

BETWEEN OPINIONS AND ADVERTISING: THE GERMAN BEAUTY BLOGOSPHERE

There are few comprehensive - or recent - studies on the influence of blogs and online communities on consumer behavior. And those that exist tend to come from PR agencies specializing in social media marketing who for obvious reasons have a vested interest in the subject matter.

However, the general trend is clear: blogs that offer brand and product reviews have a major influence on the purchasing behavior of the German consumer. Online or offline, the average consumer trusts recommendations from peers more than they do companies or brand websites. And bad consumer reviews can be a serious impediment for a brand or a product.

The problem of rank

Determining which blogs are the most important or popular is more difficult. There is no website tracking every single German language blog. Each blog provider has a thematical breakdown of the blogs hosted on its servers and some media agencies also compile lists of blog rankings.

Depending on the algorithms used, blogs can be rated according to unique user visits, Facebook likes or content recommendations, backlinks, YouTube clicks, Tweets or a combination of the above. However, most of these rating mechanisms can easily be influenced, tweaked or even purchased so any 'official' ranking is to some degree arbitrary.

Up until 2011 www.deutscheblogcharts.de was the best-known blog ranking website. The owner had developed its own algorithm which took into account the backlinks between individual blogs. However, in March 2012 he discontinued the updates to his website, stating that in the days of commercial SEO management and the concomitant surge of professional and sponsored blogs, any kind of website ranking had lost its meaning. And this is really the crux of the matter.

Personal or professional?

Today's beauty blogosphere comprises all sorts of sites, from private blogs that are maintained and updated by a single person over semi-professional blogs that employ a whole editorial team, to commercial platforms and magazines that are backed and operated by companies or even retail platforms. Many of these sites come across as personal blogs that are written by individuals.

The website Beautyspion.de, for example, is operated by a company called Beautyplaza which recently integrated an online shop into its website. Still, German blog ranking website Ebuzzing lists this site as a blog and to the casual Internet user it definitely feels like a blog. The same thing applies to Pinkmelon.de, a professional site which, amongst other services, offers beauty companies the opportunity to present themselves and their products.

A new order

Today the most accepted blog ranking is probably Ebuzzing (formerly Wikio) which has been tracking the German and European blogosphere since 2006. Ebuzzing, an agency specializing in social media advertising, ranks blogs according to shares and recommendations on social networks.

Amongst the Top 30 beauty blogs for March 2013 on Ebuzzing is *Magi-Mania* (<http://www.magi-mania.de/>), arguably one of the best-known German beauty blogs; *Innen und Aussen* (<http://www.innenaussen.com>), *Give The Bitch Her Chocolate* (<http://www.chocolate-bit.ch>), *Lipgloss Ladies* (<http://www.lipglossladys.com>), *Frau Shopping* (<http://www.frau-shopping.de>), *Blanc Et Noir* (<http://www.pseudoerbse.de/blancetnoir>), a blog specializing in Vegan cosmetics, and the natural cosmetics blog *Beautyjagd* (<http://beautyjagd.de>).

There are also plenty of smaller blogs that specialize in one specific product category, like nail polishes or lipsticks. The oldest German beauty blog is probably My Beauty Blog (<http://www.mybeautyblog.de>) which has been online since 2005.

The blogs that are listed above are amongst the best known and most respected blogs in the German beauty blogosphere. Most of them are maintained by individuals although some sites are run by two or more bloggers. One of the best-known group beauty blogs is <http://www.fragdiegurus.de>, which is operated by four women who initially met through a YouTube channel.

Trendsetters

Blogging is a force to be reckoned with in the FMCG field, particularly in a trend-driven market like cosmetics. And beauty companies are well aware of the power that bloggers exert on consumers. The more followers a blog has the more valuable it becomes to companies, brands and social media agencies. Beauty brands approach popular bloggers, send them products or invite them to launches and events in the hope of positive coverage. At trade shows companies organize blogger conferences or blogger breakfasts.

It is up to the individual blogger to draw their own personal line between overt brand sponsorship and neutral product coverage. A recurring discussion topics amongst the higher profile beauty bloggers is how far you should let a company influence your blog's identity and how much you can write about specific brands without laying yourself open to the charge of succumbing to the lure of free cosmetics.

Women's magazines have also realized the potential of cooperating with popular beauty blogs – the blog *Innen und Aussen*, for example, is presented by Condé Nast owned women's glossy *Myself*.

Compared to UK and US beauty blogging the German blogosphere is still lagging behind in terms of internal organisation and professionalism but it is now starting to catch up. And the dynamics are changing quickly.

The advertising medium of the future?

A major development that is starting to change the beauty blogosphere is the formation of professional blogger agency networks.

A well-organised group of bloggers specializing in different areas – natural C&T, colour cosmetics, Vegan products, luxury products, niche labels and so on – can offer brands and companies individually tailored media strategies, advising them how to best position their brand or product in the world of social media in order to reach their desired target group.

This type of commercial network is already a big trend in fashion blogging. A well-known example is Muse Net, a group of five German fashion blogs that have combined forces. As opposed to the bigger vertical media marketing agencies like US network Glam Media (which also has a successful German subsidiary) Muse Net is going for exclusivity, promising its clients personalized high-quality blog entries rather than just copy-and-paste press releases.

And once you have established blogger networks which professionally market their services and are basically cutting out the middle man – social media marketing agencies – this will completely change the way FMCG companies and brands market their products.