8 million Blogs, almost the double of few months before (Hill, 2005). The

Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that in January 2005 Blogs readership has growth by 58%, claiming that "Blogs have established themselves as a key part of online culture" (Raine, 2005).

Always in January 2005, Fortune defined Blogs as the number one of its "10 Tech Trends to Watch for", claims that Blogs are transforming traditional working and professional practices in the advertising, marketing and public relation fields (Kirkpatrick, et al., 2005).

Defined as dynamic web pages in which information posted are listed in a reverse chronological sequence, as well as a new form of mainstream personal communication (Rosenbloom, 2004), Weblog (or simply called blogs) represents one of the main emerging phenomenon inside the new digital and web-based landscape (Jackson, 2007; Herring, 2004; Barger, 1997). Blogs are for million of people a successful way to publish and exchange knowledge/information, and establish networks or build relationships in Blogosphere, the world of all Blogs (Du, et al., 2006).

Enabled by Internet, their exponential growth has just received considerable attention in discussion in the popular media, but also in literature where several scholars have recently studied "blogs" phenomenon as forms of social activity and virtual place for self-expression (Jackson, et al., 2007; Kelleher, et al., 2006; Herring, et al., 2005; Nardi, et al. 2004).

The updates are frequent, usually daily, according to the site owner's editorial purpose that is also responsible of the legitimacy of the published contents. Blogs contribute to web content by linking and filtering evolving content in a structured way and by establishing interlinked communities, connecting people through shared interests (Lindahl, et al., 2003).

Another interesting functionality offered by Blogs for the content management is represented by the tag and RSS. By assigning a category or descriptor to the contribution posted, this tool allows to recall or identify easily and in a more rapid way the new content updated.

For all these characteristics, Blogs have represented a radical revolution in the way in which usually people receive information and connect with each other in online environments.

Confirming the relevant dimension of a new social mass phenomenon, the Blogosphere presented, on March 2007, the following dimensions (source: Technorati & David Sifry on http://technorati.com/weblog/2007/04/328.html):

Figure 1. An Overview of the Blogosphere

An Overview of the Blogosphere Dimension at March 2007
70 millions of Weblogs
About **120.000** new weblogs each day
1.5 million posts per day - **17** posts per second
22 blogs among the top **100** sources linked in the last quarter 2006
Japanese is the 1st blogging language with 37% on total
English is the 2nd blogging language with 33% on total
Chinese is the 3rd blogging language with 8% on total
Italian is the 4th blogging language with 3% on total
230 million posts tracked with tags or categories
2.5 million of blogs posted at least one tagged post in Feb. 2007

(Adapted from "The State of the Live Web" Technorati Report – April 2007)

On May 2, 2005, the BusinessWeek affirmed "*Blogs will change your business*". From that announcement, several changes have affected the business scenario. Currently, millions of people result interconnected in hobby or product-related conversations in chats, forums, Blogs, and firms are more and more interesting to capture the large amount of knowledge that they share.

Considering the structural functionalities, we can distinguish two main types of blogs: *filters* and *journals,* even if several other hybrid categories are diffusing.

The first one is characterized by an activity of collection realized by the authors, this kind of blog presents a very low personal profile limiting its functionalities just at the resuming of the web pages in which a certain topic is debated or presented.

The second style, surely the most diffused was born as the version web-based of a personal diary. In this kind of Blogs, users expect to find in a more personal and consciousness way experiences, thoughts, feedbacks and opinions of the author (Lindahl, et al. 2003).

Looking at the global phenomenon that both these Blogs have generated in the society, they either are extremely interesting, even if the personal and individual premises, more evident in the journal blog style, highlight how the second category is the most interesting according to the purpose of our analysis.

The periodical publishing of information is the main functionality behind the creation of a personal blog. For this reason the updates are frequent, usually daily, according to the site owner's editorial purpose.

There is a growing evidence of social structures evolving around weblogs and their influence on norms and practice of blogging. One of the most interesting aspect of this global phenomenon is represented by the social consequences of their diffusion with the creation of virtual communities of bloggers.

Another distinctive characteristic of Weblogs is not the publication of content but the personalities behind them. Blogs are increasingly becoming the online identity of their authors, and this represents a factor enabling a radical shift in the traditional application web based.

Historically, the Internet has followed the separation of consumer and producers roles perpetuated in the mass media. According to this model, content consumers needed minimal skills and resources, while producers required production expertise and sophisticated tools to control content presentation and substance. The Blogosphere has enlarged the roles of both consumers and producers. Consumers can subscribe to any Blogs that interest them simply by linking to them through a syndication protocol that automatically updates content. Consumers can customize their subscriptions for both format and content. They can also produce content by augmenting existing articles with their own comments through templates that blogging system provide. The blog administrators define and control the processes for posting blog content on their sites (Lindahl, et al., 2003).

In the recent years, various observers have pointed to the shifting paradigms of cultural and societal participations and economic production in developed nations. These changes are facilitated by the emergence of new participatory technologies of information access, knowledge exchange, and content production, many of these are associated with the Internet and new media technologies (Bruns, 2005).

In conclusion, observing the technological and social trends across the last decade, it is evident the Internet has transformed several aspects of the way business is conducted, and that due to the profound changes in the global business environment, information technology and management thinking and experience, a fundamental shift is occurring mainly in how companies compete (Tapscott, 2006). Corporate Blogs seem to be the most respondent solution at this need.

Blogs for Firms: the Corporate Blogs

Inside the several typologies of Blogs, the phenomenon of the Corporate ones (defined as the use of blogs within firms) is one of the most actual and interesting. There are just several firms' applications of these blogs (Jakson, et al., 2007), the most significant regards the

creation of virtual employees or customers communities around these initiatives to enable the process of value creation, product innovation (Sawhney, et al., 2005; Kozinets, 1998), and to reinforce long-term and trusted-based relationship.

Microsoft, Sony, Apple, McDonalds, Fiat, Martini&Rossi, Mandarina Duck, Macromedia, Nokia, Mercedes-Benz, Yahoo, Google, are some of the most well known corporations that have created a personal blog transferring on their virtual pages a relevant part of their efforts in communication and interactions with the customers. The universe of corporate Blogs is very articulated, most are the result of a strategic vision, some others born as personal blog of an employee or a manager become later the official virtual presence of the firms.

These virtual environments allow the firms to reach and engage a much larger number of customers, which self-select themselves and participate in these spontaneous conversations. Their interactions are extremely flexible: customers can choose their level of involvement (Hagel, et al.,1999) and are always free to modify their level of participation as their commitment increase over time.

Popularly called "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 1993), in realty these social groups created around a web initiative, have a real existence for the participants, with a lot of social implications on their behavior, including consumer ones (Muniz, et al., 2001). For this reasons they can present interesting applications in the marketing strategies adopted by the firms. In online contexts, consumers can share information and influence each others about products and brand (Kozinets, 1999), offering so at the firms and marketing researchers the possibility to identify and understand tastes, desires, decision making influences, social dynamics inside the community.

Through this dialogue, firms learn about and from individual customers or groups and, immersing them-selves into an experiential contexts of customer consumption (Sawhney, et al., 2005), have the great possibility to test instantaneously the level of satisfaction perceived from their products, services and strategies.

In our perspective, we think that corporate Blogs can also present for firms interesting insights when adopted as a strategy for monitoring the rate of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of customers, the popularity of their own brands or products, as well as their own reputations allowing, if it is necessary, to address their strategy of relationship with the customers towards actions aimed to rebuild the damaged reputation.

At this purpose, we expect to demonstrate as the openness of an official blog by the firms can represent a challenge and a strategic point to evaluate carefully, mainly if through this

tool firms decide to reinforce their own damaged image and re-acquire the faiths of customers and investors.

The study presented is a part of a larger study about the corporate Blogs phenomenon, that also aims to contribute at the literature discussion about relational marketing and corporate reputation management, showing how corporate blog, allowing to engage a successful strategy of customers relationship and by reaching a larger community of bloggers in the Blogosphere contribute also at re-launch and rebuilding the perceptions of customers about firms and its products and in this way to guarantee a new successful and profitable performance.

Blogs and Customers Virtual Communities

If the large diffusion of blogs and their adoption by users with the most different interests is one of the most evident aspect of the observed phenomenology, another relevant perspective in our study is represented by the community dimension they present.

Perceived as "unedited personal voices" (Winer, 2003), informal, and faceless, these Blogs are for the bloggers the virtual space in which they can friendly express their own personalities.

For this reason, Blogs represent an interesting repository of data and information about their own authors, that are sharing interest for a kind of content, and simply uploading a link or a post in a such discussion more than another allow the readers to learn more about them.

Looking at the component of bloggers' personalities, it is imaginable the relevance of the social perspective about the community built around weblogs; a community that more than the shared spatial dimension is the result of a strong connection between the authors and the issues, brands or interest discussed.

As argued by Efimova et al. (2005), in a study on the bloggers community boundaries, "this evidence ranges from voices of bloggers themselves speaking about social effects of blogging, to studies on specific Weblogs communities with distinct cultures, to mathematical analysis of links between weblogs indicating that community formation in the Blogosphere is not a random process, but an indicator of shared interests binding bloggers together".

Through this dialogue, firms learn about and from individual customers or groups and, immersing them-selves into an experiential context of customer consumption (Del Vecchio et al., 2008 [b]; Sawhney, et al., 2005), have the great possibility to test instantaneously the level of satisfaction perceived from their products, services and strategies.

Other contributions have showed as such customers virtual communities can be implicitly and explicitly structured around a consumption or a marketing interest, and can be defined as "affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities" (Kozinets, 1999)

Blogs' contribution to the creation of virtual communities is surely one of the most debated issue in the studies of scholars and researchers about the Blogs phenomenon. As described by Hill (2005), for example The University of Minnesota has created a web site named "Into the Blogosphere" that features an online collection of essays about the complex world of Blogs.

Anyway, before proceeding with the identification of the main characteristics of these virtual community of customers that in the Blogosphere discuss about a brand or product, a preliminary review of the main literature about the Community of Practices (CoPs) has been useful in order to better define the phenomena we were going to study and clarify their main characteristics.

Known also as community of interest, community of knowledge practice or strategic communities (Corallo et al., 2008; Mayer, 2001), Community of practice have been defined as informal communities in which members share their knowledge and professional expertise as well as beliefs, opinions, experiences, working around a common project or issue (Brown et al., 1991; Wegner, et al., 2000). Built thanks to different kind of initiatives, several of these communities of Practices live under the surface of formal organization, these communities are identified by a group "of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, et al., 2000).

Based on the most traditional forms of interaction and mainly on face-to face meetings, these CoPs have existed for centuries.

The diffusion of the new generation of web applications is enabling new forms of social interactions, in the most recent times, encouraging the scientific and academic speculation about the Community of practices, highlighting interesting modalities of application in the third millennium as well (Dubè, et al., 2003).

The relevance on the discussion about CoPs in the era of Web 2.0 technologies find in their characteristics of relatively low-costs and in their virtual dimensions that is the main reason legitimating their existence and encouraging firms in promoting such initiatives.

Transcending spatial and timing limits, Blogs, and Wikis can be considered platforms enabling these virtual CoPs, that can be defined virtual for the adoption of ICTs as a primary modality of interaction.

A Virtual Community of Practice has been also defined as *distributed* (Wenger, et al., 2002); *computer-mediated* (Etzioni, et al., 1999); *on-line* (Cothrel, et al., 1999); or *electronic* (Wasko, et al., 2000). Therefore, the virtual dimension doesn't exclude categorically also traditional forms of interactions as well as face-to-face meetings (Taifi, 2008; Dubè, et al., 2003).

But if structurally the main difference between the two categories of CoPs is represented by the technological components behind the virtual ones, the benefits that these latter present in terms of effective knowledge sharing, building of mutual knowledge, feels of trust among members, sense of belonging and motivation are enhanced by members' major consciousness.

At this purpose it could be useful to recall an interesting study about the exploration of Weblog community boundaries (Efimova, et al., 2005), in which the authors try to delineate the Blog community boundaries through that Jones (1997) defined as the artifacts of its virtual settlement useful to identify a set of conditions able to delineate it: a minimum level of interactivity, a variety of communicators, a virtual common-public-space where a significant portion of community interactions occur, a minimum level of sustained stable membership. These conditions will result extremely useful in describing the community dimension of bloggers built around the Corporate Blog object of our study.

Brand-based Bloggers' Community

Defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admires of a brand" (Muniz, et al., 2001), brand communities are an issue of extreme actuality and interest in the marketing literature and one of the main goal of the current study.

Anyway, before to analyze the virtual dimension of this emerging collective phenomenon, we aim to recall briefly the main contributions of scholars and researchers in marketing field about the theme of Brand Community and its relevance in building strongest relationships with the customers (Del Vecchio, et al., 2008 [a]).

The discussion about Brand seems to move from the consideration that its value is represented by the capability to encapsulate all that set of communication, history, feeling about a products or a company within a simple name and logo.

Branding was defined as "a name, term or logo or design or a combination among them aiming at identifying a product or a service from one vendor or manufacturer and differentiate it from competitors" (Kotler, 1998). For many years it has been seen only as logos and advertisements while, it is nowadays evident that, a brand is much more than this.

Brand can be seen as the identity of a company as a whole and can be identified with the complex value system that the company presents to the world: the synthesis of company's way of doing things (Hague 2006; Saviolo, 2002).

A such shift in meaning has caused also radical changes in the strategic and marketing practices. If in the past to realize a good branding policy could mean a well-designed logo, a clever campaign with glitzy commercials during television broadcasts, today management of the Brand is far more encompassing, extending to customer service, packaging and quality and other areas that go well beyond advertising (Vedpuriswar, 2005).

In this new perspective, Brand Management becomes an integrative part of the corporate strategy, a new strategic approach that for its nature calls for a major top management and entrepreneurial involvement, a more diffused cross-functional approach, an emerging need of building trust and discharging social responsibility (Vedpuriswar, 2005).

As argued by some brand strategists (Aaker, 1991, Kapferer 1997) brands' strengths are represented by their capabilities to recall clear associations in consumer mind: they talk about brand personality, a long term relationship with the consumer centered on emotional feelings more than on economic transactions (Pine et al.,1999).

The current scenario, so well characterized by the diffusion of ICTs and mainly by the last generation of Web 2.0 technologies, asks for a Branding that is becoming more a function of the relationship and the set of experiences that the consumer has with the brand.

Involving consumers in a marketing dialogue is a prerequisite for achieving brand involvement and loyalty, which, in turn, affects the prospects of establishing positive market relationships (Andersen, 2005).

And it is this last relational dimension as well as the orientation towards a new line in the firms' relational strategies that are the most interesting evidences according to the purpose of our study.

Muniz et al., (2001) see in the emergence of social structure around a Brand, by the adoption of new Internet applications, its main contribution into building successful relationships between marketer and consumers (Feldstein, A.P., et al., 2007).

Increasing the accessibility to these virtual places and facilitating the process of knowledge sharing and participation by users, the Web 2.0 technologies have enhanced the rising of these virtual brand communities enabling interesting networking interactions.

In a such context, customers' influences on the choices of the others result greater than in the real world. Amazon, eBay, are just two of the most known and studied examples of consumers' communities, but we believe that new and interesting insights can also emerge

from the corporate Blogs initiatives, both in terms of social dynamics across the Blogosphere as well as in terms of new strategic approach at the CRM. The ubiquity of the Internet and the possibility of connection, knowledge sharing and information offered by the several web-based initiatives have significantly impacted on the traditional definition of the community.

Online communities exist in the areas of non-profits, as well as at the commercial level where individual citizens create their own community of interest (Jang, et al., 2007). These communities refer to either groups or individuals engaging in online interaction on virtual spaces created through the integration of communication with contents developed by members.

The large diffusion of the Blogs has highlighted the growing phenomenon of these communities inside the Blogosphere and the adoption of them by the firms has contributed at the promotion of these web-enhanced brand communities. These communities not only provide companies with an additional communication channel but also allow the possibility of establishing linkages to devoted users (Taifi, 2008; Andersen, 2005).

A brand community starts based on its core asset, the brand itself and continues to build relationships among members interested in the brand. As argued by Jang et al. (2007), these communities can be categorized in two main typologies according to their initiators and are:

- the consumer-initiated community voluntarily built by the members that spontaneously decide to share their knowledge and feedbacks about their experiences;

- the company-initiated community, built by the company with ownership in the brand in order to establish a relationship with the customers and to induce productive feedback from them.

According to this categories, the customers virtual community built around corporate Blogs have to be part of this second typology. Anyway, we think that these categorizations do not consider the complex nature of the relationships inside the Blogosphere. With this work, we aim to demonstrate how a third interesting category of community is emerging around the blog. This new category is not completely new, but it is the result of the natural process of merger in the Blogosphere between the two previous ones. The presence of this new hybrid category of customers virtual community highlights its larger dimensions and calls for a new redefinition of the customers virtual community around the blog.

More in depth, not considering this new perspective and its growing larger dimension, firms could risk to underestimate the contribution of all the users that do not participating at the official initiatives since this can be furthermore interesting and fashionable for their personal experience and relevance inside the Blogosphere.

Virtual Customers Relationship Management and Brand Community

The actual tumultuous emerging scenario calls for firms able to continuously reconfigure their structures and their own offer of products and services.

Offering the possibility to reach and retain the more profitable customers, to better know their needs and requests, the traditional forms of CRM found, in the observation and categorization of customers' data, the core of their strategy. As argued by Goel, et al., (2007) "in traditional CRM strategies, customer experience is absent in the process", highlighting as in a such relational strategy there wasn't a space for collaboration and value co-creation.

Supported by several and authoritative studies, this traditional approach at CRM even if built around the customers seems to be not yet valid in the actual scenario, where firms are called to compete by reconfiguring continuously their structures, offers and markets.

Characterized by a major focus on the process of co-creation and co-innovation, and enabled by the powerful collaborative practices, the new Customer Relationship Management, enabled by the new technologies and their several web applications, looks at the customers as innovators of their own products and not jet as a passive consumers active just in giving feedbacks (Goel, et al. 2007). Defined as Virtual CRM (Goel, et al., 2007), the new emerging paradigm takes in a great consideration the variety of customers community by an approach that privileged more and more the uniqueness of the customers' experiences, its need of personalization and the interaction one to one (Phrahalad, et al., 2004).

Another interesting evidence about the effectiveness of a Virtual CRM strategy is represented by the higher level of trust and commitment that these kind of initiatives can create. Beneficing of the positive effects that conversations can have in terms of trust, these virtual initiatives enabling knowledge sharing and interactions in more friendly way generate that consumer's attitude towards a company, its product and its brand.

CRM in the Web 2.0 era call a managerial paradigm shift in firm vision both of market and customers. Embracing a strategy of customers relationship through these virtual spaces, firms have to share a major attitude to understand the voice of their customers, this "may not be representative of the whole market, but it has a quality of genuineness that warrants its inclusion as a supplement to CRM insights" (Dwyer, 2007).

In this perspective Blogs is not a substitute of CRM but the factor enabling a new strategic trend that calls for a structural reconfiguration of the firm's resources dedicated to the CRM services.

Through a blog a company have to realize to have the possibility to discuss with known or unknown customers, but this will produce a process of openness and enlargement its own boundaries, facilitating the creation of a "brand community" (Dwyer, 2007).

Defined as the results of the communication process across the actors involved in Morgan et al., (1994) *trust* is a fundamental pillar for the creation of these virtual communities. Several factors can affect the emergence of trust: Swan et al., (1985) argued that is the sincere concern's expression for the customers well-being to create this feeling; Nicholson et al. (2001) see in linking, defined as an "emotional connection between two people" the antecedents of trust; Das et al. (1998) identify others' motivation understanding as a prerequisite of trust; in a more complex path, instead, McCullough et al. (2002) define trust as the result of a linking process that is the final result of a taking care attitude resulted by a strong benevolence motivation.

In conclusion, we can synthesize in the following points the main differences existing between the previous form of CRM, defined by Kozintes (1999) as "data-base driven relationship marketing" and the actual and more valuable dimensions of the emerging Virtual approach to CRM:

- a more active and conscious participation of customers;
- a more collective dimension of the relationship;

The incredible amount of personal, social and cultural information available to the rising of those new trends in the customers practices as well as in firms strategic management of their relationships with the market call for new and more responding tools, capable to integrate the requirements of the CRM and relational marketing instances with the powerful social networking dimension emerged.

As we will try to show in the paragraphs that follows, the adoption of Condor, a powerful tool of social networking, formerly developed at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence, can offer an interesting interpretation of the Bloggers' Communities Phenomena, displaying new and interesting aspects of such virtual phenomena.

Research Methodology: a social network perspective

Despite the increasing interest about the emergence of a virtual dimension of CRM and the main implications in terms of knowledge sharing, customers retention, level of commitment and reputational consequences, the research on the field of Web 2.0 applied to the marketing is still in its infancy.

With our research we aim to demonstrate that grasping the powerful applications of the Web 2.0 technologies and mainly of a Blog as official platform of interaction and discussion with the community of customers dispersed in the Blogosphere firms can persecute a successful CRM strategy and by this to monitor the rate of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of its customers, the level of popularity of its brand or products, and also to evaluate the opportunity of readdress its strategies of communication and relationship with the market.

At this purpose, by this study we demonstrate that a customers relationship strategy based on the adoption of a corporate blog overcoming all that limits showed in literature for the CRM solutions can allow to embrace a more customers' needs responding policy of communication and interaction, putting the firm in relationship with a brand-based community of bloggers that is larger than that one discussing on the official web spaces of the corporate blog.

Therefore, with this study we intend to demonstrate how the well planned strategy of presence in the Blogosphere through an official blog by the firms can contribute to increase in amore friendly and intimate way the level of commitment with consumers and enhance the relationships with them in a more intimate and collaborative dialogue.

In this preliminary phase, we have conducted our analysis adopting a social network perspective and mainly by using the last version of Condor (Gloor, et al., 2006), a powerful social network tool formally developed at MIT Center for Collective Intelligence.

Condor is a tool to automatically analyze social networks based on communications logs. It allows to create visual maps, movies, and many graph metrics of relationships (Gloor, et al., 2006). Relationship can come from social networks, web site link structures, and concept maps of unstructured documents, online forums, phone archives, blogs, e-mail networks, and others. Taking inputs from these several web-based communication tools, Condor parses those documents and incrementally stores them in a database, offering the possibility to visualize and analyze these data in manifold interactive and visual maps.

At this stage we adopted the Condor functionalities with the aim to track the boundaries of a brand-based customers virtual community of bloggers. The network observed was represented by community of bloggers interested at the discussion about the most recent offers of Dell, one of the most successful and well-known computer out-let firm.

This observation has allowed to map the complex and rich nodes of interactions between the bloggers and mainly to show clearly how a brand-based community shapes the boundaries of the official one built around the corporate blog.

This also has allowed to reflect about the real dimensions of a brand customers virtual communities, how in our case presents lines and dimensions larger than that official one.

Offering interesting considerations about the social dynamics developed in the Blogosphere, the results obtained have represented a significant preliminary test of the goodness of the main hypothesis behind the study about the Corporate Blogs we are going to define.

Dell Customers Virtual Community: Analyzing the Blogosphere with Condor

Engaged in a large strategy of customers relationship and management of the firm's corporate reputation based on the use of Blogs, Dell represents, with its three official corporate Blogs, one of the most actual and interesting case of firm's presence in the Blogosphere.

Thought with the aim to give to customers a place to share their opinions, ask questions, and say what they would improve in the Dell's products, these Blogs are largely frequented with a highest number of postings by day, according to the different discussions and the different aims. These Blogs are the clear expression of an innovative and interesting larger strategy of customer relationship and engagement and brand management operated by Dell, after a negative period for its financial and reputational performances.

Choosing between the several tracks proposed, we focused our study on one of the most recent and popular discussion about the launch of a new commercial solution.

In the last days of May 2007, Dell offered from the pages of one of its official Blogs three different Dell systems with Ubuntu 7.04 pre-installed. The novelty of the offer, even if at that time was limited only at the US market, has generated a great echo and an enormous traffics of postings. For the first time in the PC history, Dell was selling a machine with an open.-source system based on the LINUX technology pre-installed.

As imaginable, the topic was largely debated by bloggers and users mainly on the pages of two of Dell's Blogs (Direct2Dell and Ideastorm), manifesting a great consensus, a diffused level of satisfaction and in general a great expectation by the bloggers. In other words, it is possible to argue that the virtual community of Dell customers has expressed through the participations at the discussion on the pages of the Blogs a clear positive feedback about the initiative.

A preliminary observation of the postings collected, that will be better performed in the future steps of our research, has showed something of interesting about their authors. Most of them, in fact, are authors of personal pages on the web or of other Blogs, some others are actively engaged in other initiatives devoted to the same issues, some others with larger interests.

This characteristic, showing an overview about the dynamics and personal complex interactions of the bloggers inside the Blogosphere, offers also interesting evidences for the aim of our research in terms of social network and relational marketing.

Behind the links of all these active actors, it is possible to see a larger community of bloggers that in the Blogosphere speaks about Dell and its innovative products. The lines of this community overcome the number of bloggers engaged in the discussions on its official blogs and call for a new and interesting scenario. Through Condor it has been possible to map this larger community and the most evident dynamics inside it.

Between the several functions offered by Condor, the blog collector allows to start automatically the research of the selected words in the Blogosphere. Condor operates automatically this research presenting the possibility to choose among three different blog search API (i.e.: Google, MSN, Technorati). According to the selected discussions and the focus of our study, the most representative key words of our analysis were represented by the following words: "dell ubuntu", "dell linux", "great dell", "thanks dell" (Fig.2).

Figure 2: *Collecting Information from the Blogosphere through Condor's Functionality*
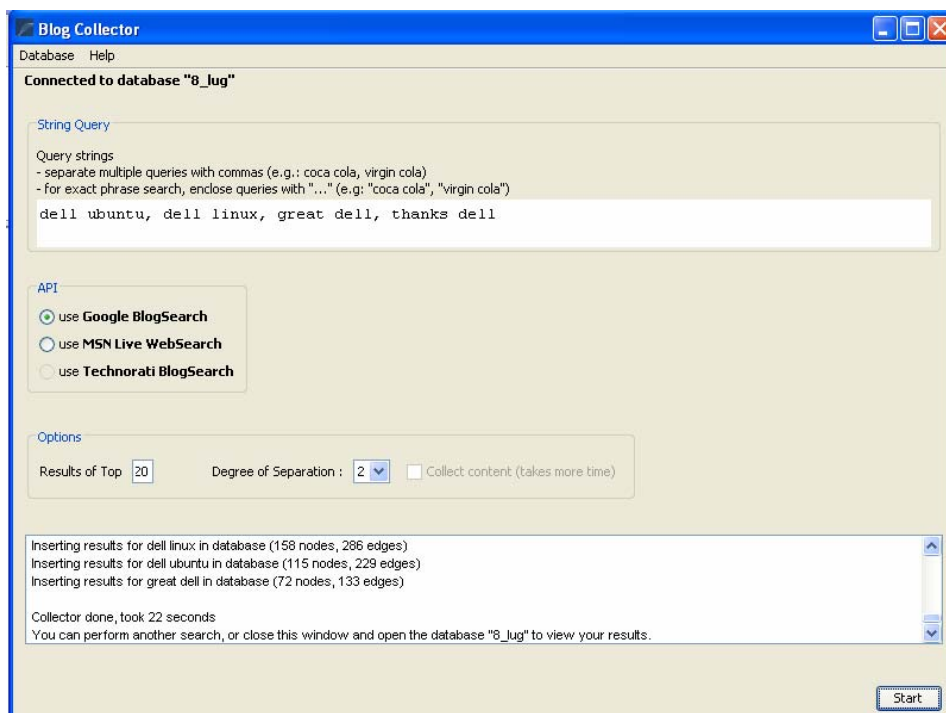
The words inside the queries are the most representative of the diffused contributions of bloggers inside the postings.

The obtained results have been collected in a selected database. Thus, recalling these words inside the database, it has been possible to proceed with the creation of the communication view, just selecting the option "view" of the tool and then choosing the creation of a static view of communication. The tool maps by this way all the Blogs that in the Blogosphere have spoken about this issue using the words contained in the selected queries, and offers an interesting overview of the social dimension of this Dell devoted virtual community of users that in our analysis results composed by 719 nodes (Fig.3).

**Figure 3:** *Mapping the Dell brand-based bloggers community with Condor*
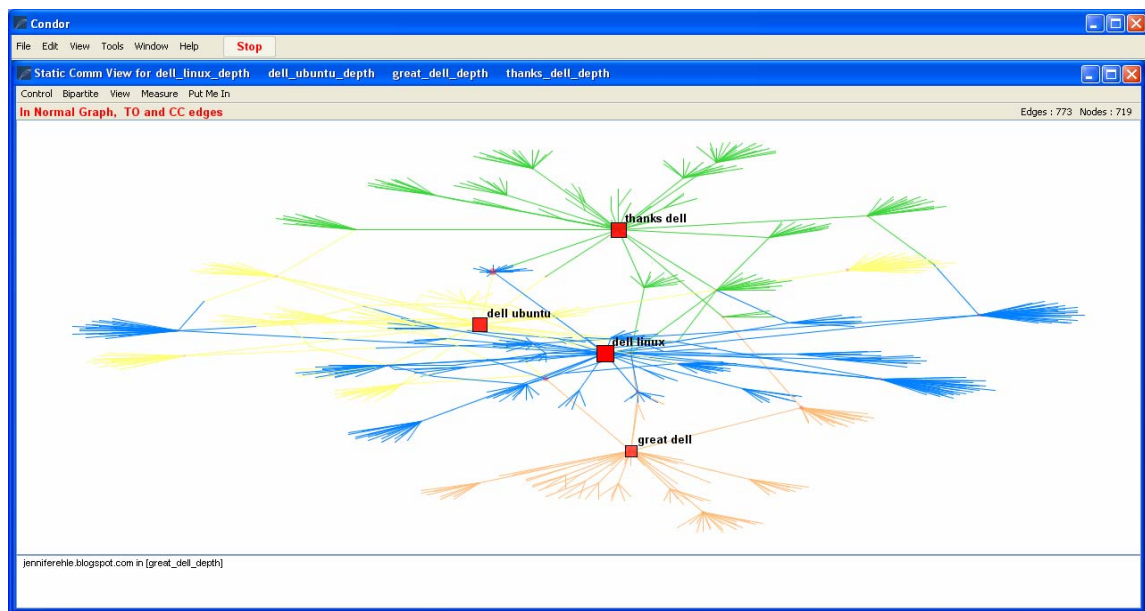
As it is possible to see in the previous picture, the community of users that in the Blogosphere discuss about Dell, commenting its initiatives and offers with expression as "thanks Dell", "great Dell" or "Dell Ubuntu" and "Dell Linux", that were the most representative expression of the topics debated, results more complex and articulated than the community of bloggers built around the official Dell's Blogs initiatives.

The obtained results are representative of the social network inside the Blogosphere built around the words of our research and mapped according to the degree of centrality between the nodes. This means to represent the nodes according to the function of bridge realized among the several Blogs.

The same map can be visualized also according the node's degree of centrality, that instead shows what are the main nodes of the network (Fig.4):

Figure 4: *Collecting Information from the Blogosphere through Condor's Functionality*
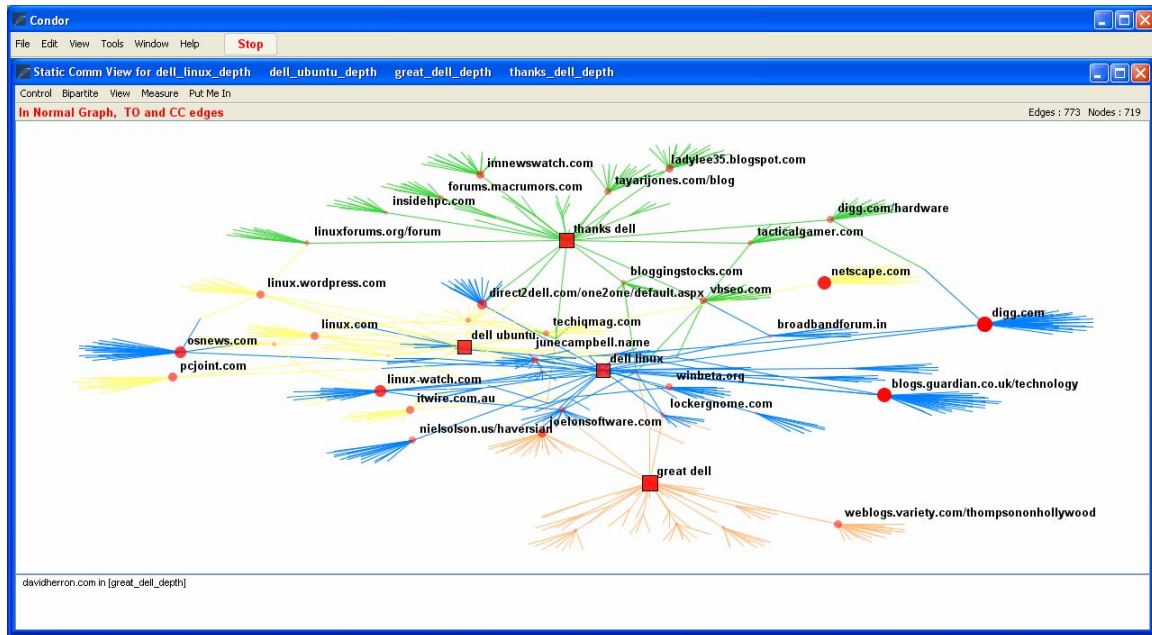
These two alternative visualizations result extremely relevant for the aim of our study. Even if through two alternative readings, mapping the large dimension of the virtual community that in the Blogosphere discuss or is interested in these topics, they can represent for firms a source of knowledge about its own brand and products of highest importance. We are conscious that this evidence is not exhaustive to argue that all the bloggers mapped can be considered customers or potential ones, some of them could express negative or boycotting feedbacks, but the obtained results are indicatives of the great echo about Dell and its last offers in the Blogosphere.

Other two interesting applications offered by the tool and also relevant for the aims of our research are represented by the possibility to visualize just with a click on the node all the links presented behind it (Fig. 5) and the function of recalling the URL of the mapped Blogs, available directly from the map (Fig. 6). These applications result to be very useful to improve the knowledge about the bloggers by the firm and also to proceed with a more exhaustive and detailed analysis of the postings.

Figure 5: *Discovering the personal network of the participant at the Dell brand-based community*
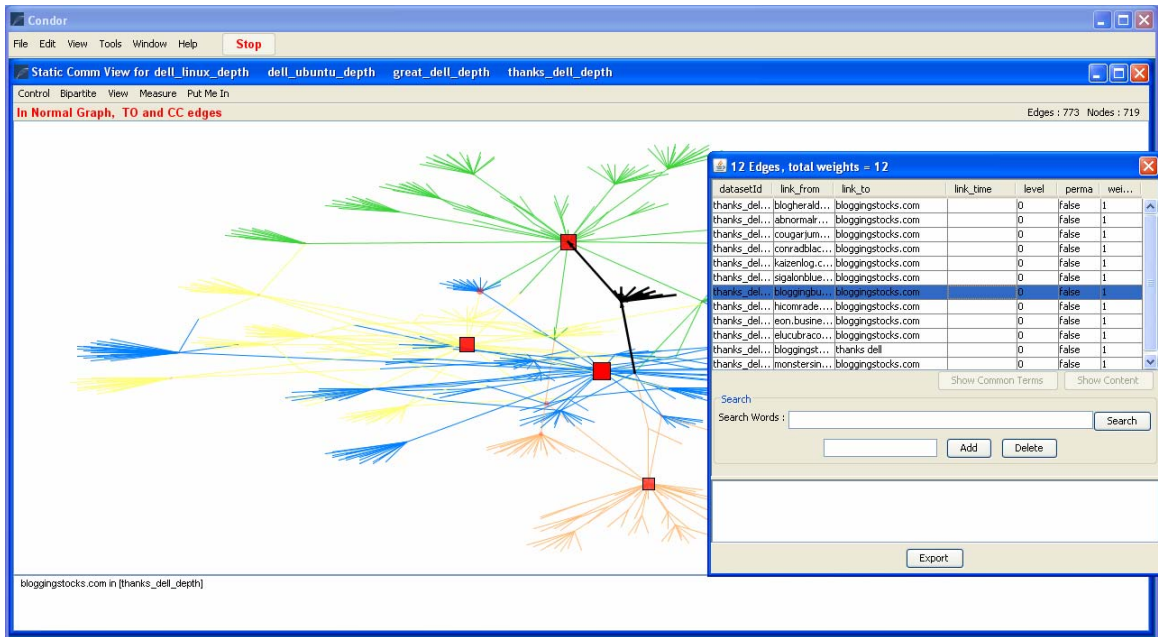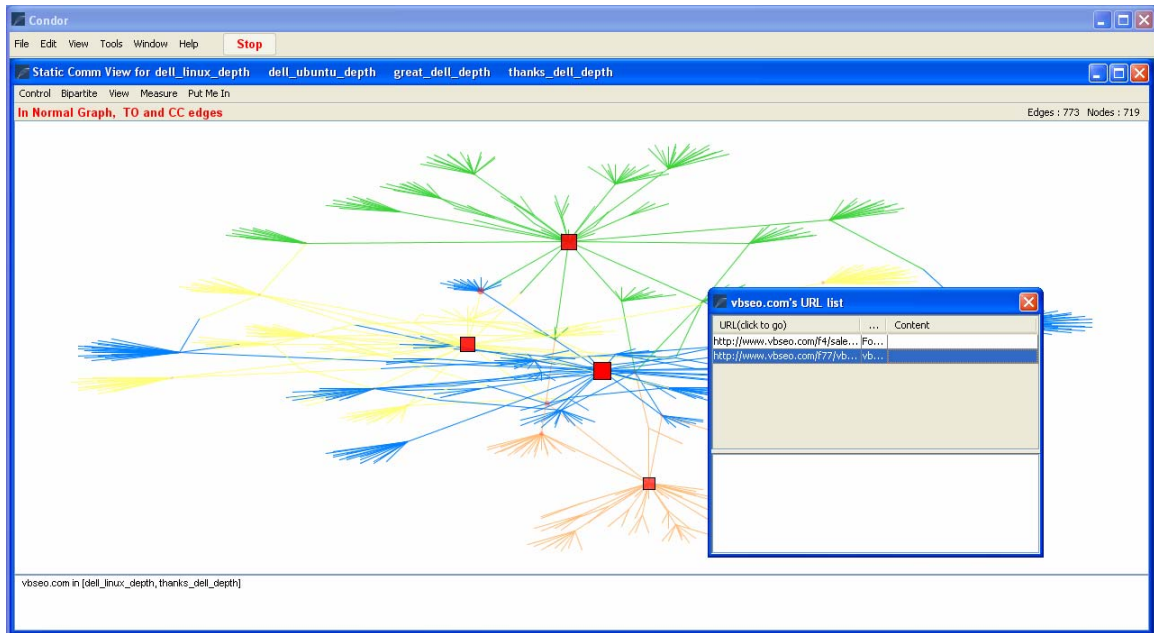

Figure 6: *Brand-based Bloggers Community personal URL*

Conclusions

The adoption of Blogs by firms as institutional channels of promotion of own brands and communication with customers in a more intimate and profitable way is one of the most interesting and actual phenomenon.

Enabled by the large diffusion of the Internet, the Blogosphere results as a virtual place in which the firms can concretely improve their market performances, develop their business and succeed. The growing attention by media, such as scholars and researcher about these new initiatives open a lot of discussions about its social dynamics, offering a lot of several insights.

In the preliminary stage of our research, by this study we aimed to demonstrate how, in the Blogosphere the dimensions of the community are larger than it could seem.

We have used Condor, a powerful social network tool, to demonstrate how the dimensions and the dynamics of a customers virtual community built around a blog are larger than it could result from the first study of the corporate initiative. The results obtained are extremely interesting in this direction and have allowed to contribute at the literature discussion about the traditional categories of brand customers virtual community overcoming the duality of the categories of the initiatives promoted by the customers or firms and permitting to identify a third and comprehensive one.

The complex and extensive area delimitated by the brand-based bloggers community highlighted by the visual functionalities of the tool has clearly showed as such a virtual community can be defined as an *hybrid community* in which the initiative of the firm through the corporate blog is mixed in a not well-defined space with several other communities founded spontaneously by the users.

At this purpose, the social networking perspective adopted has been useful in mapping the boundaries of a brand-based customers virtual community. Starting from the hypothesis behind the whole study, the powerful functionalities of Condor has allowed to delineate the boundaries of the community of bloggers that in the Blogosphere was speaking about Dell, also facilitating the identification of their personal URL as well as their personal networks.

Overcoming the limit of a summary judgment about the speech of a such complex and articulated community, we believe that the map obtained has better delineated the dimensions of their own market, the new possibilities of growth for firms, a community of acquired or potential customers to reach and monitor.

The results obtained are also extremely significant according to the social network perspective embraced, and even if they can not be considered as an exhaustive interpretation of the real message among the bloggers participating to the community, they can be assumed as a significant evidence about the large amount of knowledge and relational insights that firms can acquire and use by interacting with the market through the new technologies.

The lack of a content analysis as well as the replication of the study are two of the main limits we intend to overcome in the future, anyway the results obtained by such a preliminary study can be considered as a positive test of the social network perspective embraced and the theoretical hypotheses developed that we are going to prove in our future investigations.

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