

February 13, 2008

Online Community Best Practices

by Jeremiah Owyang
for Interactive Marketing Professionals



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Online Community Best Practices

Communities Are A Powerful Tool, As Long As You Put Members' Needs First

This is the first document in the "Online Community" series.

by **Jeremiah Owyang**

with Josh Bernoff, Christine Spivey Overby, and Scott Wright

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An online community is an interactive group of people joined together by a common interest. It's also one of the most powerful tools a marketer can deploy for customer retention, word of mouth, and customer insight. To host a successful community, think of it as you would product development: Start by focusing on objectives, chart a road map, assemble the right team, and plan to be flexible. Then build your success by launching the community with the backing of your most enthusiastic customers and staying engaged as the community grows. Above all, remember that control is in the hands of the members, so put their needs first, build trust, and become an active part of the community.

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Forrester interviewed Carnival Cruise Lines, Leverage Software, Microsoft, and MySpace.com.

Related Research Documents

"Objectives: The Key To Creating A Social Strategy"
October 9, 2007

"Marketing On Social Networking Sites"
July 5, 2007



SHOULD YOU HOST A COMMUNITY?

Increasingly, interactive marketers come to us with questions about communities — why to start them, how to start them, and how to make sure they succeed. Often, marketers are confused about what a community is and what it can accomplish. Communities can be among the most effective social applications a company can deploy, but managed improperly, they can also fizzle, backfire, or consume large amounts of company time with very little benefit.

Since there's plenty of confusion about what communities are, let's start with a definition:

An online community is an interactive group of people joined together by a common interest.

Although the most important element is members' common interest and interaction with each other, communities can take many forms. For example, a community could be:

- **A discussion forum where conversations develop.** People can answer each others' questions on sites like tivocommunity.com or dellcommunity.com.
- **A custom application with profiles and connections.** These are built by a company using community-building software from companies like Ning, HiveLive, or Drupal.
- **A group within an existing social networking site or email service.** This includes groups on Facebook, MySpace.com, or Yahoo! Groups.
- **A set of communications.** People can respond to each others' published content on blogs, video-sharing sites like YouTube, and microblogging tools like Twitter.

Regardless of the variations in these forms, what's important is the approach. Like a traditional marketing program, launching a community program requires strategy, management, and resources to succeed. But unlike most marketing programs, where the marketer does a majority of the talking, a community requires a bottom-up approach. Why? Because *the control is in the hands of the participants*, often yielding seemingly unpredictable results. Marketers must relinquish control or risk ending up with an empty community or — worse yet — brand backlash. As a result, marketers hosting a community should serve their customers by focusing not on marketing or advertising, but on listening and responding to their needs.

Before You Start, Determine Your Objective

Although communities ultimately empower their members, marketers can still successfully pursue specific objectives. How? At Forrester, we believe interactive marketers should move forward in four stages that we collectively call the POST method: people, objectives, strategy, and technology.¹ This means before deciding to set up a community, you should first determine what sort of social

interactions your customers or prospects are ready for.² Then determine your main objective, so you'll know what kind of community to host. Only then can you continue with strategy and technology details.

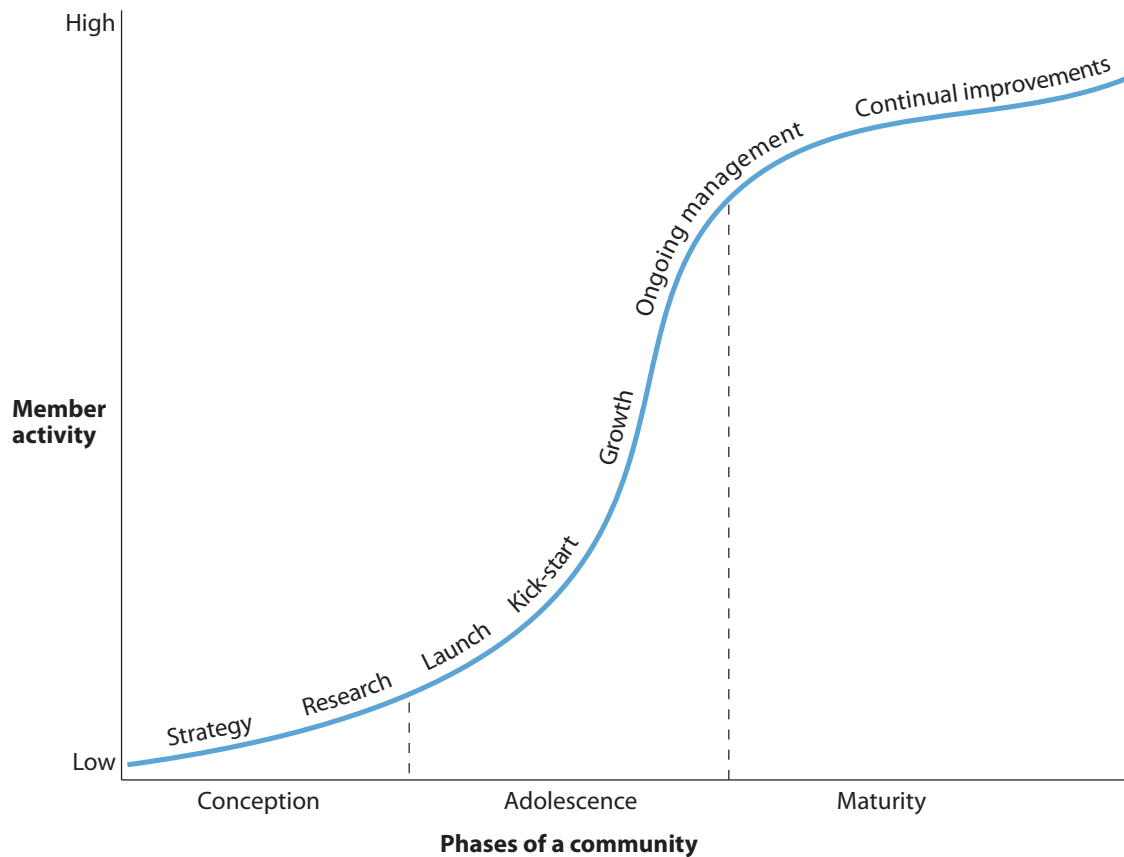
Based on our experience, there are five major objectives companies can pursue as they set up or interact with online communities:

1. **Listening.** Companies like GlaxoSmithKline have recruited members into online communities for the sole purpose of using them as a sort of standing focus group. Communispace and MarketTools have built businesses around creating and managing these sorts of research communities for companies.
2. **Talking.** If you're seeking to get your idea or message heard, you can benefit from online communities that share the same ideas and influence other customers. Conversational marketing best practices include engaging community members in active dialogues, hosting sponsored groups, or creating relevant media that's focused on the needs of a community.
3. **Energizing.** Marketers seeking to benefit from word-of-mouth marketing can create content that members will share on their profiles and even send to their friends. Members will share these textual topics, images, video, audio, and interactive media with their vast networks.
4. **Support.** For many products, customers can support each other by using online social networks and tools like forums and wikis. For example, Hitachi Data Systems used an online forum for members to support each other by asking and answering questions. Q&A tools can help customers get the most out of their products by letting them pose problems and receive answers from other members.
5. **Embracing.** One of the more sophisticated uses of communities is the opportunity to work *with* customers to build better products and services, as Dell did with its Digg-style innovation community called *IdeaStorm*. Once these new products are in production, these same customers often turn into brand advocates of the company.

PLANNING A COMMUNITY

You should plan a community much as you would plan rolling out a new product. In other words, start with a documented plan, and continue by preparing the company leadership, hiring the right staff, and connecting with the right partners. Successful communities evolve through a life cycle of strategy, research, launch, kick-start, growth, ongoing management, and continual improvements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Life Process Of A Successful Community



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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Anatomy Of An Effective Plan

Rolling out a community is not like putting on a play that unfolds exactly as the script specifies. Since communities develop their own needs, you need to be flexible, allowing for adjustments as your customers react to each other. For example, when Adidas created an online community on MySpace.com, the brand developed a six- to 12-month road map that included a design refresh for every three months. As you develop your own flexible plan, here are the steps you should take:

- **Decide on your objective and find ways to measure progress toward it.** Select one objective — listening, talking, energizing, supporting, or embracing — that aligns with the strategic goals of your company, and develops your plan to advance that objective. Every plan should have success metrics that you'll use to benchmark and track your performance. A company focused on talking, for example, should measure how many people were involved in the conversation, how they consumed the information, and how they responded, as well as monitor brand metrics like awareness or purchase intent.³

- **Create a responsive process so teams are empowered to act quickly.** Dealing with crises and brand detractors is a normal aspect of community management, so be prepared. Establish a flexible protocol that empowers the community manager and/or moderators to quickly respond — without having to be subjected to the limbo of internal politics. For example, when email marketing company Constant Contact launched its community for direct marketers, a fiery member-to-member debate emerged over the provider’s stringent rules regulating use of its email products. By engaging the members directly and quickly with a Webinar, the company’s community team was able to turn these detractors into advocates (see Figure 2).
- **Remember the needs of the community and prepare to participate.** Communities will only succeed if they serve the interests of their members. Provide a place for the members to initiate their own content, or if none exists, provide content that is valuable to the community such as: help docs, behind-the-scenes videos, or sneak previews. The community team at Microsoft’s Channel 9, a developer community, publishes regular demo and behind-the-scenes videos that help its community learn about new products, environments, and technologies. Content is defined by what’s valuable to the community — which means most traditional advertising and marketing materials don’t count.
- **Create a community policy, focusing on the desired behavior.** Set the tone by developing community guidelines that outline the expected behavior of the community. For example, the startup Dogster, a lifestyle and support community for 500,000 dog owners, established three guidelines: “Be Fun, Friendly, and Informational.” Anytime a situation arose in which contributors didn’t meet these three requirements, the community managers notified the offender and removed the offensive content. In the same way, you should prominently publish desired guidelines focusing on the positive, rather than create a long list of prohibited actions.
- **Prepare for costs and benefits.** Make sure you’ve allocated the proper amount of resources to ensure that your community won’t run out of steam. Hidden costs include the labor to kick-start a community or time spent educating internal folks. Although ready-made tools like Ning, Web Crossing, and Drupal require less capital, they still require ongoing management costs. A good plan shows ROI with estimates of fixed and ongoing costs and anticipated benefits (see Figure 3).

Figure 2 A Taxonomy Of Detractors

Type of detractor	Why they make trouble	How to recognize	What you should do
Legitimate complainer	Needs help with products or services or wants to warn others	Raises legitimate issue; may use strong language but seems open to reason	Solve problems or explain policies, publicly if possible
Competitor	Want to promote competing products	Continues to mention other brands; parrots their marketing messages	Engage rationally and respectfully with your company's perspective
Engaged critic	Think they can make things better	Makes suggestions, not just complaints; responds intelligently to others' criticisms	Create forum to encourage discussion; recognize good ideas publicly
Flamer	Like to argue with other members	Tend to participate in "flame wars" and may have specific other members they target	Refocus discussion on higher goals of community
Troublemaker	Have a grudge against company; hope to create problems	Complains continuously and cannot be satisfied; uses incendiary language	Address individually and privately. If complaints continue in face of attempts to resolve, remove from community

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 Costs And ROI Worksheet

Costs	Benefits*
<p>Setup costs (one-time) One-time costs for planning and launching</p> <p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consulting startup fees • Outside consulting • Community design • Outside experts/guests <p>Labor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal evangelism • Creating a plan • Training • Launch team and integration <p>Ongoing costs (monthly)</p> <p>Resources[†]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media creation (optional) • Advertising of community • Outsourced service and support (maintenance, administration) • Outsourced monitoring and alerting <p>Labor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal ongoing community management and interaction (likely of community manager) • Reporting • Monitoring and alerts • Content creation • Member support and administration • Internal IT • Internal marketing personnel • Ongoing marketing campaigns <p>Total annual cost</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Total setup costs + Total ongoing costs (x 12 months) <p>= Total predicted annual costs</p>	<p>Direct</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase customer conversion revenues (number of signups, increased registrations, trial products) • Improve customer engagement (measure attention, interaction, and sentiment) • Increase SEO placement • Decrease SEM spending • Decrease content creation costs • Decrease marketing spend (promote products and events tactfully within community) • Accelerate product development • Increase customer satisfaction • Direct revenue improvements • Decrease customer support costs (calls, questions, etc.) • Decrease feature failures <p>Indirect</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand awareness/PR (measured from monitoring services, be sure to benchmark upfront) • Increased customer insight (key learnings from this real-time focus group) • Indirect revenue improvement • Increased product knowledge (even product teams will learn) <p>Total annual benefit formula</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Total direct benefits + Total indirect benefits (x 12 months) <p>= Total predicted annual benefits</p>

*Note: These are benefit categories. For true ROI, community strategists must include actual financial benefits related to these categories.

[†]Subscription costs (based upon seats, traffic, features, or fixed)

Note: This figure is based on a worksheet provided by Leverage Software.

Getting Your Company Ready

Having developed your business plan, it's now time to use it to convince internal stakeholders. Your role is now part educator, part evangelist, and all customer advocate. While these discussions often spur great interest in the tools and the technologies, you should redirect managers' interest to tangible benefits, as well as how helping customers will improve the community. At this stage, concentrate not just on getting approval but on lining up connections with other parts of the company so you can succeed in front of customers:

- **Get an executive champion.** Find a powerful person who shares your goals and who will back you up. This executive could be in support, product marketing, or upper management, but regardless, he or she must be passionate about serving customers and enthusiastic about the benefits of communities. Sun Microsystems, a culture that supports Social Computing for its employees has top-down support from its CEO and President Jonathan Schwartz. This champion will be your advocate — and defender — as you initiate discussions with other internal stakeholders.
- **Obtain blessings from stakeholders by presenting your plan and demonstrating value.** Your boss, your CMO, and perhaps your CEO are wondering what the benefits are of online communities. Start by connecting with important decision-makers one at a time: Make them feel included, head off their worries with a detailed plan, and develop relationships you can rely on in the future. With help from your champion, win them over by presenting your business plan in the context of your objectives, outlining your costs, predicting concrete benefits of a community, and showcasing an ROI model. By getting everyone aligned, you won't risk the project getting derailed when groups don't agree on objectives or processes.
- **Establish clear lines of responsibility and ongoing processes.** Online communities affect many parts of your company, so clearly identify roles and processes between community managers and marketing, product teams, account teams, support, and any other affected group. In our discussions with large companies, they developed a plan that indicates how other departments will contribute, such as publishing content or responding to questions. Pursue buy-in by hosting internal awareness meetings, setting up mock simulations using internal versions of the tools, and further refining the process. You may also want to set up regular progress meetings to keep people aware of what's happening as the community launches and grows.

Ongoing Staff You Will Need

Companies need a team to launch and sustain your community. For example *Reuters AdvicePoint*, an online community for investors and advisors, established a multifunctional team that includes a lead technologist, a business strategist, marketing staff, content creators, and project managers. Although the team composition will vary from company to company, you'll need a few critical roles including the executive sponsor mentioned above, a technical lead, and two crucial new hires:

1. **The community strategist who organizes internal resources and supports the program.** This person manages the business program, leading the internal charge to develop the objectives and obtain resources. The strategist creates policy, deals with internal stakeholders, and provides ongoing reports to management. This experienced business manager is able to maneuver within the organization and likely has strong relationships with many business teams.
2. **The community manager or moderator who interacts with members.** As a primary advocate of the community, the community manager balances the needs of the community with corporate objectives. Companies such as Dell, ACDSec, Microsoft, and Dogster have leaned on community managers to be a customer advocate, evangelize the brand, create editorial content, and harvest customer needs for market intelligence. The moderator or community manager will possess strong online communication skills, be approachable and conversational, and have the ability to relate to the members, including in person (see Figure 4).

When Picking A Vendor, Lead With Needs, Not Technology

With a plan and staff in place, you're ready to determine the specific technology and features you'll need to bring the community to fruition. Finding the right one is a lot like organized shopping: Get your list together, compare different vendors, and see how it's being used by the market (see Figure 5).

- **First, develop your feature requirements.** Based upon your objectives, determine the right tools to meet the needs of your community. For example, in communities focused on energizing, you'll need tools that let information spread such as news pages, dashboards, and embeddable components. Also recruit customers who are interested in your online community (they are likely to already be your most vocal customers) to help shape the direction of the online community. When the community launches, they will become early adopters or even advocates.

Figure 4 The Four Tenets Of The Community Manager

1. Community advocate	The community manager's primary role is to represent the members of the community. They must listen, monitor, and respond to requests and conversations, both within the community platform and in email.
2. Brand evangelist	Community manager promotes events, products, and upgrades using traditional marketing tactics as well as being part of conversations within the community. The community manager must first earn and maintain trust.
3. Facilitator	Defines, plans, and executes content strategy. Uses forums, blogs, podcasts, and other tools to create content. Mediates disputes: Encourages advocates and deals with — or when necessary removes — detractors. Works with corporate stakeholders to identify content, plan updates, publish, and follow-up.
4. Research and development contributor	Gathers the requirements of the community and presents to product teams. Plans and analyzes results of surveys or focus groups. Facilitates relationships between product teams and customers.

Note: This figure is based on the analysis of 16 community manager job descriptions.

Figure 5 Features And Benefits Of A Community

Feature	What it does	Benefits of this feature
Member directory		
User profile	Often referred to as a user's bio, this will have member user name and a variety of other metadata user can choose to fill in, like location, workplace, interests, or affiliations.	Members will self-express and connect with other members, and you'll glean insight.
Network connections and permissions	Social networking tools allow users to connect to other members, giving them access to information or to establish affiliations.	The crux of a social network, this lets affiliations form, resulting in efficient communications and increased return.
Community maps	These tools — such as Leverage Software's People Map tool — lets members find other similar members.	Help members find other "like" members, as well as glean intelligence.
Communication and knowledge tools		
Discussion forums, chat tools, private messages	These tools encourage dialogue and discussion as members can create their own topic or add their additional thoughts to any given topic.	The heart of a community is the discussion among members; this encourages participation and creation of valuable content.
Question and answer tools	These tools encourage specific problems to be posted, and community members will pose answers.	In a more organized fashion than forums, questions will be quickly elevated and answered by community.
Groups	Members can belong to specific affiliations and connect with other members of similar interests.	Members can quickly self-identify, and information can spread accurately to these groups.
Knowledge management tools		
Wikis, libraries, document repositories	Effective for harvesting collective knowledge	Quickly scan these content areas for key information and documents.
Search	Common in most community software packages, it helps users quickly find keywords in large content repositories.	Improved content wayfinding especially in large communities
Tagging, rating, and ranking	These member created features allow a community to organize information into a way they think of.	Reduce your community management costs, and gain insight into how customers think.
Platforms and widgets		
Widgets and applications	Some social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Bebo, and Friendster allow third-party developers to create mini-applications "widgets" to interact with their existing communities.	Quickly spread applications across existing communities at low cost.
Dashboards		
Dashboards and aggregation newsfeeds	These tools collect and organize relevant information about a community or individual on a single page.	Promote viral growth of ideas as they can quickly spread.
Reporting and Data		
Measurement tools	Many software suites come with administration tools that also have monitoring, measurement, and alerting tools.	Be aware of hot topics, key influencers, and changes in the community.

Special Considerations

Stay protected and avoid vendor lock-in and maintain freedom. The core asset of your community is the data within it. Forrester highly recommends you come to pre-agreement with your vendors that you own, control, and can remove all of your community data at will, even if it's a hosted application.

- **Take your requirements to vendors.** Armed with your feature requirements list, ask for information from vendors using a request for proposal (RFP). Smart community builders will develop knowledge about this industry — as different vendors have different strengths. For example, Blogtronix is well suited for collaboration, Leverage Software has effective profile matching, and Neighborhood America leans toward media features. Rigorously test the vendor software by requesting a test area to experiment and simulate a community.
- **Rely on services and support from experienced vendors.** If you don't have sufficient internal resources or haven't launched a community program before, expert vendors can help. In our research, companies leaned on vendors' know-how and experience with monitoring, setup, and design. Caution: While they may be experts at building and deploying communities, they won't have the same understanding of your business or customers, so you'll still need to stay engaged to keep them aligned with your objectives.
- **Check references and existing projects online.** For real-world preparation, get client references from vendors. Also, when you find communities that are already successful, contact those companies' community teams to find out about their experience with their vendors. Some of those we interviewed regularly communicate with others that are hosting communities. How? By participating in user groups for community managers, attending conferences, or reading blogs on the topic.⁴ Don't just rely on vendor case studies. Do your homework and find successful communities, observe how features were adopted, and see what the members said about the tool.

LAUNCHING AND GROWING THE COMMUNITY

The most difficult part of a community strategy is not selecting tools but rather attracting members and getting them to participate on an ongoing basis. Interactive marketers will have to put traditional marketing and advertising tactics away and think more like a host at a party, one who is ready to listen and help. The key component to launching a successful community is putting the members first.

Kick-Start By Involving Advocates And Starting Small

The most successful communities are those in which the members are taking leadership, then ownership, and eventually becoming caretakers. So rather than go at the community launch alone, involve the community that you plan to serve; empower them to guide and shape the community. Think of your role as an event host: it's your job to deliver a venue and attractions and make people feel at home. So in addition to providing the platform for gathering, you'll have to involve the community in the early stages and treat them as special guests.

- **First, find creators and influencers.** The most successful communities start by involving actual community members in leading the charge. Find them with simple tools like Google search or Technorati, and monitor blogs and existing communities in your market space. Or get help from vendors like Buzzmetrics, Cymfony, or Visible technologies. Then approach these influencers directly with an invitation to become a charter member of your community.

- **Create evangelists by empowering and rewarding.** Anoint key community evangelists to take part in planning, decision-making, and spreading the word to others. For example, Constant Contact is a private “embassy” for 30 of its influential members in a community of 14,000. Rather than directly pay them, the company rewarded them with exclusive access to new information, publicly recognized them, and solicited their feedback to shape future endeavors.
- **Choose just a few features to launch with, and then add more as needed.** Launch with just the most important features such as discussion forums, wikis, or member profiles. Then, slowly add features as the community demands them. Keep the focus on what’s really important: the content and discussions between members. This works better than adding a flurry of new features that will overwhelm members and discourage adoption.
- **Light the match, ignite your community with conversations.** Invite members to connect with each other, start discussions, and take ownership of the topics. Like a real-world mixer, encourage members to share stories, problems, or successes. Lean on your evangelists or community manager to start discussions at a steady pace. Let the members take center stage as they start their own conversations, keep your employees watching, and participate when needed.
- **Ensure that your community is easy to find and access.** Make sure that your community is visible, not just from your corporate Web site but also from wherever else your community may hang out. Oracle invites members from its home page to actively join its Web site, with “communities” linking to more than 12 different groups segmented by need. Prominently link to the community from your home page, leave comments on blogs in your industry, and make sure that the content is efficiently being indexed by search engines.
- **Encourage community adoption by integrating with other marketing efforts.** To boost signups in your community, weave links and references into your other marketing vehicles like email newsletters, newsfeeds, podcasts, and blogs. Embed community features like polls, discussion boards, or Q&A features on your static corporate Web site. Charles Schwab’s philanthropic community for learning-challenged youth embedded a poll in various areas of the Web site — thereby encouraging interaction with social tools. Your existing customers, once exposed to new community features, are more likely to try them and join the community.
- **Encourage new members with urgency and recognition.** Encourage early adopters by letting them take ownership. For example, *Reuters AdvicePoint*, a community for financial advisors, used a direct marketing campaign to invite investors to “claim their profile” in the community — creating both a sense of ownership and urgency. Advisors filled out engaging surveys to strut their knowledge, which encouraged them to earn the “Top Advisors” title in their region. These advisors grew the community further as they told others about their new recognition.

Growing And Maintaining The Community

Having successfully launched, it's important to keep the momentum going or risk your community drying up and dying off. A community program is not a campaign that's time-limited; it's more like a living garden that requires care, watering, and the occasional weeding. To nurture:

- **Stay engaged with your community by monitoring and quickly responding.** The community team should monitor the community in order to: 1) ensure that quality remains consistently good; 2) identify interesting topics; and 3) identify individuals of influence. Participate daily or use monitoring software that will alert you in real time of sudden spikes or major crises. Create a contact feature that allows members to “alert” management teams to potential hazards like defective products, bad customer service, or bickering between members. Response teams should react quickly and succinctly to incidents as they occur.
- **Integrate your community with real-world events.** By tying your online community to actual events hosted by the company, members will deepen relationships and return to the community site. Or let them plan their own events: Carnival Connections, a social community for cruisers, lets members organize and manage cruise events such as “girls’ night out” or other excursion services. Using tracking software, Carnival Cruise Lines proved these events yielded increased sales as members signed up for more services.
- **Extend the reach of your community by cross-pollinating on existing social networks.** Learn to use the strengths of other social media tools and networks. US presidential candidate Barack Obama promotes a community on the campaign Web site *Obama for America* while also maintaining a presence on Facebook. Videos on YouTube, Facebook, and Obama’s own network leverage extended reach using very little additional effort.
- **Encourage loyalty with an advocate program.** Build an advocate program that both recognizes exceptional members and encourages them to support your brand. Microsoft’s Most Valuable Professional (MVP) program rewarded MVPs with privileged knowledge, training, and access to help train other members. In public, the firm recognizes members that helped to shape the product life cycle.
- **Stay involved and respond quickly to community requests.** Your goal is to be part of the community that you’re serving, so listen and quickly respond to their needs — both good and bad. The community manager at Constant Contact directly called nasty commenters. In one case, the detractor, after having his qualms listened to, converted to an advocate, and praised the company for its direct response.
- **Launching a new product? Stay involved with the community.** Provide ample information and be prepared to interact when releasing new products. When ACDSee, a photo management software company, launched a product, it was very involved with the community to ensure that all questions were answered. It offered product demos and tutorials, and as the word spread, a 37% increase in product trial downloads resulted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

REGARDLESS OF YOUR GOAL, PUT THE COMMUNITY'S NEEDS FIRST

Regardless of your business goals, remember that the control is in the hands of the community. Only once you build a relationship of trust with them can your own objectives be fulfilled. Failing to prioritize the community members' needs will result in no one showing up, or worse, members telling others how your brand failed to understand how to connect with customers.

- **For listening communities, quality generates the best insights.** Companies that want to learn from their customers need to start with a core group of customers and provide special tools. Focus on smaller communities where interaction and dialogue is higher — resulting in more insight. For brand marketers, use services that specialize in insight-generating communities like Communispace and MarketTools.
- **Pursuing a talking or energizing (marketing) objective? Put customers first.** Whether you're objective is to talk with or energize your community, listen to the existing conversation before speaking. Companies that bombard communities with marketing or advertising will suffer a backlash from the community. First, understand who the key influencers are in a community and what topics they write about. Then approach them to be part of the topic creation, widget, or meme that you hope to spread among the community. Encourage community leaders to start conversations and, with you or the community manager pointing to them as the expert, let them lead the topic — thereby engaging other members.
- **Managers of support communities should know when to engage and when to back off.** Support communities can help customers ask questions and find answers quickly as well as help companies learn more about their products and even reduce existing support costs. The trick is to know when product teams should help customers and when they should just listen. In most cases, the collective consciousness of your customer base knows more about the products than the product team, so employees should spend a great deal of time listening. But when customers aren't getting a question answered or a discussion is headed the wrong way, product teams should step in and set the conversation on course.
- **Embracing communities can help build better products and services.** Involve your customers to help define the specific features of your next product by giving them voting tools, providing access to product teams during planning phases, and letting them provide real-time feedback as the product develops. Unlike traditional marketing or product research, this is an ongoing dialogue between customers and product teams. As customer ideas are submitted, publicly credit them and denote which ones you're going to consider, pass, or implement. Finally, when you launch these new products, invite the contributors to take part in the opening event, party, or ceremony. Embrace your virtual product team.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Companies Interviewed For This Document

ACDSee	Intuit
AirTran Airways	Leverage Software
Ant's Eye View	Microsoft
Avenue A Razorfish	MySpace.com
Carnival Cruise Lines	Organic
Charles and Helen Schwab Foundation	Reuters AdvicePoint
Cnet TechRepublic	SATMetrics
Constant Contact	Telligent Systems
Dogster	

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Contributors to this definition are Shel Israel (<http://redcouch.typepad.com>) and Jake McKee (<http://www.communityguy.com/>) who both participated in an online dialogue in Twitter and in the blogosphere.
- ² Forrester's POST methodology outlines a strategy for Social Computing technologies. See the October 9, 2007, "[Objectives: The Key To Creating A Social Strategy](#)" report.
- ³ Marketers should be monitoring how customers and prospects are talking about their brands. See the September 13, 2006, "[The Forrester Wave™: Brand Monitoring, Q3 2006](#)" report.
- ⁴ To best understand community managers, join them in discussions in actual online groups. To find and communicate with community managers, access this Facebook group for community managers and advocates managed by Jeremiah Owyang (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=3553055120>). Recommended community manager blogs include those by Connie Benson (<http://conniebensen.com/blog/>) Bill Johnston, (<http://redplasticmonkey.wordpress.com/>), and Sean O'Driscoll (<http://communitygrouptherapy.com/>).

The following is a Web site community on the Web: Amy Jo Kim, *Community-Building on the Web*, (<http://www.naima.com/community/>).

Source: Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002.

Source: Posts tagged "Community Marketing" at Jeremiah Owyang's *Web Strategy* blog (<http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/category/community-marketing/>).

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