Abstract: Sheena RAJA

A faux-public sphere: marketing online conversation economies for citizen consumers

Advertisers, considered cultural mediators of an affect industry, pioneer creative methods to reach and move consumers towards consumption. A popular industry buzzword strategically crafted for the dissemination of corporate social responsibility is referred to as “cause related marketing” (CRM). Though many CRM measures are overt, new media CRM campaigns, I argue, are complex cultural sites of veiled corporate objectives and mixed consumer interactions. As companies shift gears in their public portrayal of social consciousness, the aim of my project is to gain a richer understanding of the conflation between consumerism and citizenship. A case that presents the ideological tensions of corporate responsibility adopted for an interactive online space is Liberty Mutual’s The Responsibility Project – a US-based insurance company’s blog aimed to “interpolate” attentive citizens to discuss matters of private and public responsibility (Althusser, 1972). As an element of a larger advertising campaign, a platform of citizen exchange and a manifestation of corporate social responsibility, I call The Responsibility Project website a CRM blog and “faux”-public sphere with complex implications for consumerism and citizenship (Habermas, 1989). Using Schudson’s (1998) construction of “monitorial citizenship”, I analyze the context, condition and nature of the user-generated comments occurring within the most active areas of the blog space. To carry out my inquiry, textual analysis of The Responsibility Project website offers a unique optic to examine Liberty Mutual’s posturing of citizenship and its self-assertion of social consciousness through its blog. Examining the ways that collective value rather than individualism is grafted within this CRM-blog, I find Liberty Mutual constructs its brand identity by harnessing the functionality of Web 2.0 to broker democratic conversations of civic duty.

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