

Case #3. Companies Buying “Likes” for Their Facebook Fan Pages

Facebook.com is the largest worldwide social network used for communication and also for company promotion.

A problem has emerged because of companies like **boostlike.com** that are selling “likes” or “followers” on Facebook.com. Nobody knows who the owner of **boostlike.com** is, but people know that employees are from Asia.

On **boostlike.com**, owners of “fan pages” or “business pages” can buy some number of “likes” on their page. For example, for 500 likes you have to pay 42 \$US and your likes will be on your page during 10 days. These “virtual likes” are made by low-wage Asian employees. The rationale for buying likes is that people go to a fan or business page and are influenced by the number of fans. Higher numbers are meant to imply a quality firm and service in a customer’s eyes.

Not aware that likes can be bought, customers or followers believe that numbers of fans on a page are relevant and real. Customers don’t consider the possibility of an illegal means to increase likes on a page. Although Facebook’s has rules against building artificial likes, the rules are difficult to enforce.

In 2012 **Rory Cellan-Jones**, a British journalist focused on technology and economic issues, made a project called **VirtualBagel** to assess the value of likes on a Facebook fan page. VirtualBagel is a non-existent company. He used boostlike.com, paid 10 \$US and during 24 hours, VirtualBagel had 1600 Likes. During 4 days his fictional page had 3000 likes. The majority of likes were from Asian countries. Notably, there were no reactions, comments, sharing – no conversation—regarding these likes.

After this project, some media will start to analyze a number of profiles on Facebook. It is quite easily to search profiles with likes, because these profiles have same structure: high number with fans, no comments, no reactions, only photos, and users are usually from Asia with common names.

QUESTIONS:

1. Present the arguments for and against the following statements:

a. It is ethical for companies to buy fans for their fan pages.

(In answering Q1a, be sure to consider the ethical dilemma small, entry-level companies face in marketing their products.)

b. It is unethical for boost.com to create false „likes.“

(In answering Q1b, be sure to indicate which of the philosophical approaches to ethics would argue for or against boost.com)

2. What should Facebook's role be in “validating” “likes?”

(maximum length: 250 words)

This case was prepared by Klara Hencova, a student at the University of Hradec Kralove, under the direction and with the assistance of Professor Earl Molander.